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THE ANXIOUS LIBERAL'S GUIDE TO THE FUTURE

ROBERT B. REICH

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ROBERT B. REICH

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INTRODUCTION

I write this at a time when many Americans are confused about what America stands fo
Many of the courageous souls who still call themselves “liberals” find that they are witho
bearings. The ideals that had guided them since the 1930s and through the postwar decad
seem less clear, and the premises of public debate in recent years, strangely disorientin
Many who call themselves “conservatives,” although more confident in their assertions tha
at any time since the start of the New Deal, are bedeviled by the possibility that their se
assurance may be vicarious—attributable to the ebullience of the man now occupying th
White House rather than to the discovery of any fundamental moral truths. On the horizon
a presidential election that may determine which set of concerns endures longer.

You may ask: Is it really necessary to probe the public consciousness and examine th
reigning public philosophy? Are not most of us guided by a gritty pragmatism that eschev
any overarching approach to our society’s problems?

Between the transient moods elicited by political advertising or lofty rhetoric and th
detailed policy prescriptions manufactured by the inhabitants of Washington think tanks ar
universities spreads the conceptual terrain in which public problems are defined and publ
ideals are forged. This is a realm of parable and metaphor, the source of our collective visio
To dismiss this realm as “ideological”—meaningless because irrational and unempirical—is
miss the point that value, not fact, is the currency of the realm. It is to neglect th
importance of values for motivating a society. It is to preempt or cheapen all discussion abo
whether we are motivated in the right direction.

The current confusion reflects turmoil and change in this realm. Our collective vision
slowly shifting in response to a radically different world. Hence the importance of examinin
what the prevailing vision has been, and what it might be.

Since this is a realm of values and purposes, a journey into it must follow a route marke
by interpretations and illustrations rather than formal proofs. In this book I have drawn fro
several disciplines, selected from a wide range of examples, and connected ideas ar
phenomena not normally juxtaposed. But I am relying on you, the reader, to be an activ
explorer as well. You will need to ask yourself: How do these illustrations resonate with m
experience? Are these interpretations plausible and meaningful to me? Do they help m
better understand my own values, or lead me to question them?

In undertaking this journey, I have relied on the help and insights of many people. Th
enterprise has come as close to collective entrepreneurialism (a term with which the read
will become acquainted) as is possible without relinquishing single authorship. Only in a
academic environment as marvelously disrespectful of traditional academic boundaries, ar
as supportive of interesting but risky intellectual ventures, as the Kennedy School at Harvar
would I have found a group of people willing to take on the topic and encourage me forwar
I am particularly grateful to Michael Barzelay, whose interest in the relation between idea
politics, and economics continues to kindle my own; to Ronald Heifetz, whose insights in
group psychology and cultural avoidance have influenced my thinking about politic
mythology; and to Bill Hogan, whose hard-nosed approach to public policy has forced me
connect these larger concepts to practical policy questions. I have benefited from Steve

Kelman's understanding of American political institutions, and Mark Moore's continuin interest in the capacity of myths and visions to mobilize public action. Howard Frant and Ro Muller, graduate students here, donated their time and perspectives. I am especially indebte as before, to Jack Donahue, whose tenacity forced me to rethink and rewrite, and whos insights added immeasurably to whatever strength the book now possesses. Sever colleagues and students at the Harvard Law School, where I have been teaching about th relationships between law, politics, and industrial structure, have also aided in the venture. am particularly grateful to Phil Heymann for sharing with me his insights into law ar political ideology and for his continuing interest in probing these dark corners.

In addition, I am grateful to a number of people who took an early interest in this projec and offered valuable advice and counsel along the way. Larry Smith and Hendrik Hertzber got me started; Jack Beatty and Bill Whitworth encouraged me to write an essay for *Th Atlantic* that foreshadowed several of the themes in this book; Paul Erickson, Mark Koerne Robert Bell, and David Kastan provided background on American myth, literature, ar politics. The manuscript benefited from readings by Robert Ball, Sidney Blumenthal, Samu Beer, Nancy Bekavac, Lincoln Caplin, George Gilder, Ray Dalton, Jim Dillon, Doug Dworki David Ellwood, John Isaacson, Robert Kuttner, Marc Lackritz, Nancy Altman Lupu, Herma Leonard, George Lodge, Shelley Metzenbaum, Richard Neustadt, Michael O'Hare, Ra Sagalyn, Paul Starr, Phil Steele, Richard Stewart, and Jim Verdier. Jon Segal, as befor brought to bear his unique blend of enthusiasm and moral support. Above all, I owe thanks t my intellectual partner, friend, and wife, Clare Dalton, whose insights into critical theory ar feminism have enriched my perspectives on economics and politics, and whose grace unde fire has been an inspiration.

—ROBERT B. REICH

Cambridge, Massachuset
October 1986

PROLOGUE

THE AMERICAN STORY

CHAPTER 1

FOUR MORALITY TALES

1

You've heard the story a hundred times, with different names, different details. George was good man, the son of immigrants who had made their way to Marysville. They came with n money, with nothing but grim determination and hard-won freedom. Dad worked all his li in the mill; he was union, hard, and proud. George was quick by nature, dogged by necessit He studied hard at school, and after school worked long and well at anything that wou bring in a few dollars. George was good at sports, but he had little time for games. He ha few close friends, and yet he was fair and decent with everyone, and quietly kind to anyboc in real trouble. He never picked a fight in his life. But in eighth grade, when the town bul Albert Wade was slapping around the smallest kid in the class, George stepped between the without saying a word. He let Wade throw the first punch, then put him away with or straight left, turned around, and walked away.

