



Midge Decter

THE PEOPLE'S YES

The desire to see America restored to its Number One position is not based in selfish jingoism, but rather in ideas.

On some occasion during his 1976 senatorial campaign Daniel P. Moynihan, as is his wont, in the course of making some other point tossed off a genuinely illuminating observation. The United States, he said, in electing to build the nation's capitol on that parcel of swampy land along the Potomac, two hundred miles from what was to become its cultural capital, had made a fateful, and in Moynihan's view beneficent, decision. For in physically separating the dominant institutions of national government from those of the arts and sciences and higher learning, the United States—alone among the great nations of the earth—had ensured the protection of the culture from political domination, the kind of domination, for instance, that has in our time made possible some of the more notable efficiencies of totalitarianism. His analysis of the benefits of that decision aside (and on reflection it seems somewhat debatable), undoubtedly the distance between Washington and New York has been a determining one in our national life. If the culture has not, to put it mildly, been dominated by the processes and needs of government, and has thus been uniquely cut off from a sense of its own consequence in the everyday life of the country, the agents of government on their side have been no less cut off from a sense of the forces that are at any given moment acting to influence people's opinions and spirits.

Whether this is, as Moynihan thinks, nevertheless a good thing or whether it is an unfortunate one, that it creates a very special set of circumstances for both the adumbration and implementation of national policy there is no doubt. And one of its results is that in a country fairly drowning in communications—in which

daily the populace is exposed to a torrent of the stated views and explanations of its leaders, and vice versa—it can take years for some of the simplest messages to get through. Partly, of course, this is because in a democracy many of the most important messages that ordinary people and those who govern them have to bring to one another cannot properly be expressed in forthright terms. Mostly, however, it is because in the United States politics and ideas exist in a state of almost forcible—albeit by now rather smugly habitual— isolation from one another. Until, that is, the pressure of crisis brings them together.

The gaudiest case in recent times of such a failure to send and to receive communications was, of course, the late great upheaval over Vietnam. This was a case in which the government failed to make its policies creditable to the people in the kind of terms

necessary to secure their assent over the long and difficult haul, and failed equally until much too late to take account of the power as well as the nature of the cultural forces arrayed against them. Would it have made any difference to American policy if John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson had in those critical years actually been living where the new cultural impulses of the 1960s—impulses, indeed, that their own administrations had unwittingly helped so much to unleash—were first being given expression? Undoubtedly to some extent it would. For at the very least their minions and advisers, and possibly the presidents themselves, would have been absorbing—with, as it were, the very air they breathed—a far more highly calibrated body of information about the hearts and minds of those they governed than the gross, misleading numbers brought to Washington by means of polls and vote-counts. ("How many votes," sneered one of Johnson's White House aides in a private conversation about the growing opposition to the war in 1965, "does the Upper West Side of Manhattan have in Milwaukee, Wisconsin?" His employer was to pay dearly for that Washington-bred confusion of voting, which anyway expresses only a primitive choice between pre-selected alternatives, with influence.)

Why go over this by now dusty, trampled ground again? The nation's arrangements are what they are, and have been for two centuries. Washington was, after all, forced to foot a heavy bill for its electoral and bureaucratic philistinism over Vietnam, as was the entire country. If we speak of Vietnam, however, it is not merely to participate in the process of recrimination and exculpation that must be the standard ritual of exorcism for every wartime defeat. In the discussions of 1980 Vietnam reappears (or perhaps one ought to say, remains) because once more we are in the kind of crisis where the national ethos has become a necessary and critical

