

The Unfinished Search for Nobility

The following is an excerpt from The Good Fight (Random House 1993).

by The Honorable Gary Hart

Egalitarian democracies understand reform to be the price periodically paid in order to avoid revolution; the persistent frustration of reform can lead to dangerous consequences. Reform itself can usually be postponed as long as economies are expanding and standards of living are rising. But when institutions and structures fail to adapt to changing times, when elites become selfish, when justice is too long deferred, and when aspirations are constantly frustrated, the sweep and scope of necessary reforms must expand accordingly and with greater urgency if more dramatic measures are not sought by a restless, angry citizenry.

According to Hannah Arendt, failure to remember that the United States and the foundation of freedom were born out of revolution "is largely responsible for the intense fear of revolution in America," and "fear of revolution has been the hidden leitmotif of postwar American foreign policy in its desperate attempt at stabilization of the status quo." This fear led us to support obsolete and corrupt political regimes that were hated and held in contempt by their own people.

Revolutionary American principles were further distorted when cold war competition came to be seen as a life-or-death clash between antagonistic economic systems rather as a contest between diametrically opposed political value systems. Thus, instead of focusing the world's attention on America's revolutionary emphasis on individual rights and political freedom versus a totalitarian Soviet political model, we permitted the contest to be identified as free-enterprise capitalism versus the Soviet economic model. The unchained, unbridled private initiative of capitalism — essentially laissez-faire economics — flourished under benign American democratic governments as much as anything because of our nation's enormous natural wealth. Ironically, given time and opportunity, it could well flourish in Russia for the same reason. But preservation of a particular economic philosophy closely associated with preservation of the status quo is not necessarily the same as preservation.

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tion of a revolutionary political philosophy closely associated with evolutionary reforms.

History will consider it odd, to say the least, that America, victorious without bloodshed in the most prolonged, potentially most dangerous ideological struggle ever, demonstrated adamant insistence on Russia's adoption of a market economic system and seemed apathetic about Russia's adoption of a democratic constitution. Late-twentieth-century America seemed sadly ignorant of, and unconcerned about, its true contribution to world history: revolutionary democratic emphasis on constitutionally guaranteed individual freedoms and human political rights

This failure to remember our revolutionary heritage might have its reasons — having to do with insularity, rampant individualism, the privateer-buccaneer entrepreneurial spirit, and most of all, latent awareness and avoidance of the civic duty necessary for the survival of a democratic republic. Americans prefer to see the opportunities and rights that their form of government offers rather than the obligations and responsibilities it requires. No more need be said on this theme than that the political debate of the 1990s has much to do with entitlements and little to do with civic duty. Political candidates cast their campaign rhetoric in the mold of government programs and services but are largely too fearful of their constituents to remind them of their own civic responsibilities. For as Arendt says, "Political freedom, generally speaking, means the right 'to be a participator in government' or it means nothing at all."

The eighteenth-century principles motivating the American revolution were public freedom, public happiness, and public spirit. After the revolutionary spirit was lost in the nineteenth century through the failure of thought and remembrance, these principles gave way to "civil liberties, the individual welfare of the greatest number, and public opinion as the greatest force ruling an egalitarian, democratic society," according to Arendt. By the late twentieth century, these principles had given away to values of rampant private interest, with the government as guarantor-of-last-resort (but otherwise as enemy), and to values of materialism, scorn for the public interest, and disinterest for social justice.

The Litest national election focused almost exclusively on economic concerns. George Bush was fired by the voters because his laissez-faire philosophy — largely left over from his predecessor — permitted no government intervention to jump-start an economy that was struck in a dormant, recessionary cycle. What is a president to do when his belief system is anti-government and the voters demand government action? President Clinton's victory was attributable not only to the generational contrast his candidacy represented after twelve years of geriatric conservatism but even more to the sense that he represented moderate change by means of a leaner but more active government. The motto on his campaign headquarter's wall—THE ECONOMY, STUPID—seems to have said it all.

Arguably, given the political values of the age, President Clinton will be judged a political success (and the sure winner of a second term in office) if he is able to stimulate or even simply be fortunate enough to preside over another cycle of economic growth as well as a stable, if not rising, standard of living for middle America. This would be a suitable and deserved reward for the skillful and increasingly delicate

manipulation of the fiscal and monetary levers and gears that is required in treacherous economic currents.