George finished high school in 1943, and joined the army the day he graduated. Fou months later he was in Europe. On the sixth day of the Normandy invasion his squad was c patrol, passing through a French orchard when a German machine-gun nest opened up fro behind a stone wall, picking off the squad one by one. George broke from cover and, dodgi from tree to tree, raced toward the Nazis as bullets chewed the bark and ground around hi He took out the nest with a grenade and his rifle, and he saved his buddies, but he neve wore the medals they gave him and he never talked about it much. After the war he cam back to Marysville and married Kate, his childhood sweetheart. He raised three kids, and h started a little construction business, which his hard work and integrity gradually made into big construction business. By and by, George made a lot of money. But his family continue to live modestly, and he gave generously to the local boys' club and an orphanage h founded. He was generous with his time, too, and headed the community chest. Still he ke pretty much to himself until Albert Wade inherited his father's bank, the only bank in tow Wade risked his depositors' money on shaky loans to his cronies, bought and bullied his wa into power with Marysville's political leaders. When he was elected mayor the electic smelled bad to everyone, but only George openly accused Wade of corruption. For six montl Wade's bank refused every mortgage on houses built by George's company, and Georg risked everything in the showdown. But in that tense town meeting, one of the ci councilmen Wade had paid off could no longer hide his shame under George's steady gaze ar simple question from the back of the room. He spilled how Wade had rigged the electio Albert Wade went from city hall to county jail, and George went back to his family, his wor and his quiet service to Marysville.

George's story is an American morality tale. It is a national parable, retold time and aga in many different versions, about how we should live our lives in this country. George is th American Everyman. He's Gary Cooper in *High Noon.* He's Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderf Life.* He's the American private eye, the frontier hero, the kid who makes good. He's Geor

Washington and Abe Lincoln. He appears in countless political speeches, in newspaper storie on the evening news, in American ballads, and sermons.

Everyone has a favorite variation, but the basic theme is the same and speaks to th essence of our national self-image: Ours is a nation of humble, immigrant origins, built out o nothing and into greatness through hard work; generous to those in need, those who canno make it on their own; a loner among nations, suspicious of foreign entanglements, but willin to stand up against tyranny; and forever vigilant against corruption and special privilege.

The American morality tale defines our understanding of who we are, and of what we wa for ourselves and one another. It is the tacit subtext of our daily conversations abo American life. It permeates *both* American conservatism and American liberalism. And—th essential point—it is a fundamentally noble, essentially life-affirming story. Much is made o the American political distinctiveness of a Constitution inspired by theory rather than b tradition. But there is a subtler yet equally profound *cultural* distinctiveness as well, national sense of identity rooted not in history but in self-told mythology. Political scienti Carl Friedrich captured the distinction in 1935: "To be an American is an ideal, while to be Frenchman is a fact."[1]

This basic mythology, however integral to the American identity, is so vague as to admit o many interpretations, to present itself in multiple manifestations over time. At different time in our history, different aspects of the parable have come to the fore while others recede Some variants of the myth are more faithful to its essence than others; some variants a more supple accommodations to current American reality than others. Our history punctuated with wrenching national contests between competing versions of the ideal; bo world wars, for example, forced us to decide whether we must love peace more or justic more. Indeed, these episodes of editing our common mythology, as painful as they may b are themselves affirmations of the American distinctiveness. This book is premised on th observation that another such episode seems to be at hand.

2

The most important aspect of political discourse is not the appraisal of alternative solutio to our problems, but the definition of the problems themselves. This simple truth is easy t miss because what we *see* when we look at politics is a series of particular problems an possible remedies: How to contain Soviet aggression? Improve American competitivenes Eliminate poverty and hunger? Manage the size and curb the intrusiveness of governmen Editorial pages overflow with worries and suggestions. Political candidates brandish ne ideas. Economists diligently tally the costs and benefits of the various proposal Congressional committees hold hearings. Television documentaries present exper pontificating from behind desks. Disagreeing specialists abuse each other for the edificatio and entertainment of the populace at large. Public opinion, as measured in the latest pol swings to and fro. This is what we take for public discourse.

But in the background—disguised, unarticulated—are the myth-based morality tales th determine when we declare a fact to be a problem, how policy choices are characterized, ho the debate is framed. These are the unchallenged subtexts of political discourse. We deba specifics, and on almost every issue we instinctively define a spectrum ranging from "left" t

"right" and align ourselves along it. But our varying readings of the American morality ta condition how this spectrum is drawn. And the basic contours of our mythology organize th way we think about issues; they bound the field of argument.[2]

Public problems don't exist "out there." They are not discrete facts or pieces of da awaiting discovery. They are consequences of our shared values. Without a set of commo moral assumptions we would have no way of identifying or categorizing problems and the possible solutions. Some questions are rarely asked. What is at the root of our quarrel wi the Soviets? Does it make sense to speak of American economic competitiveness? Is citizen's poverty his own misfortune, his own due, or a social problem? What precisely do w mean by government intervention, or the market? These questions do not enter publ discourse because so much of the ground from which they spring is taken for granted. To as them directly is often to end a conversation, because there is nothing left to say; on suc basic questions we have collectively, albeit tacitly, reached either essential agreement stalemate. And yet it is that which we leave unsaid in our debates, not the words that fill th air and the pages, that says the most about us.