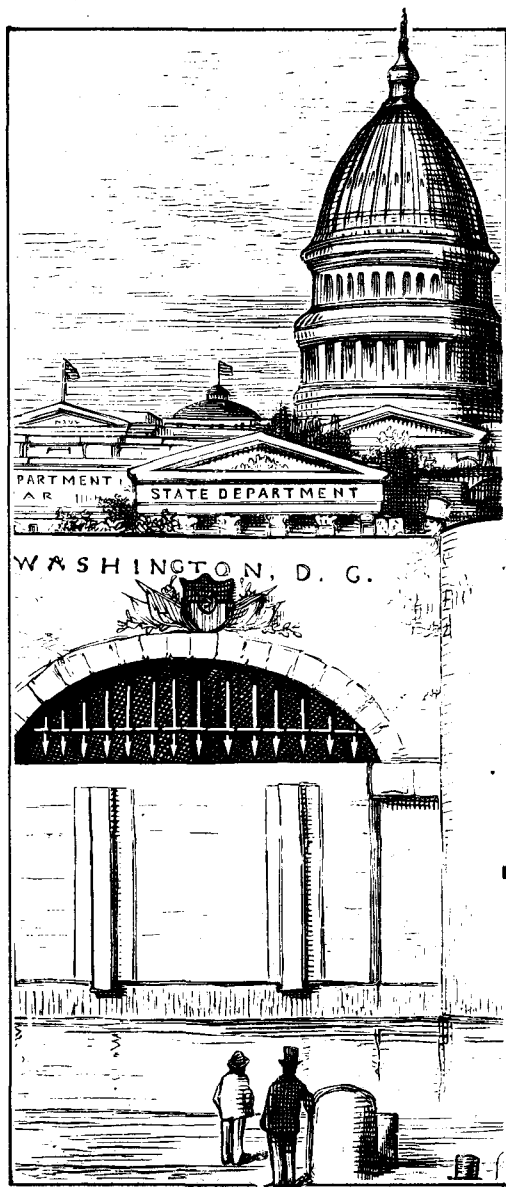


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element in the proper shaping of American policy. And once more, predictably, the politicians and their servitors in the press, wrapped in the splendid isolation of their calling and the heady babble of presidential electioneering, will be invited by circumstance either to ignore or to misread it.

Vietnam shadows our present concerns in another, and perhaps more important, sense. Just as generals are said always to be preparing for the last war, so do our peacemakers seem to be keeping the last peace. The discovery that the demand for the United States to pull out of Vietnam had become a serious social as well as political issue, and not merely the whim of some dismissable small group of radicalized intellectuals—that, in fact, the radicalized intellectual community had itself succeeded in becoming a formidable constituency—was a discovery that came hard. Once arrived at, and celebrated with a mass abandonment of the war by most of the people who had launched it and at the same time made it unwinnable, that discovery remained in force. It continued to haunt the deliberations over policy, domestic as well as foreign, until only a moment ago, long after anyone paying respectful attention to the ebb and flow of ideas would have known that a new “discovery” was called for.

The content of this new turning in public



attitude is now being undeniably revealed and yet, as these things go in American politics, is simultaneously being obfuscated in the presidential campaign. I speak here of the desire, even the passionate demand, to see the United States restored to its former status as a great and rich and respected world power: the desire that has come to be called, in the always over-hasty language of opinion-tracking, “the new nationalism” or “the new patriotism.” Many separate elements and responses make up the final definition of this desire, just as many elements and responses went into the temporary and clouded retreat from it in the 1960s and 1970s. But insofar as American status in the world is concerned, it had already gathered sufficient steam to send people marching into the streets—and this time without an organized movement to direct them or movie stars to lead them—to protest government inaction at the taking of the hostages in Teheran. (If the marchers quickly returned indoors, they had nonetheless revealed in those first antic days in November 1979 the vast underground swell of dissatisfaction that propelled them.)

No doubt Washington was once again, as with Vietnam, taken by surprise. No doubt, too, the dizzying alternations of tough and placatory gestures that have for so long characterized American policy in the Persian Gulf have been the result of a baffled effort in the White House to read the mind of an electorate about to cast its vote for president. But whatever Carter’s struggles to read the public temper at a critical moment in his career, and whatever their particular outcome, the so-called “new nationalism” is itself at a critical juncture. Will it be properly understood and accounted for in American policy? Or will it, like the opposition to the Vietnam War, be permitted to fester too long in those nether regions where ideas circulate and grow powerful, and distorted and poisonous, away from the light of political responsibility?

The evidence for the answer to these questions is, at the moment, mixed. To judge from the current statements of public officials, at least those public officials with real constituencies to answer to, there is growing recognition that the strategies of the recent past will no longer suffice. With a public traumatized, in turn, by the spectacle of our inability to influence the behavior of small sheikdoms, by the weakness of the dollar, by the contrariness of our European allies, by the almost careless cheekiness of the Russians, and by the dawning realization that we have reached a point of dangerous decline in military power, one can no longer earn credit merely by proclaiming oneself a man of peace and justice. Candidates, for instance, with a record of voting against military appropriations have commenced scurrying about to conceal their past. And statements of firm determination—firm determination to increase American pro-

ductivity and make the economy grow, firm determination to strengthen our alliances, firm determination to protect the American national interest—are heard all around, right, left, and center. Indeed, the term “the American national interest” has been emblazoned on a huge public banner only faintly redolent of the moth balls in which it had been keeping to these many years.