But a more profound measure of leadership lies beyond this. It rests in a new government's willingness to undertake fundamental reforms, reforms deferred for a half century by assassinations, the genuine political scandals of Watergate and Irangate, the fiasco of the savings and loan associations and Bank of Credit and Commerce International, the Vietnam War, and most of all, the seemingly interminable cold war. Major modifications of health-care systems, federal support of and incentives for public education, campaign financing laws, and job-training programs have succeeded, are underway, or soon will be. The more serious question surrounds our willingness and our ability to restructure national energy policies, reform military institutions, replace consumption with incentives for productivity, rebuild our national communication and transportation infrastructures, convert excess military production to non-military production, clean up nuclear and toxic wastes, reduce deficits, and redirect our foreign policies. All are now possible for one historic reason: the end of the cold war.

But even beyond these huge reform efforts, there remains the challenge to reawaken America's revolutionary spirit, with its principles of public freedom, happiness, and spirit and its commitment to the national interest. The whole idea of reform is based on the notion that virtually all citizens possess within themselves the ideal of a better society. At its furthest extreme, this ideal is Utopian. But wars, assassinations, political pragmatism, and repeated violations of the public trust by political leaders have pummeled the dreaminess from the Utopian vision as though it were stuffing a rag doll. Instead, the American people have been left with the belief that there may be no solutions to urban decay, racial disharmony, crime, drug use, and other current maladies. Thus, the challenge for contemporary political leadership, namely the Clinton administration and current Democratic Congress, is to reawaken the belief that progress is not a myth but is indeed possible, that government can be both active and benign, that the public and private sectors are not natural enemies, and that public support for a new round of revolutionary experimentalism-what the urbanologist Jane Jacobs calls "the esthet-

ics of drift"-may be required to solve intractable social problems.

Looking back on this time from the future, we shall come to see how fortuitous — almost divinely so -- was the coincidence of the cold war's end with the need for America - and much of the Western world — to manage the transition from a manufacturing to an information-based economy. Indeed this transition has been dangerously delayed in America by the perceived imperatives of the Cold War militancy. But that militancy, to the degree it ever was as impor-



Gary Hart speaking at Columbia University

Courtesy of the Columbia Spectator

tant as we were told it was, evaporated on the democratic barricades raised against the August 1991 Russian coup, and we are now faced with a host of new, and often harsh, economic realities. The new Democratic leadership has made clear that it is not traditionally New Dealish; it claims to have no appetite for larger, more bureaucratic government, increased payroll taxes, programmatic policies, or knee-jerk adherence to interventionist economics.

But that is not to say that reforms in the self-definition of government are out of the question. The New Deal's most exciting contribution to government- experimentalism- will lead to policies permitting the private sector to use a wide range of options to meet government-mandated performance standards in environmental quality, health-care protection, worker training and retraining, urban renewal, and a wide variety of other public interest arenas. The nation itself will continue to evolve in terms of pluralism and multiculturalism, thus requiring renewed tolerance

and openness in adapting to changing immigration demographics. We continue to become more Asian, African, Latin, and Caribbean in cultural and ethnic complexion. The national dial is to absorb the best of all these cultures even as we did with nineteenth-century European immigrants.

But the post cold war reform of America must also include the careful dismantling and restructuring of the military industrial complex in ways that protect the lives and prospects (jobs) of hundreds of thousands of skilled workers, their families, and the communities in which they live and work. This clearly work to be done in infrastructure rebuilding, in the invention of new medical, environmental, and communications technologies, in information handling, in health care delivery, and in a great variety of similar activities. Once again the challenge lies in the management of transition. Safe, renewable energy supplies must be developed. Research in new building materials and manufacturing techniques must be carried out. Our military forces must be restructured and reformed. All these demands, long deferred for national security reasons, now rise up to be addressed. Consequently the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries could become a historic era, one rivaling the revolutionary eighteenth century, but only if great leaders in government, business, and society at large arise to seize the opportunities.

In the end, it is never a question of opportunity but always a question of will and imagination. Great leaders inspire both. It has nothing to do with the tedious ideological quarrels between conservatives and liberals over the size and power of the government. It has everything to do with the vision of public leaders for the nation's future and their ability to summon our better instincts in the national service. This is the arena that separates a Washington, a Jefferson, a Jackson, a Lincoln, a Franklin Roosevelt from their more numerous, ordinary predecessors and successors. Almost never in a generation and seldom in a century is a society or a nation given the rare chance at redefinition and reinvention. That is precisely what the post-cold war era offers. But this opportunity will not tarry forever. Either we grasp out destiny, or fate and circumstance will dictate it for us.