As good American pragmatists, wary of grand themes, we prefer the ellipses of metapho To the extent that we reflect upon these deeper premises at all, we do so through the stori we tell one another about our lives together—stories like that of George. These tales embod our public philosophy. They constitute a set of orienting ideas less rigid and encompassi than an ideology but also less ephemeral than the "public mood." The stories interpret an explain reality and teach what is expected of us in light of that reality.[3] They situate u allowing us to understand where we are in an otherwise incomprehensible sea of facts an events. In so doing, these stories give meaning and coherence to what would otherwise see random phenomena: a new Russian missile, a shuttered factory, a starving child. Ou morality tales inform our sense of what our society is about, what it is *for.*

Every culture has its own parables.[4] Conveying lessons about the how and why of li through metaphor may be a basic human trait, a universal characteristic of our intermittent rational, deeply emotional, meaning-seeking species. Cultural parables come in a multitude forms. In modern America, the vehicles of public myth include the biographies of famou citizens, popular fiction and music, movies, feature stories on the evening news, and gossi They may also take more explicitly hortatory forms in judicial opinions, political speeche and sermons. In whatever form, they are transmitted constantly, and all around us—in ou schoolrooms, dining rooms, poolrooms, and newsrooms. They shape our collecti judgments. They anchor our political understandings. The specific details of the stories we te need not have any particular connection to fact, an insight that some political orators gra instinctively. What gives them force is their capacity to make sense of, and bring coheren to, common experience. The lessons ring true, even if the illustration is fanciful.

There is a danger in this, of course. It is not that the public can be readily led into believi lies or embracing destructive values. Cultural parables are deeply rooted and resistant manipulation by controlling elites. Myths cannot be made to order. Propaganda—the attem to dictate mythology—is a pitiful device; there is evidence that the critical sensibilities those who must endure it grow exquisitely acute. (Soviet citizens are accustomed to maki inferences from the most subtle of clues.)[5] The danger is more insidious. A mythology is culture's device for interpreting its reality and acting on it. But what if the reality chang

and the mythology does not?

Even when a culture's parables lose their vitality—their compelling connection with th broader reality in which the culture finds itself—they may continue to inform and entranc This can go on for a time. The culture can continue to act as though its myths were soun guides to behavior. If the culture is powerful enough relative to other powers in i environment, if its members' ambitions lean more to conservation than to greate development, the penalties for following outmoded myths may at first be small. We ca continue, without great cost, to embrace the conviction that the world is flat only until w develop the competence to sail to the edge. It is at that point—when we restrain ou potential out of fear of falling off, or greet any stranger as a devil from beyond the edge- that the stories we tell ourselves can metamorphose from myth to damaging delusion.

3

George's story embodies four basic American morality tales, our core cultural parables. The are rooted in the central experiences of American history: the flight from older cultures, th rejection of central authority and aristocratic privilege, the lure of the unspoiled frontier, th struggle for harmony and justice.

1. THE MOB AT THE GATES. The first mythic story is about tyranny and barbarism that lurk "ou there." It depicts America as a beacon light of virtue in a world of darkness, a small island o freedom and democracy in a perilous sea. We are uniquely blessed, the proper model fo other peoples' aspirations, the hope of the world's poor and oppressed. The parable give voice to a corresponding fear: we must beware, lest the forces of darkness overwhelm u Our liberties are fragile; our openness renders us vulnerable to exploitation or infection fro beyond.

Hence our endless efforts to isolate ourselves from the rest of the globe, to contain ev forces beyond our borders, and to convey our lessons with missionary zeal to benighte outsiders. George fought the "good war" against the Nazis; Daniel Boone, a somewhat le savory campaign against Indians; Davy Crockett, Mexicans. The American amalgam of fea and aggressiveness toward "them out there" appears in countless fantasies of space explore who triumph over alien creatures from beyond. It is found in Whig histories of the Unite States, and in the anti-immigration harangues of the late nineteenth and early twentie centuries. We heeded George Washington's warning to maintain our independence from th monarchical powers of Europe, and then proceeded for more than a century to conque purchase, or otherwise control vast territories to our west and south.

In this century Woodrow Wilson grimly rallied Americans to "defeat once and for all … th sinister forces" that rendered peace impossible;[6] Franklin Roosevelt warned of "rotten appl nations that spread their rot to others; Dean Acheson adopted the same metaphor to describ the Communist threat to Greece and Turkey immediately after Hitler's war; to Eisenhowe South Vietnam was the first in a series of dominoes that might fall to communism; to John Kennedy it was "the finger in the dike," holding back the Soviet surge. The underlying lesso We must maintain vigilance, lest dark forces overrun us.

2. THE TRIUMPHANT INDIVIDUAL. This is the story of the little guy who works hard, takes risk believes in himself, and eventually earns wealth, fame, and honor. It's the parable of the sel made man (or, more recently, woman) who bucks the odds, spurns the naysayers, and show what can be done with enough drive and guts. He's a loner and a maverick, true to himsel plain speaking, self-reliant, uncompromising in his ideals. He gets the job done.

Determination and integrity earned George his triumph. Benjamin Franklin employed carefully conceived system of self-control (Franklin's *Autobiography* is but the first of a lon line of American manuals on how to become rich through self-denial and diligence). Th theme recurs in the tale of Abe Lincoln, log splitter from Illinois who goes to the Whi House; in the hundred or so novellas of Horatio Alger, whose heroes all rise promptly an predictably from rags to riches (not only through pluck; luck plays a part too); and in th manifold stories of American detectives and cowboys—mavericks all—who reluctantly g involved in a dangerous quest and end up with the girl, the money, and the glory.[7] It appea in the American morality tales of the underdog who eventually makes it, showing up th bosses and bullies who tried to put him down; think of *Rocky* or *Iacocca.* Regardless of th precise form, the moral is the same: With enough guts and gumption, anyone can make it o their own in America.

3. THE BENEVOLENT COMMUNITY. The third parable is about the American community. It is the story o neighbors and friends rolling up their sleeves and pitching in to help one another, of sel sacrifice, community pride, and patriotism. It is about Americans' essential generosity an compassion toward those in need.

