



F O O T N O T E S

In Praise of Patriotism

by Lindsey Grant

On the old road between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, at a crossing called Budaghers, there is an abandoned roadhouse and gas station, bypassed by the new Interstate. Whoever owned it retreated in good order. Plywood was put over the windows to protect the place. On one of those sheets of plywood, now partly obscured by an ailanthus, somebody took a paint brush and wrote "U.S.A.#1!" in big, bold letters.

There is a lot of courage reflected in that little scene. I don't know who owns the place, and I don't know who wrote the graffiti. I suspect it was an Hispanic. It was probably somebody who had had his share of lumps, culminating in a distant decision to cut off his roadhouse with a new highway. He was undaunted nonetheless. He believed in the system, and he believed in an abstraction called country.

In a fractioning age and society, we could use more of that spirit. In fact, we desperately need it. There is not much to rally the spirit in the cry "I'm all right, Jack" — i.e. I've got mine — that animates the era. Humans are at least in part a social species. In the absence of a larger group with which to identify, we tend to fall back to identifying ourselves with subgroups, whether they be urban street gangs, ethnic groups, or economic class.

It is less divisive to invest a sense of identity and altruism in one's country, to be proud of it and concerned about its well being. At the local level, the parallel is civic pride. We need a global system to perform the same role for societies that those concepts do for individuals, but it will be a long time coming. Meanwhile, we need the nation. We have a better chance of making it work than of reforming everybody, everywhere.

Patriotism is not presently a popular idea. Driven too far, it can indeed become jingoism. Its savage cousin, ethnic bloodshed, is riding high in much of the world. We don't need more of that. Patriotism is, however, a different concept and a powerful emotion. It has been prematurely counted out. Before Marx changed our perceptions and redivided humankind by economic class, Western historians wrote in terms of nations as the natural social unit. Marx overstated his case. At the advent of World War I, many German Socialists could not believe that workers from different

nations could be herded into armies to shoot at each other. They were wrong. The writer Thomas Mann at about that time observed that different occupational groups have more in common even across national lines — a German and French banker, for instance — than they have with their fellow countrymen from other classes. Perhaps so, but it is an alliance of self interest more than a visceral identity.

My interest in patriotism is partly emotional. (On Census forms, I perversely insist in writing in "American" where it asks about race, thus assuring, I imagine, that my data will be recorded with American Indians or "other.") My present purpose, however, is intellectual.

In the debate about population and immigration, the adversaries tend to talk past each other, because the concept of the national good is simply absent from the thinking particularly of immigration advocates. They dismiss the argument as racism or xenophobia.

Immediate personal self-interest often argues for immigration; witness the recent stories of politicians who were found to have illegal alien servants. Most of the arguments for stopping population growth rest upon societal considerations — the plight of the poor, the preservation of the land for our descendants — and not upon immediate individual or sectarian benefit. Individually (unless you yourself are being displaced), the costs of massive immigration and population growth are gradually imposed, while the benefits are immediate: cheap labor and lower prices. Only if you believe that the social good is important and worth the sacrifice of some immediate individual benefits does the argument even reach you. In a society where the social good is seldom invoked except as a cover for parochial interest, it simply sounds irrelevant.

Individual interest is concentrated. The social interest is dilute. At every turn, when one argues the disadvantages of population growth, one encounters a phalanx of those for whom the growth is immediately profitable: realtors, landowners, businessmen seeking cheap labor, politicians seeking a larger constituency.

Moreover, there is a conflict of moral values involved here. The two World Wars resulted in part from the excesses

of nationalism, and the word has become pejorative in many minds. Add to that the dawning recognition that we share one world and that “all men are brothers”. The result is that arguments based on the national good are suspect.

It is easy to associate that state of mind with liberals, who tend to be Democrats. I want to be fair, however, so I intend to blame both political parties.

The Democrats (with some Republican help) inadvertently promoted the divisions within our society by using ethnic identity to categorize who should benefit from President Johnson’s Great Society program and the other efforts of the past three decades to achieve racial justice. The discrimination was real, and I can think of no other way to propel people from those minorities into the middle class, into corporate boards and senior governmental jobs, and into a position to be heard. Nevertheless, reverse discrimination, like subsidies, creates its own vested interests. Our government created a powerful inducement for people to think of themselves as members of a particular minority. The need to know who was there and how they were faring led to other self-perpetuating divisions such as racial questions on job applications and the Census questions about race (a thoroughly unscientific concept) and ethnicity.

Perhaps we should have written sunset provisions into those laws to terminate them when they had served their purpose. It is hardly rational for the child of a Black PhD to have a hiring advantage over a White manual laborer’s child. Reverse discrimination in the name of ending discrimination has a certain Alice in Wonderland quality, and there may be hope in recent proposals — voicing the unthinkable — to gear the legislation more closely to individual wrongs.

As to the Republicans: The Republican majority elected to the House of Representatives in November 1994, with its demolition derby approach to government, seems intent on validating Karl Marx’s class view of society. Their proposal for a “capital gains cut and indexation” is a rich man’s dream. In the name of a balanced budget, they have embarked upon two thoroughly incompatible projects: wiping out the deficit; and cutting taxes for the prosperous. They propose a massive income transfer from the poor to the prosperous and a removal of social controls on the latter, as if to emphasize that America consists of those two classes and to show which one is in control.

That, apparently, is what the people want. The Republicans won.

The rich get richer and the poor get bitter. The rich don’t need a tax break. A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* — not usually considered a radical rag — pointed out that in the past two decades the real earnings of the bottom fifth of Americans have dropped 24%, while those of the top fifth have risen 10%. A company CEO then typically earned 35 times as much as the average worker; the ratio has risen to 150, the highest in the industrial world.• The proportion of our country’s wealth held by the rich has been growing.

If Congress seeks to address the deficit, and to share the burden fairly, is this the way?

We are destroying the sense of community. There is no automatic rule as to what income disparity should be tolerable in a society, but we are widening the gap. Those at the bottom suffer first, but our society is being torn apart, and not only the poor will suffer. The new Republican House majority seems to see the nation simply as a space in which the ground rules are dog eat dog. Witness its eagerness to dismantle the environmental protections and the national parks and forests built up over the years, as they seek to cut expenses, make room for a tax cut, and get rid of impediments to business as usual.

In the past, Americans have responded to appeals to the social good. Franklin Roosevelt’s second inaugural speech in 1937 is still stirring: “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad and ill-nourished.” Many Republicans of his time were convinced he was a Communist, but his message was rooted in precisely the opposite view of society: that we all had a stake in that one-third of the nation, and that we would not prosper if they remained excluded.

We need to bring back that state of mind. I think that, as we do, it will become much clearer why some of us argue that the social good calls for a smaller population.

• Steven Rattner (a managing director of Lazard Freres & Co.), “GOP Ignores Income Inequality”, *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 1995. He called income inequality “the greatest evident threat to America’s well-being”.

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NEGATIVE POPULATION GROWTH, Inc.

210 The Plaza, P.O. Box 1206, Teaneck NJ 07666-1206 Telephone: (201) 837-3555

