

# IS THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE CONSERVATIVE?

by George H. Nash

We gather today in a season of conservative discontent. Since the elections of 1986, a swift concatenation of events has overtaken the United States, paralyzing and threatening to derail the conservative ascendancy. The protracted Iran/Contra affair, the impending Reagan/Gorbachev "arms control" treaty, the incipient rebirth of detente, the dubious Central American peace initiative, the savage fury of the assault on Judge Robert Bork, the murky prospects for the coming Republican presidential nomination: all have sent a discernible chill through conservative ranks. No longer, it appears, does the political initiative belong to the American Right. Increasingly, it seems consigned to a spectator's role in the process of public policy formation.

The mounting malaise of which I speak goes deeper than the ebb and flow of political controversy. As the unifying and invigorating struggles of the early 1980s recede from consciousness, disturbing signs of sectarianism have begun to afflict the conservative movement. One thinks of last year's feisty "exchange of views" among prominent neo- and paleoconservatives at the Philadelphia Society's annual meeting. One thinks of the well-publicized differences among leading supply-side economists as well as various elements of the right-to-life movement. Even as the overall infrastructure grows, generating a neverending flow of conferences and policy studies, one wonders at times whether we are witnessing a laudable division of labor in the mold of Adam Smith or a subtle process of parallel fragmentation. Each ideological tendency in the movement now has its own network of scholars, foundations, "think tanks," and periodicals. But few conservative institutions, it seems, embrace and attempt to unite these sometimes fractious components of the Grand Alliance. No wonder that more than one commentator has openly suggested that conservatism's moment of glory has passed. No wonder that the editor of a journal familiar to us all is now at work on a book entitled *The Conservative Crack-Up*.

**Achieving Results.** The roots of this uneasiness go deeper still. During the first decades after World War II, the emerging intellectuals of the American Right were repeatedly obliged to establish their historical legitimacy--to demonstrate that the American heritage they presumed to defend was authentically conservative. During the 1970s and early 1980s, this preoccupation with the past gradually subsided. As conservatives came to influence public discourse, they found it less and less necessary to validate their claim to be indigenous. Whatever their roots or lineage, they were, undeniably, achieving results in the intellectual and political marketplace. Their very success was proof enough that they "belonged."

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Now, however, the wheel seems to be turning, as the battle over Bork makes clear. For what the judge's opponents are really asserting is that Bork and by implication the entire conservative intellectual movement are marginal, eccentric, and dangerous--not part of the "mainstream" at all. To the opponents of this nomination, the American political tradition evidently consists of only two legitimate forces: "progressive" liberalism, entrenched in the courts and elsewhere since 1933, and the "pragmatic," accommodating Center, willing to ratify liberalism's victories with the doctrine of *stare decisis*. Aware that he who controls the past controls the future, some American liberals now seem intent on constructing an image of the past that equates conservatism with racism and reaction. If they succeed, tomorrow will be theirs.

**Core Values.** For all these reasons, then, it seems appropriate today to reexamine the American experience and contemporary conservatism's relationship to it. More particularly, I wish to identify some of the core values of our past--values that American conservatism ought to stand for. Perhaps by stepping back from the current tumult and reflecting anew upon what America has meant, today's conservatives can regain both perspective and purpose.

From the days of the Puritans to the Age of Ronald Reagan, a sense of uniqueness and of destiny has infused the American character. On board the ship *Arbella* as it sailed for New England in 1630, John Winthrop admonished his Puritan brethren: "...we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." A century and a half later, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, a Frenchman who had settled in New York, pronounced in a classic little book a famous question: What then is the American, this new man? And he prophesied: "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world."

**New Order.** I wonder whether any of you have ever examined the design of our one dollar bill. On the back of it you will find a replication of the Great Seal of the United States. One side of the seal features a majestic bald eagle holding arrows and an olive branch in its talons. The reverse side of the seal, however, is less familiar--and, I think, more revealing. It shows a pyramid--an unfinished pyramid--with the date 1776 engraved in Roman numerals on its base. Below the pyramid is a motto: *Novus ordo seclorum*--"A New Order of the Ages."