The story is rooted in America's religious traditions, and its earliest formulations are foun in sermons like John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity," delivered on board ship Salem Harbor just before the Puritans landed in 1630. He described the enterprise on whic they were embarking in the terms of Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount: Th new settlers would be "as a City on a Hill" whose members would "delight in each other" an be "of the same body." America began as a nation of religious communities, centered in th church and pledged to piety and charity—Shakers, Amish, Mennonite, New Englan Congregationalist. Biblical language and symbols continued to propel American soci movements committed to enlarging membership in the benevolent community—the drive fo emancipation of the slaves, women's suffrage, civil rights. "I have a dream that every valle shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low," said Martin Luther King.

The story extends beyond religion to embrace social solidarity and civic virtue. It summon images of New England villagers who meet to debate their future; of frontier settlers wh help build one another's barns and gather for quilting bees; of neighbors who volunteer a fire fighters and librarians, whose generosity erects the local hospital and propels high scho achievers to college; of small towns that send their boys off to fight wars for the good of al The story celebrates America's tradition of civic improvement, philanthropy, and loc boosterism.

It also tells of national effort on behalf of those in need. The theme permeated Roosevelt New Deal, Truman's Fair Deal, Johnson's Great Society: America is a single, nation community, bound by a common ideal of equal opportunity, and generosity toward the le fortunate. E Pluribus Unum.

Our popular culture has echoed these sentiments. Three hundred years after Joh Winthrop's sermon they could be found in Robert Sherwood's plays, the novels of Joh Steinbeck and William Saroyan, Aaron Copland's music and Frank Capra's films. The la scene in *It's a Wonderful Life* conveys the lesson: Jimmy Stewart learns that he can count o his neighbors' generosity and goodness, just as they had always counted on him. They ar bound together in common cause. The principle: We must nurture and preserve genuin community.

4. THE ROT AT THE TOP. The fourth parable is about the malevolence of powerful elites, be the wealthy aristocrats, rapacious business leaders, or imperious government officials. Th American parable differs subtly but profoundly from a superficially similar Europea mythology: The struggle is only occasionally and incidentally a matter of money or clas There are no workers pitted against capitalists at the heart of this American story. It i rather, a tale of corruption, decadence, and irresponsibility among the powerful, o conspiracy against the broader public.

This morality tale has repeatedly provoked innovation and reform. Experience with th arbitrary authority of the English Crown produced in the Founding Fathers an acu sensitivity to the possibilities of abuse of power. The result was a government premised o the Enlightenment idea that power must be constrained and limited through checks an balances, and be kept firmly tied to the consent of the governed. A century later Americ responded to mounting concentrations of private economic power through antitrust law designed to diffuse such power, and later by government support for other groups—labo unions, farmers, and retailers—capable of exercising countervailing power.[8] The nation dea with concentrations of governmental power through civil service rules that limite favoritism, and through electoral reforms and limitations on campaign contributions, t render politicians more accountable to the public. Government power also was held in chec by periodic efforts to extend power to the states and cities, to open government decisio making to greater public observation and scrutiny, to reduce the power of senior legislator and to limit the ability of the president to take action without congressional approval. Sinc the beginning, in sum, Americans have been suspicious of elites and anxious to circumscrib their power.

At their worst, suspicions about the Rot at the Top have expressed themselves in conspirac theories. America has harbored a long and infamous line of rabble-rousers, from the pre-Civ War Know-Nothings and Anti-Masonic movements, through the populist agitators of the la nineteenth century, the Ku Klux Klan, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and Lyndon LaRouche. The have fomented against bankers, Catholics, big corporations, blacks, Jews, foreigners, eithe or both major political parties, and other unnamed "interests." In this version of the stor the Rot at the Top is in a great conspiracy with the Mob at the Gates to keep down th common man and allow evil forces to overrun us.[9]

Our popular culture revels in tales of corruption in high places. At the turn of the centur muckrakers like Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell uncovered sordid tales of corpora malfeasance; their modern heirs (revealing CIA depredations, White House scandals, an corporate transgressions) are called investigative reporters. The theme recurs in real o invented stories of honest undercover agents—Sam Spade, Serpico, Jack Nicholson

Chinatown—who trace the rot back to the most powerful members of the community. It
embodied by the great bullies of American fiction: Judge Thatcher of *Huckleberry Fin*
Broderick Crawford as the Huey Long-like character in *All the King's Men*, Lionel Barrymore
demonic Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life*. And in the tales of humble folk, like the Joa
family of *The Grapes of Wrath*, who struggle valiantly against avaricious bankers ar
landowners. The moral is clear: Power corrupts, privilege perverts.

4

These are stories of aspiration. They summon us to duty and destiny. Importantly, th
American ideal can never really be fulfilled. The goals it mandates are at once too vast ar
too vague for objective achievement. To pursue them is its own accomplishment. The strivir
gives meaning to our collective life; the aspiration bestows on us a national identity. In th
respect, America may be unique; probably no other culture so clearly defines itself by i
morality tales. As a nation of immigrants without a deep common history, we are bour
together by a common hope.

Sometimes the four tales take the form of self-congratulation: Celebrate our triumph ov
savages and evil abroad! Rejoice in the opportunity open to each of us to gain fame ar
fortune! Admire our generosity and compassion! See how we have overcome veste
privilege! But the same stories can be cast as rebukes, exposing the great gulf separating wh
we are from what we want to become, or how far we have fallen from an ideal we onc
achieved. The world is succumbing to tyranny, barbarism, and devastation, while we star
idly by! Hard work and merit are sabotaged by convention, chicanery, and prejudice! We ar
selfish, narcissistic, racist, indifferent—look at the poor and hungry in our midst! Ou
democracy is a sham, and everything important is controlled by a venal cabal at the top!