On the other hand, little in these expressions of firmness and determination betrays any serious attention either to the way the “new nationalists” are being moved or to what they are being moved by. One of the more curious phenomena of a curious time has been the impulse, in political debate, to tiptoe around issues of principle. It is as if, in the aftermath of the recent epidemic of a radicalism that spoke only, and thunderously, in terms of principle, public reference to such issues might brand the speaker a hopeless naïf or something worse. Even as otherwise principled a gesture as boycotting the Moscow Olympics was advertised primarily for its virtue as a blow to the Russian economy.

Beyond any aversive effect from the style and manners of the Vietnam debate, there is the older and more deeply rooted habit, probably originating in the smoke-filled chambers of congressional barter and negotiation, of viewing all important questions of policy through the lens of political, and particularly economic, interest. So viewed, the new post-Vietnam mood appears to be an amalgam of demands for a continued cheap and plentiful supply of energy, favorable conditions for American industry, tax relief, control of inflation, and, so far as any “higher” aspirations are concerned, a restoration of American prestige and American status abroad as Number One. For those who applaud this mood, it is seen as a return to sanity about the facts of life. For those who deplore it, the new public attitude is seen as a selfish and self-deluded withdrawal from the pursuit of justice at home and the recognition of limits abroad—a turn, as we have endlessly been hearing, “to the right.”

Thus, neither the favorable nor the hostile official view of the “new nationalism” betrays any real perception of its true source, which is not interests but ideas. One might better say, an idea. This idea, moreover, while it has many and various expressions, is an almost breathtakingly simple one: that American society is a good society. Just as the opposition to Vietnam with its many bitter social consequences took strength from, and was crucially based on, the opposite idea—that American society was at least a failed society and at worst a sick and evil one—so the growing demand to restore American power is crucially based on the proposition that the strength of the country is not only a material benefit to its inhabitants but a moral benefit in itself. The American

people, in other words, wish not to be indulged but to be *confirmed*.

The issue, for example, that has turned an ever larger body of public sentiment against what are called the "liberal social programs" is a cultural rather than an economic one. These programs, once accepted as instruments for alleviating distress, have come to be seen as attempts to alter the social ground rules; they assume wrongdoings—and mete out rewards and penalties accordingly—that people do not feel their society is guilty of. The issue that has turned a growing body of sentiment hostile to the Third World, and particularly its surrogate, the UN, is also predominantly cultural. Once accepted as newcomers to the community of nations in need of aid, sympathy, and encouragement, Third-World countries now stand revealed as outrageously hypocritical and false attackers of American behavior. As for the Soviet Union, the new, or let us say reactivated old, sentiment about the Soviet Union contains a large component of rebellion against the Left-inspired notion of a convergence between Soviet and American societies.

Issues of this kind, with only rare exception, have not been and cannot be given more than the crudest expression in voting patterns, for elections are too gross a means either for registering or making any great effect upon the tides of cultural development. Yet in our day alone three Presidents, Johnson, Nixon, and Carter, have in one way or another foundered on their incomprehension of the intellectual and cultural forces that on the one side elected them and that on the other sought to defeat them. The president elected in November 1980 could easily suffer the same fate for the same reason.

II

What, then, ought the "new nationalism" to mean for the policies of the next administration? First of all, it cries out for an understanding that the old division between liberal and conservative, at any rate, as these terms have traditionally been used, no longer applies. A victory for Ronald Reagan—not simply a mandate to re-create some vanished world of the free market, although, again to judge from the evidence of the culture, there is a new stirring of moral as well as theoretical approval for the old-time capitalist religion. Similarly a vote for Jimmy Carter is no gesture of praise either for his own record in office or for the recent programs of the Democratic party. The subject for now is American decline: the decline of American power abroad and the apparent decline of belief among the country's leadership class in the comity and workability of the society at home. On matters so central to the very question of survival intact, there is no liberal position and no conservative.

Second, it means that a most urgent

priority for the new administration will be to find the necessary means, that is, military strength, and the true tone in which to conduct the country's dealings with the other nations of the world. By "tone" I do not mean rhetoric or language. There has recently been more than enough of both, belied by the accompanying music of actual intention. I mean the achievement of a genuine pitch at which commitments will be, and will be heard to be, commitments, promises, promises, and threats, threats. There must be a full-scale policy, a consistent posture, whose main principles will be as defined and binding on those who give them voice as they will be consequential to those listening. In short, foreign policy must be made to rest on the twin pillars of military strength and ideology.