Adopted by the Continental Congress in 1782, the Great Seal of the United States symbolized America's self-image as it embarked upon nationhood. America, the seal suggested, was not simply another nation-state; it represented something novel in history. Moreover, it portended the future--"a new order of the ages," a break with the past. The Old World, with its kings, oligarchies, and regimes of oppression, was to be left behind forever. Now, in a vast and nearly empty land, there would be constructed a republic--"conceived in liberty," as Lincoln later put, and dedicated to--to what? To a proposition, a creed, a set of truths held to be self-evident. America was to be a polity created by conscious design, an unprecedented experiment in self-government on a continental scale.

From its inception in 1776, the American republic has been identified with the hopes and future of mankind. The United States, to borrow a phrase from

Seymour Martin Lipset, was "the first new nation," and Americans and Europeans alike have probed the implications of this event. Said Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* in the 1830s, "I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought the image of democracy itself...." For Tocqueville, as for so many observers, America exemplified the contours of the future.

In other ways than the political, America has long been perceived as an untraditional society. To millions upon millions of immigrants through decade after decade of our history, America has been a land of opportunity, a refuge from the constricted, decadent, stratified, class-bound, traditional societies of Europe. Is it surprising that during our Civil War the British aristocracy was sympathetic to the "feudal" South, while the British working class favored the more "modern" North? And America has beckoned precisely because it appeared to be different from the Old World.

**Values of Modernity.** What has it promised? It has promised freedom: free land, upward mobility, equality of opportunity, a chance to start over. It has been a land of stupendous social energy, a land wherein has flourished, as in no other society before or since, the social type known as the self-made man. Benjamin Franklin is said to have remarked that America is country where we ask of a person not "Who is he?" but "What can he do?" Think about that; it is a profound observation. In our commitment to a society based on individual merit and equality of opportunity, we Americans have adopted two of the core values of modernity.

Still another way in which America has exhibited its modernity is in its dedication as a society to progress--or, to use a better word, to "improvement." Implanted deep in the American psyche is a conviction that social conditions around us do not have to be that way--that if evils exist we can eradicate them, that if, for example, corrupt politicians hold office we can throw the rascals out, that we are the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls. Passivity and fatalism are not a part of our national character. If we encounter obstacles that seem insuperable, well, our creed tells us, we can move on. This is one reason, I suspect, why California and more recently Alaska have held so much allure for the American imagination: they are states where, all else failing, we can go and start over. We are a restless people; half of us (think of it--half of us) change residences every five years. Has there ever been a society so mobile, as kinetic, as our own?

**Constant Reforming.** This relentless American impulse for "improvement"--of society and of oneself--has taken the most various forms. Think of the extraordinary edifice of higher education that Americans in two centuries have established: from small liberal colleges to behemoth universities. Think of the assumptions about human nature behind this commitment, and think also about its expansiveness: Americans increasingly seek education not just for a privileged elite but for ever broader segments of the population. A far higher percentage of Americans attend college, for example, than in any other country in the world. And consider this: has there ever been a society as incessantly productive of reform movements as our own? I refer not only to such preeminent crusades as those for emancipation of the slaves, universal suffrage, and regulation of the "trusts," but also of such causes as temperance, prison reform, aid to the Indians, the creation of

orphanages, abolition of child labor, even the health food movement. "What is man born for but to be a Reformer...?" wrote that enormously popular American philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. We are, I repeat, a restless people, and many of us believe that even our inner selves can be re-formed. It is a remarkable, and remarkably modern, notion.

Let me offer another example. As a nation Americans have long been enamored of entrepreneurship, invention, and technology. From Eli Whitney to Thomas Edison, from Henry Ford to Charles Lindbergh, from the Wright brothers to the astronauts, from the automobile to the home computer and VCR: no other society, to my knowledge, has honored science--above all, applied science--as lavishly as has ours. I do not know how many inventions have been patented in the United States in the past two hundred years, but I would not be surprised if the total exceeded that of all other industrial nations combined.