Pride in what we have accomplished, shame in what we have not—these are the ways w
recount the four mythic tales and incorporate them into our daily lives. We hear them on th
evening news and read them in the press. We reiterate them over lunch when gossip turns t
affairs of the day ("Did you hear about—?" "It just shows you—"). Our jokes, tellingly, ofte
refer to these fables and our failures to manifest their mandates. No other culture s
celebrates its Mark Twains and Will Rogers, its satirists and debunkers.[10]

The pride or shame that come from seeking to live out these four parables also shape ou
politics. The great reform movements of American history—the Jacksonian war on the Ban
of the United States in the 1830s, the abolitionist crusades of the mid-nineteenth century, th
Populist-Progressive agitation of the 1880s and 1890s, the New Deal of the 1930s, the War o
Poverty and Vietnam protests of the 1960s, even the Reagan "Revolution"—can all be viewe
as periods in which the gap between aspiration and perceived reality grew too painfully wid
for many to endure. The dissonance was too loud; the hypocrisy too transparent. If we wer
to continue to tell one another the same stories, it was necessary to take dramatic action.[11]

Political rhetoric in America is essentially prophetic rather than pragmatic. Challengers te
tales of shame and betrayal, incumbents speak with pride and promise. Both refer not to th
mundane present but to a nation "to be," which has yet to fulfill its national destiny. The ton
is often messianic, evangelical. The four parables appear as stories of salvation ar
redemption: America is to be a promised land of "New Frontiers" and "Great Societies."

will triumph over evil. It will light the world. We will all be blessed with freedom an wealth, make manifest our compassion, and celebrate the triumph of the common man. Suc as we all know perfectly well, is our destiny.

5

The four basic parables have endured throughout American history. But in each era they hav been combined and conveyed in slightly different ways, emphasizing a distinct messag Variants develop, come to dominate, and eventually evolve. The evolution can be endorse and possibly accelerated, but never dictated, by political leaders. The art of political rhetor has been to reconfigure these stories in a manner that affirms and amplifies the chang already occurring in the way Americans tell these tales to one another. The best politic tales, like any parables, are those which most elegantly and simply interpret what happening to the average person, which render coherent the citizens' experiences of fear an shame, pride and hope.

In the early part of this century, for example, Progressive leaders merged the parables Rot at the Top and the Triumphant Individual. The lesson was that Big Business—the trusts blocked worthy citizens from their rightful places in society. Corruption in high places wa thwarting personal initiative, stifling upward mobility for the little man. Woodrow Wilso put the matter bluntly in a speech during the 1912 presidential campaign, promising to wag "a crusade against the powers that have governed us … that have limited ou development … that have determined our lives … that have set us in a straightjacket to do they please." In his view, the struggle against the trusts would be nothing less than "a secon struggle for emancipation."[12] (For Wilson, the Mob at the Gates—the large, bellicose, prew European states—represented a similar challenge to democratic freedoms, and required a n unrelated dispersion of power.)

By the 1930s, the parables had shifted. Now the key thematic link was between Rot at th Top and the Benevolent Community. Now the lesson was that the mutual prosperity common people was under attack by leaders of big business and finance. In the 193 presidential campaign, Franklin D. Roosevelt warned against the "economic royalists" wh had impressed the whole of society into "royal service." "The hours men and women worke the wages they received, the conditions of their labor … these had passed beyond the contr of the people, and were imposed by this new industrial dictatorship," he warned in on speech. "The royalists of the economic order have conceded that political freedom was th business of the government, but they have maintained that economic slavery was nobody business." What was at stake, he concluded, was the "survival of democracy."[13]

The shift from the Progressives' emphasis on the Triumphant Individual to the New Deal Benevolent Community was more than an oratorical device. It represented a change Americans' understanding of social life. The Great Depression had provided a national lesso in social solidarity; nearly every American family felt the effects of poverty and insecurit The Benevolent Community became intimately relevant as relatives and neighbors sought help one another, as government became the insurer of last resort, and then as America turned together to winning Hitler's war. Roosevelt explicitly described the purpose of th New Deal as "extending to our national life the old principle of the local community." "W

are determined," he said, "to make every American citizen the subject of his country
interest and concern."[14]

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan drew on the same parables, but they were substantial reconfigured. Repudiating Roosevelt's national community, Reagan redefined the Benevole Community as small, traditional neighborhoods in which people voluntarily helped o another, free from government interference. The Rot at the Top referred to Washingto insiders, arrogant government bureaucrats, and liberal intellectuals who wanted to gra power and stifle creativity. The Triumphant Individual was the business entrepreneur wh started work in an attic or garage and ended up spawning an entire industry. And the Mob the Gates comprised a wide assortment—illegal immigrants, drug traffickers, Third Worl debtors and revolutionaries, terrorists, greedy trading partners, and, above all, Communi aggressors—who threatened our way of life. But America would prevail. "America is bac and standing tall," Reagan said in 1984. "We've begun to restore the great American values the dignity of work, the warmth of family, the strength of neighborhood, and th nourishment of human freedom."[15]

6

All four of our morality tales refer to a *collective* identity. They affirm a *common* destin Thus a fundamental theme in the American mythology is membership—inclusion an necessarily, exclusion. In American political life, as in our sporting events and lawsuits, th pronouns "us" and "them" contain the essential information. They signal the boundari beyond which loyalties and commitments do not extend. We trust that others like "us" wi fulfill mutual obligations that yield joint benefits. But for "them" we have only pity disdain.