For this, a temporizing preoccupation with what is meant by the "national interest," while obviously necessary, will not be enough. Interest without a clear ideological base can be a slippery and evanescent thing. It can speak in many voices. It offers the irresistible opportunity to be too clever by half.* One of the fateful questions of the twentieth century, "Why die for Danzig?" was a question asked, and as it seemed at the time not unreasonably, in the name of the national interest. The saving answer to that question, saving to the very lives and interests of several nations and scores of millions of people,

would have been the simple—call it simple-minded, if you will—ideological one.

What is needed and being demanded now, in other words, needed in the world abroad and demanded at home, is a defense of democratic society. This, in a nutshell, is the mandate that the new nationalism seeks to impose on the next president of the United States. A merely military defense—and we are, alas, a very long way even from that—of the territory and interests and, yes, the national honor

* Witness Henry Kissinger's fascinating account in *White House Years*, of the notions and formulations behind the policy of détente, particularly as revealed in his memos to Nixon. No one could have had a broader or more penetrating grasp of the play of interest among Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States, as well as inside Europe itself. The connections and conflicts become fairly dizzying in the brilliance with which he is able to analyze and then to synthesize them. One can imagine the gratitude and admiration with which Nixon, or any other boss, living in a world so largely made up of plodders, received such memos. And yet the policy they argued, worthy in its sophistication of the greatest statesmen of the ages, was ironically, and even in the not so long run, far from being in the best interests of the United States. And this because, like Kissinger's memos, it was a shimmering play of concreteness with no hard, which is to say, abstract, center.



of the society will by itself be inadequate to meet the felt demands now making their way through the world of ideas. What is more, the experience of the past half century has taught that without a sense of the special value of their society and political system, the American people will not yield up the wherewithal, in spirit or in kind, required for a true national defense.

There are many for whom this lesson has been an occasion for despair or for contempt. It is time, they have said, for the Americans to grow up, to put away their infernally tiresome preoccupation with themselves as a model to the world and learn to live with a wise respect for the long history of relations among nations and powers. This exhortation is, to be sure, a sometimes salutary one. The United States has been summoned by history to be, and thus must be prepared to behave as, a major world power among others. Moreover, the American need to be legitimated has worked both ways: If it made possible the grand policies that ensured the salvation of postwar Europe, which of course it did, by the same token it was to a very large degree responsible for our defeat in Vietnam, and for sev-

eral other subsequent dangerous fiascos.

Yet taxing the country for its tendency to overrely on principle is ultimately fruitless as well as, in the the present crisis, misplaced. Fruitless because that is the way things are. Why this should be so is an interesting problem probably not too difficult for a gifted and imaginative historian to explain. He could not, however, in any case, explain it away: It is the nature of the beast. Those who would govern, as I have said, pay a steep price for their dismissal of regnant moral and social attitudes as a factor in their deliberations.

Moreover, in facing the current threat from the Soviet Union, the sentiment that lies behind the need for reconfirmation happens to be a sounder guide to policy than the old hard-headedness of the pundit or the worldly cynicism of the pol. For the Soviet Union is not merely another great power seeking to pursue its military and economic interests. The Soviet Union is an ideologically armed, continually expansive, revolutionary force. Where its armies, or the surrogate armies of its dependents, move, its political and social system moves as well. Where it hopes to exert influence, political parties committed to

the imposition of that social and political system stand ready to undermine the indigenous social and political fabric.

The strongest, and perhaps in the long run the only, defense against the two-pronged Soviet menace of military power and political subversion is an equally well-armed but also equally confident assertion of the superiority, and superior staying-power, of Western-style democracy. Mere love of country and corresponding hatred of the Russians—that local nationalism which the optimistic preachers of American withdrawal from the world assure us must in the end defeat the spread of Russian power—has proven no adequate counterforce. If by itself this passion could stop the metastatic processes of Communist totalitarianism, the world would be a very different place: Hatred of the Russians is a widespread emotion, as is love of country, and nowhere more so than in Eastern Europe. No, it is a *free* society that by its very nature must depend upon the assent, and the hopes, of those who dwell in it; Communist society has all too brilliantly devised the means to govern without the benefits of popular consent.

Yet this seeming tactical disadvantage of free society, that it must live or die by the steadfast voluntary adherence of its members, is at the same time precisely its greatest strength in confronting the Soviet system. Beyond American nuclear power, there is little the Russians fear more than the example of freedom. Witness the almost incredible lengths of trouble they have put themselves to in order to protect their citizens and the citizens of their European empire from it. We have all but forgotten that if the Soviets have managed to put in place a most effective worldwide network of subversion, including Communist parties, agents, dupes, terrorist gangs, and so on, the West on its side represents a subversive danger to them.