**The American Dream.** This interest in technology, in gadgetry, in shaping and reshaping our environment reflects another aspect of the American temperament. We Americans like to think of ourselves as an optimistic, problem-solving people. During the election campaign of 1980, Ronald Reagan repeatedly denounced the drab, defeatist notion that America's challenges were insuperable, that our expectations must be lowered forever, that the "era of limits" had arrived. It was a theme that was persuasive with millions. In his inaugural address, Reagan declared:

The crisis we are facing today [requires] our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds; to believe that together with God's help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us.

And after all, why shouldn't we believe that? We are Americans.

Surely it is a significant datum that in our discourse we speak of something called the American Dream. No one ever talks about the British Dream, the Russian Dream, or the Japanese Dream. But the American Dream--that is something else. Instinctively, we comprehend what it means: it means opportunity--opportunity to achieve, to ascend the ladder, to transcend our origins, however humble. We sense that this is distinctively an American dream, that it is inextricably interwoven with our self-definition as a people. We sense further that ours is a land where dreams, often enough, find fulfillment, and that our society is unusual because of it.

This belief in American uniqueness and destiny, then--of America as a trailblazing society--has been deeply embedded in our historical consciousness. It is not the sole property of the Left. Consider this quotation:

It was not because it was proposed to establish a nation, but because it was proposed to establish a nation *on new principles*, that July 4, 1776 has come to be regarded as one of the greatest days in history [emphasis added].

Who said this? Tom Paine? William O. Douglas? No; it was Calvin Coolidge in 1926. Now consider these words:

By a classless America our forefathers meant far more than a sociological expression. There were to be no stratifications in life that handicapped the rise of any boy from the bottom to the top. The human particles should move freely in the social solution....This idea of a fluid classless society was unique in the world. It was the point at which our society structure departed from all others

Who wrote this paeon to a classless America? Hubert Humphrey? Eugene Debs? Jane Fonda? No: it was Herbert Hoover in 1940.

Or consider the following poem, written many years ago and delivered significantly enough, at the Republican national convention in 1980:

'Tis great to see the old world and  
wander up and down  
Among historic palaces and  
the cities of renown  
And admire crumbly castles,  
and the statues of the kings,  
But now I think I've had enough  
of antiquated things,  
So now it's home again and home again--  
America for me.

My heart is turning home again and  
there I long to be,  
In the land of *youth* and *freedom*  
beyond the ocean bars  
Where the air is full of sunlight and  
that flag is full of stars.

.....  
I know that Europe's wonderful,  
yet something seems to lack,  
The *past* is too much with her,  
the people looking *back*.  
But the glory of the present  
is to *set the future free*.  
We love our land for what she is and  
*what she is to be*.  
So it's home again and home again--  
America for me. [emphasis added]

America is different: it represents youth, freedom, energy, a better future: this is a vision that has been central to our national identity.

A few years ago, I participated in a conference of German and American conservatives held in Bad Godesberg, West Germany. The subject was the "Reagan Revolution" and its implications for the Atlantic alliance. I was fascinated, during

those four days, by the differences in outlook and temperament between the American delegation and its European hosts. The Americans tended to be ebullient and practical, filled with specific suggestions for getting things done. Do we want to advance the cause of conservatism? Then, the Americans would say, let us organize: set up conferences, establish "think tanks," found journals and newspapers, work at the grassroots. The Germans, in contrast, seemed much less "activist," more constrained by a sense of limitation, and elitist rather than populist in their approach to institutions and the mechanisms of social change.

**History a Burden.** Above all, I was struck by the differences in attitudes toward history among the conferees. For most Americans at the meeting, history seemed to begin with the Carter Administration, and when answering questions, Americans focused quickly on the present. When the Germans answered questions, their remarks might begin with learned references to the revolution of 1848 and work down gradually (sometimes very gradually) toward the present. For the Americans, the past was prologue; for the Germans, it was a weight. As one German intellectual said to me during the conference, "Our [German] history is a burden and a curse." I returned home with a deeper appreciation of the distinctiveness of the American experience.