In the story of the Mob at the Gates, "they" are dangerous outsiders. Their specific identit and the quality of their menace, has varied throughout our history. "They" have been, at o time or another, American Indians, French, English, Mexicans, Southerners, Europea immigrants, Germans, Japanese, Chinese, and Russians, to name a few. That members these groups have on occasion done us injury is true but not essential; that the pigment their skin is different from that of most Americans is often, but not necessarily, the cas What unites them is that, at some point, "we" have defined ourselves as definitively not lik them, and our thorough repudiation of what they represent has buttressed our sense of wh we stand for.

Similarly, as Triumphant Individuals we are characterized partly by contrast with who w are not. In this story, "they" are featherbedders, menial workers, and time servers. They a the men in gray flannel suits who dither and grovel in the offices of large organization workers who mindlessly follow routine, petty bureaucrats, and all the other slackers who fa to pull their own weight. That even entrepreneurial garages go dark unless the bureaucrats the local utility keep the electricity coming may seem to suggest a more complicated story how we get things accomplished in America, but the stirring distinction between the chan master and the time server endures.

A comparable dividing line runs through our conception of the Benevolent Community. O one side of the line the governing principle is solidarity; on the other side it is altruism, eve

paternalism. “We” are solid citizens who ask no more than our due, who offer or accept hel
only in cases of unanticipated and uncontrollable calamity. “They” are *the poor*, dependent b
nature and perhaps by choice. We assume, mistakenly, that they are mostly black or brow
Our sense of mercy requires that we limit their suffering; our sense of justice requires that w
accompany our charity with proper discipline.

Finally, in the tale of Rot at the Top, “they” are business tycoons, wealthy aristocrat
Washington insiders, or any others who seem to exercise unaccountable power or enjo
unearned privilege. “We” are the common people, too often robbed of true authorit
unfairly dispossessed of our proper rewards, innocent victims of the venality ar
incompetence of self-serving elites.

Dividing the world into “us” and “them,” of course, is a universal and perhaps inevitab
human trait. But when the dividing line is accepted without question by all sides of th
political debate, it renders our convictions about credit and blame, about the sources ar
solutions to our problems, sturdily resistant to evidence. This is dangerous when it undercu
the possibility of mutual responsibility and reciprocal gain. As we attribute to “them”-
dangerous outsiders, lazy workers, the poor and the deviant, the scheming elites—th
problems that bedevil us, we simultaneously limit our repertoire of responses to two broa
categories: First, we can discipline them. By being tough and assertive, we can compel the
to repent, lay down the law on acceptable behavior, and punish them when they transgres
Alternatively, we can conciliate them. Through generosity, understanding, and toleration w
can socialize them, bring out the best in them, and seduce them into changing their ways, in
becoming more like us.

It is in large part this pervasive mythic division between the “us” and the “them” th
explains the American propensity to squeeze the most collectively diverse and individual
complex public choices into a linear array of options anchored, on the one end, by toughne
and on the other, by conciliation. These are our contested principles, in issues ranging fro
foreign policy to welfare. Our public discourse, thus constrained, is often comfortab
straightforward but perilously incomplete.

Our morality tales are increasingly at odds with the new challenges we confront. Th
prevailing versions have little relevance to the relationships that frame our lives—with othe
peoples of the earth, within our firms, toward our poor, toward our leaders. The prevailin
versions do not speak of mutual obligation. They neither celebrate joint gain nor forebo
reciprocal loss. Our morality tales, too long unexamined, are losing their power to inform ou
present. Once again we must revise and reaffirm our declaration of identity.

CHAPTER 2

THE PREVAILING VERSIONS

1

The terms “liberal” and “conservative” (along with their more recent “neo” variants) deno
two fundamental orientations toward public issues. They anchor American political discours
Each orientation harbors internal contradictions and inconsistencies; neither comprises
logical structure of opinions founded on first principles. And many who think of themselve
as one or the other often find that on certain specific issues their sympathies lie in the othe
camp. Nevertheless, Americans tend to define their stances across a remarkable range o
issues by reference to conservatism or liberalism.[1]

These two orientations are not comparable to the conflicting ideologies that animat
politics in other cultures. They are best understood, rather, as different interpretations of th
same four morality roles—the Mob at the Gates, the Triumphant Individual, the Benevole
Community, the Rot at the Top. Both are inspired by roughly the same values; both proje
similar ideals of the perfect society. Both feature a division of the world into “us” an
“them.” The conservative version sees “them” as unruly and exploitative, yielding only
discipline. The liberal version sees “them” as misguided and needy, deserving of and open
accommodation and charity. In recent years the conservative version has been mo
compelling to a majority of Americans.[2] It is important to understand why.

Many liberals have refused to credit the currently reigning conservatism with a philosoph
at all. They prefer to see it as a thinly veiled scheme to further enrich the wealthy. Som
conservatives doubtless embrace their positions out of pure self-interest. But such cynicism
rare. The majority of conservatives, I venture, are attracted by the ideas themselves; th
stories make sense.

Other liberals have conceded conservatism’s new claim on the public’s sentiments but see
as a sign of the temporary reversion toward private interest and away from public activis
that periodically overcomes a reform-weary citizenry.[3] This view, however, fails to accou
for the reformist zeal of the new movement and its aggressive use of public power
transform the American system. The new conservatism is no simple rejection of “b
government,” for it is content to subordinate a significant part of the economy to th
military, and aims at expanding the powers of the police, teachers, and other designate
public disciplinarians.