Given the still-uncelebrated

victory of democracy over communism, why does America seem so hesitant about reawakening its dormant revolutionary spirit? This question is inextricably intertwined with the multitudinous barriers conservative America has erected against reform. From the Founders' insistence on not simply a balance of power but an almost absolute dispersal of power down to today's attempt to exhume and reinstate the mythologically independent Western hero, America constantly finds new ways to escape its revolutionary roots. Liberalism is demonized; government is ridiculed and mocked; activism is made marginal; the idealism of youth is discouraged; and social justice is made a Utopian dream. Rewards are granted for cleverness, triviality, and sensationalism. Why is any recollection of a nobler time dismissed as nostalgia for Camelot?

The more attention the reformer gave to the question, the more he would become convinced that late-twentieth-century America is in search of that lost fragment of its own revolution, human nobility. But nobility is inseparable from that equally rare quality, integrity, and a nation whose integrity is hostage to a frantic search for material success, ease and comfort cannot be a noble nation.

The reformer could not see the country that he deeply loved, his homeland, apart from Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Seeking its ease, metaphorically, in a foreign land, America forgot its soul, its home, its family. It desperately needed to return to the home of its Founding Fathers, not those who thought democracy to be another name for economic determinism and capitalism's most fantastic excess, but a democracy that meant justice, equality, and opportunity for all.

The reformer's historically insignificant efforts at reform, his faults, and his failures were but a single frail human measure of distance between the real and the ideal, the immeasurable space that represents an instinctive human search for nobility. His mature life was chafed by religious belief and family training to the immutable rock called justice. Justice was an unforgiving

teacher; she was blind, and she was relentless. She would not let go, and she permitted no compromise.

But this reformer's personal struggles were a trivial matter on the great scale of human injustice and in the context of a society's search for its unrealized nobility. If the reformer's belief is correct, that the seeds of injustice were planted by the conquistadors, Pilgrims, and slave traders, then the roots of national discontent go deeper than any late-twentieth-century reformer, or president, could ever hope to reach. The nation's founders, unable to resolve age-old struggles between property rights and human freedoms, markets and social

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cohesion, capitalism and justice, simply passed those struggles down through each generation to the present age.

When faced with far-reaching misery, as in the Great Depression, America would seek to deal with these tensions. But occasionally, as in the eighties, the country turned selfish and mean to a sufficient degree to dismay a mature but still idealistic reformer. The values of its popular culture — sensationalism, triviality, and mass exploitation of private lives — would be incompatible with national integrity and any serious sense of true nobility. For his children's and his nation's sake this reformer would hope with considerable desperation that this represented but a passing phase, a sacrifice to the insatiable gods of amusement and consumption, a temporary detour from a just and moral crusade in search of national integrity and nobility.

No single election, including that of 1992, could immediately alter

America's course. But it might represent a turning point, a creaking shift of the compass point on the great ship of state. Even at two hundred years of age, America is too young to succumb to the erosion, decline, decay, and collapse that have characterized history's many cultures. America is not finished yet. Its reformers and disciples of national nobility will not let it slide beneath the surface of history's turbulent waters without one last struggle to realize a better national destiny. However flickering the candle of justice, the effort has to be made. The prospect of a brighter destiny has to be preserved for yet one more generation.

It is devoutly to be hoped that President Clinton's soul will be stirred by Jefferson's radical notion of generational revolution, by the better angels of our nature so dormant since Lincoln, by Wilson's Utopian vision of a family of nations, by Franklin Roosevelt's belief that we are all in this together. Sometimes, even in the crude arena of politics, a leader's soul may be stirred by the mystical chords of a nobler future, a more just nation, a better people. When it happens, it is magic.

May such magic descend on America, at least once more. No president, especially in today's age of leveling and reduction, can ever wish for the hero's mantle, and it should not be expected. But there is still a chance, against great cultural odds, that some spark of inspiration so rare and unexpected as to seem almost divine might visit even the most political of politicians and grant them the courage to seek the grail of national nobility. Only a people with some spark of idealism left, after decades of pragmatism, realpolitik, and cynicism could even imagine such a crusade for social justice. More mature peoples, more sophisticated nations had given up such an idealistic quest long ago.

But not the American soul. It is like Sancho Panza, merely awaiting the quixotic call for one more, perhaps last, crusade in search of a dream that will never die. And even if we fail to find the dream, we must still fail better. •

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11 "IT 7e do not yet have justice, equal and practical, for the poor, for the members of minority groups, for the criminally accused, for the displaced persons of the technological revolution, for alienated youth, for the urban masses, for the unrepresented consumer - for all, in short, who do not partake of the abundance of American life. The goal of universal equality, freedom, and prosperity is far from won. Ugly inequities continue to mar the face of the nation. We are surely nearer the beginning than the end of the struggle."

- Justice William Brennan