Perhaps by now you discern the point I am making. If, as the social scientists tell us, the process of modernization entails social mobility, economic freedom, and the breakdown of class barriers; if it means equality of opportunity, increased popular participation in politics, and equal justice under the law; if it means a social order that is not static and hierarchial but dynamic and future-oriented; if it means technological innovation and a spirit of improvement; then America for two hundred years--at least in its own self-understanding--has been a modernizing, not a traditional society.

**Modernizers vs. Traditionalists.** There have been dissenters from these trends, to be sure, and sometimes the dissenters have been eloquent. In his bicentennial history of Illinois, Professor Richard Jensen has even reinterpreted American history as in substantial measure a conflict between "modernizers" and "traditionalists." Mark Twain, for instance, scorned the American penchant for uplift. "To do good is noble," Twain observed. "To instruct others in doing good is just as noble and much easier." Among twentieth century American critics of the modernizing ethos, one thinks above all of Albert Jay Nock, H. L. Mencken, and the Southern Agrarians who published *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930: "superfluous men," Robert Crunden has called them, brilliant men, but men whose dissent only underscored the prevailing orthodoxy of their time. Most Americans--at least most Americans who got things done in the society--saw themselves as creators of a modern, progressive civilization. The quintessential American, a British visitor shrewdly remarked in 1898, is "a highly electric Anglo-Saxon." Until well into the twentieth century, America was predominantly, in more than one sense of the term, a Yankee nation.

Now I am generalizing broadly, of course. And you will note that I am dealing with perceptions and ideals. But the "most potent force in society," Herbert Hoover once reminded us, "is its ideals." From the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth, the dominant American idea has been (to use a current term)

"democratic capitalism." And in the long perspective of Western history, democratic capitalism has been a virtual synonym for modernization.

Yet if America in many respects is a modern society (as I have used the term thus far), we must now examine an unsettling fact: that for more than half a century the identification of America with the future of mankind has been declining. No longer, it seems, is America perceived as the harbinger of the new order of the ages. Instead today, over much of the earth, the inspiring ideals of the American experiment--the ideals of political equality and participation, of entrepreneurial freedom and economic growth, of social fluidity and equality of opportunity--are scorned, despised, and mocked.

Why has the American system lost its idealistic appeal as a model for other new nations? Some, I suppose, would claim that this was inevitable: That America, the nation of youth, has finally become middle-aged. Some would argue that America's sense of uniqueness was always a function of geographical isolation and that as America's isolation has disappeared, it has lost its immunity from the Old World and its ills. No longer, they would say, is America exempt from the disillusionments of history. Still other observers would point to our racial problems, political corruption, unemployment, or environmental pollution and claim that the United States is no longer a success story, hence not a model for anybody.

**"Political Pilgrims."** These explanations have some plausibility, but they are not sufficient. For what has occurred in the past fifty or sixty years is not simply the discovery of an alleged gap between American ideals and American reality but a growing and massive rebellion against the ideals themselves. To an influential number of American and European intellectuals in this century, other societies have supplanted America as the repositories of progress and modernity. Just after World War I, the eminent muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens declared, "I have been over into the future--and it works." He was not referring to his own United States but to Russia. For him and so many others, Communist Russia had come to portend the beneficent next phase in the evolution of mankind.

Lincoln Steffens was but an early example of one of the most extraordinary phenomena of the twentieth century: the rise of what Paul Hollander has called "political pilgrims"--deeply alienated Western intellectuals, many of them quite famous, who have repudiated their own societies, traveled to horribly repressive totalitarian regimes, and found therein the dawns of utopia. Over the years, the particular earthly avatar of the new age has varied. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was Soviet Russia; later it was Cuba and Maoist China, Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh and Chile under Salvador Allende. But always it was somewhere else--never America. And always it was a totalitarian regime.

**New Modernity.** This profound inner defection of many of the West's most distinguished intellectuals from the American ethos of democratic capitalism is one of the most stunning and disturbing features of our time. It is a phenomenon, of course, that has many roots--far more than I can analyze here. But clearly it is linked to the rise, within the last century or so, of a new conception of modernity. Unlike the modernizing principles to which I have referred earlier, this "new modernity" (as I shall call it) has not been primarily political or economic in its