Still other liberals have sought to attribute the change in public attitudes to the congeni
personality of Ronald Reagan, rather than to any philosophical shift. History will note th
the president was an artful orator and a master of parable. He brilliantly acted the part o
America’s cowboy hero—the tall and rugged town marshal, who kept the peace wi
integrity, optimism, and self-deprecating humor.[4] But this explanation overlooks th
groundswell of support for conservatism that arose before Reagan arrived in Washington. Th
new conservatism was a wider phenomenon than Reaganism. The ideological chest-thumpi
of the Reagan administration, for example, obscured Jimmy Carter’s quieter but profou

conservatism. Reagan's success lay not in changing the nation's view of how the world worl
—he had been saying the same things for years, after all, without sparking much of
response—but in giving clear voice to themes the public had finally shown itself ready
embrace.

The new conservativism is attractive because it manages to make sense out of a great de
of our troubling collective experience since, roughly, the assassination of John F. Kennedy.
refashions resonant new versions of America's core myths. It extracts from thes
reinterpretations a set of plausible lessons. The first such lesson describes a world "out there
grown more ruthless and sternly warns that as individuals and as a nation we must strugg
for survival against the Mob at the Gates. Another speaks of Triumphant Individu
entrepreneurs who must be liberated and spoiled workers whose wage demands could ru
our economy. A third talks of dependency and excess in our Benevolent Community ar
charges us to require responsibility of the objects of our benevolence. The last warns
slackness and corruption in our political system that inflict on us an unaccountable flood
wasteful public spending.

All four lessons convey much the same moral: We are in danger of losing our way. W
must impose discipline and responsibility on "them"—malign outsiders, free-riding worker
welfare cheats, bureaucrats and politicians—in order that we may fulfill our grand destin
The parable presents an intricate blend of dissenting Protestant theology and soci
Darwinism—of salvation, redemption, and triumphant survival. The overarching lesson
dramatically clear, and it applies to a range of public issues. Its power lies in its simplicit
and scope, and its evocation of unarticulated fears and hopes.

2

Consider, first, the new conservative position on foreign policy. For years liberals had soug
to appease the Soviets, placate the less-developed nations of the Third World, and coddle ou
allies. As a result, the story goes, we became an easy mark. The Mob at the Gates too
advantage of us. Our defenses were down; the Soviets surged ahead of us in armament
Emboldened by our passivity, they viciously subjugated Afghanistan, cracked down in Polan
and expanded their influence in southern Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central Americ
Simultaneously, the United States was being taken for a ride by Third World nations th
demanded our aid but persistently sided with our adversaries and voted against us at th
United Nations. Other Third World nations have threatened default on loans from our bank
We have been overrun by illegal immigrants who defy our borders, take away our jobs, ar
live off our social services. Drug traffickers in Asia and Latin America, undeterred by cynica
governments, pump poisons into our cities. Iranian thugs humiliated us; terrorists kill ar
maim at will. Even our allies have refused to cooperate with us in limiting East-West trade.

The problem, thus posed, admits of only one approach. We must impose discipline. W
must regain our credibility, and the way to do that is to get tough with this Mob at the Gate
We should dramatically increase our military defenses, get the Soviets (and their Cuba
allies) out of Central America and Africa, give aid to Third World nations only when the
play on our side, and crack down on international terrorists without undue squeamishne
about who gets in the way. We should get tough on illegal immigration and drug smugglin

We should tighten up on East-West trade, so that the Soviets cannot easily take advantage o
our technology. We should "play hardball" with our allies on trade and defense. We shou
threaten to retaliate against Japan if its markets are not fully open to our products. And w
should impose austerity on Third World debtors, ensuring that they repay their debts and en
their profligate ways.

Liberal indulgence toward the Soviet Union is thought to have threatened our ver
survival. According to foreign-policy hardliners, we cannot conciliate the Soviets, nor shoul
we try to. The danger of nuclear war will recede only when the Soviet Union transforms itse
from a totalitarian state into a freer and more democratic one. Liberal accommodation ha
only fortified Soviet totalitarianism. By this view, pressures for change are growing within
Soviet Union collapsing from economic and moral decay. We should promote this intern
disintegration by "a combination of active resistance to Soviet expansion and politica
military blackmail and the denial of economic and other forms of aid."[5] To hasten th
process we will have to be tougher than they are.

3

The conservative story covers economic policy as well. For years, the tale goes, America
Triumphant Individuals—its entrepreneurs—have been held back by slack and slo
elsewhere in the economy.

The liberal solution to the tendency of the economy to succumb cyclically to recession an
underemployment was for the government to spend freely enough to restore demand. B
this approach, inspired by the British economist John Maynard Keynes, ultimately proved i
own undoing, according to the conservative story. Government went on spending beyond i
means, even during times of buoyant growth. Undue government solicitousness also bre
expectations that Washington would always step in to snap the economy out of slumps an
slowdowns. The result was a breakdown of social discipline. Conservative economis
condemned the laxity: "The standard brand of liberalism … was still undisciplined, st
devoid of guidelines or limits."[6] The government went on a spending binge through the la
1960s and the 1970s, while workers went on a corresponding wage binge. Succeedin
presidents tried to keep the rate of unemployment too low, relative to what the econom
could manage without fueling inflation. By the late 1970s prices were out of control. Suc
irresponsibility undermined the integrity of the entire economic system.

The lesson of this story, too, is clear. We must restore discipline to the economy. We ha
to "break the back" of inflation in the early 1980s through tactical unemployment, to remin
workers of their vulnerability to joblessness should wage demands get too high, and we mu
stand ever ready to do so again. Future economic policy must "take the control of inflation a
its first priority" and relegate unemployment to a lower concern.[7] To control inflation is t
impose discipline on the system, particularly on the inflationary wage demands of workers.