III

All this is something that, albeit inchoately, America's "new patriots" struggle to give expression to. They feel threatened. Not only by the Soviet Union and not only by their government's increasingly evident inability to inspire confidence in the idea that they are, in fact, secure, but by the lack of attention, if not active hostility, all over the Western world to the verities they believe in. They believe the United States is a free and decent society, equal if not superior to any other. They believe that for the past 40 years the United States has been first, the arsenal, and next, the bastion, against the forces of political evil. They believe that without American power, coupled with an activist foreign policy, nothing could have stood in the way of that evil. They believe that the country has been more than fully repaid for any failure in Vietnam. They believe themselves capable of sacrifice if the demands on them to sacrifice are by their



lights worthy. And they believe the time has come for a renewal of American self-respect and a resumption of American responsibility.

The question inevitably presents itself: How many such believers are there? How strong is the new patriotic impulse? The answer, as in the case of the antiwar movement, is, we do not know nor does it matter. Look to the culture, in which an ideological battle is now being waged and in which battle the recently dominant opponents of American power grow ever more enervated and uncertain and, in their enervation and uncertainty, ever more thinly shrill. The future of the political at-

mosphere, without support from which no one in office may conduct any but the most trivial of policies, lies in the relative strength of competing ideas.

And in this, the United States is but the whole world writ small. If the "new patriots" were truly to gain ascendancy—and there is much cheering though not yet conclusive evidence that they are doing so—it would make possible the first indispensable step in national revitalization: the assertion that American power is not only great but good. If the country were to be so revitalized, her allies in turn, concerted in what was now an effort not to beg for the most advantageous terms available but to

secure the survival of a world political order, would have reason to become more resolute. And her enemies, confronted by the two things they most fear, Western power and Western ideology, would once again grow cautious and respectful.

A war of ideas may not be as aesthetically pleasing as a dance of doubts and complexities. It is certainly more demanding to conduct than a barter of near-term interests. Yet in a world living under the long shadow of V.I. Lenin, it is a war we are, whether we will it or not, engaged in. The moment may have come when we are to remind ourselves that, Lenin to the contrary, we need not inevitably lose. □

Francis X. Maier

RED-CURTAINED CATACOMBS

In little Lithuania a gigantic passion persists to haunt the Kremlin and apparently to bore the West.

Earlier this summer, three Russian women were expelled from the Soviet Union for publishing a feminist samizdat journal. Their exit produced an interesting study in contrasts. None of them was beaten up. None of them was sent to the gulag. And as far as the State Department knows, none of them had any trouble bringing her family to the West with her.

At about the same time, Nijole Sadunaite completed the final year of a six-year sentence for dissident activities: three years hard labor in a strict regime Mordovian prison camp, and three years internal exile in Siberia. Sadunaite, like the Russian feminists, was also associated with samizdat activism—in this case, with the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, which documents religious persecution and other human rights violations in the Soviet Baltic republic. Unlike the feminists, she was not invited to emigrate.

The three Russian women—Tatiana Mamonova, Tatiana Goritscheva, and Nataliya Nalachovskaya—drew the attention of American network television news, national news magazines, and a variety of leading news dailies across the country.

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Sadunaite's story, on the other hand, sparked a couple of brief blurbs in the far more obscure religious press.

The disparity in the media coverage of these two incidents is almost as disturbing

as the disparity in the punishment meted out. But one can easily see why the Party chose to act as it did. Women's rights is a "progressive" issue (in the Marxist sense), and the international women's movement is vocal and well-covered by the Western press. As nearly every Soviet exile has pointed out, the regime can be surprisingly sensitive to the pressure of world criticism.

Religion, however, is *not* a progressive issue, and, to make matters worse Nijole Sadunaite, it turns out, is a clandestine nun. The Party, in treating her far more severely, betrayed its thorough knowledge of contemporary Western, and especially American, attitudes toward religion: Basically, the Soviets assumed they could get away with it. And they did.

But there was also an unstated fear in the Soviet treatment of Sadunaite that is quite different from the repression dealt out to the feminists, or even to Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn. Sadunaite's activism is representative of a growing minority nationalism which the Soviets, despite official propaganda, have been unable to head off.

Lithuania is one of the three Baltic states annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. Ethnically, culturally, and linguistically it



Nijole Sadunaite.