Another strand of this conservative parable emphasizes the imperative to discipline th
insatiable public sector. If we fail to constrain the federal budget, by constitution
amendment if necessary, productive entrepreneurs will be starved of resources. Businessme
are motivated by money; paring their financial rewards through taxation saps their wi
Conservative thinking holds: "The key to growth is quite simple: creative men with mone

The cause of stagnation is similarly clear: depriving creative individuals of financial power. Public spending, of course, simply reflects the set of common endeavors that cannot b coordinated by the market. In the conservative view, however, this set is small, and clain for government action are presumptively illegitimate. While conservatives frequently oppo public spending in the abstract with more vigor than program by program, the mythic them is clear: We must discipline "them," those illegitimate claimants on resources, so our nation inventors and investors can be freed to create new wealth.

4

The modern conservative's position on social welfare and other underpinnings of th Benevolent Community is consistent with the rest. First, according to this tale, the welfa system is riddled with waste and fraud. Second, when welfare *has* gone to those it wa intended for, its effects have often been perverse. It has encouraged poor teenage girls t have babies and deterred them from marriage and work, trapping children in a lifelon culture of dependency and irresponsibility. At the same time, criminal suspects have come t enjoy so many rights that our police are incapable of keeping order, so drugs and crime infe our cities. We have forbidden teachers to control their classrooms and have been mo concerned about equality and self-expression than about competence in basic skills, with th result that our schools are failing to educate—a failure particularly damaging to the poor inner cities. The three forms of laxness have reinforced one another: The easiest path fo inner-city youths has been to drop out of school, and then for the girls to have babies and liv off welfare, and for the boys to live off girlfriends on welfare and the proceeds of crime.

This overall tale is backed by a plethora of studies purporting to show the inefficacy or th downright malignancy of welfare—and of the related permissive approach to education, la enforcement, and child rearing. One conservative sociologist examined the data on povert and welfare, particularly those covering the period since the Great Society, and discovere that despite the striking growth in welfare spending during this interval the plight of poo blacks did not improve. His conclusion: We failed to deal with poverty because we created a the wrong incentives—to get into poverty rather than to get out. We undercut discipline an responsibility.[9] Some educators have come to much the same conclusion about America education. "Permissive progressivism," with its emphasis on self-expression rather than sel control, perverted our schools.[10] The same story echoes in the work of criminologists, wh attribute the dramatic increase in crime between 1960 and 1980 to a permissive approach t child rearing that stressed self-expression instead of self-control.[11]

The only solution, in the minds of many of these conservative thinkers, is to revers course. Although not every one of them would agree with all aspects of the prescription, th general lesson is the same: We should eliminate welfare except to victims of sudden an unexpected hardships. We should allow our teachers to punish and expel. We shou empower our police officers and judges to mete out swift and certain punishment. And w should teach our children self-control. In short, we should restore social discipline.

5

The conservative tale about the Rot at the Top is too well known to require detaile
elaboration. Ronald Reagan himself became the most vocal exponent of the tal
"Government is not the solution to our problems," he proclaimed on more than one occasio
"Government is the problem." The story tells of excessive red tape, intermeddlir
bureaucrats and policy professionals, and ballooning government expenditures—unrestraine
out of control. And the moral of this tale is essentially the same as the others: We must exe
discipline over the taxers and spenders, the bureaucrats and meddlers, who otherwise wou
go on consuming ever more of our resources and compromising our precious freedoms.

What is so compelling about all these arguments—drawn from foreign policy, economic
sociology, and politics—is that they are mutually reinforcing. They tell one interwoven stor
No conservative thinker, and certainly no politician, subscribes to the full complement o
these views. (Ronald Reagan gave voice to many of these themes without putting them in
effect. His budgets were not marked by excessive discipline.) But the details of thes
arguments are less important than the central set of parables that informs them. Liber
permissiveness has rendered us vulnerable to exploitation. Without discipline, there has bee
no accountability. Without accountability, decadence has crept in, irresponsibility has becom
endemic, the system has lost its moral fiber, and we have let ourselves become victims.

This coherence gives the story enormous appeal. It rings true with elements of almo
anyone's personal experience. It offers a comprehensible and comprehensive explanation fo
what has happened to postwar America. Bundling such disparate issues together into a sing
tale of decadence, slackness, and assertiveness gives comfort. The comprehensive explanatio
suggests a way of coming to terms with the source of the decay and eventually reversing it.
is only a matter of recognizing the prevailing pattern and applying the moral. In i
simplicity, consistency, and plausibility, the new conservative public philosophy provides
near-perfect mythology.

There is a final feature that helps to explain the emotional appeal of modern conservatism
and to distinguish it starkly from its philosophical forbears. Traditional conservatism wa
dour. It spoke of austerity and self-discipline. It emanated the gray gloom of Herbert Hoove
and William Howard Taft. It dwelled on the shameful side of the morality tales. As such
people regarded traditional conservatism the way they regard a bitter medicine or a stri
diet—good for you, perhaps, especially after you have gone on a binge, but fundamental
unpleasant nonetheless.

This new brand is markedly different. It preaches austerity and discipline, to be sure, b
with the crucial revision that the discipline is not for "us" but for "them." The conservatis
of the late 1970s and 1980s was astonishingly successful at convincing many Americans th
vast changes in national priorities could be achieved to the benefit of nearly all and th
detriment of only a small number of demonstrably undeserving claimants. For the rest of u
the message was cheerfully optimistic—the proud side of the morality tales. We coul
achieve whatever we want to achieve, be whatever we want to be, or in the vernacular of th
day, "go for it." There were no limits on our strivings, no constraints on our impulses.

The two parts of the message are not inconsistent. To discipline "them," it is necessary th
we be strong. We must be ready to exercise our will and impose our vision with sel
confidence, pride, and enthusiasm. It is always easier to be righteous when you know th
you are right. As Teddy Roosevelt (Ronald Reagan's favorite president) represented in wor

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