

NOTES ON THE UNITED STATES

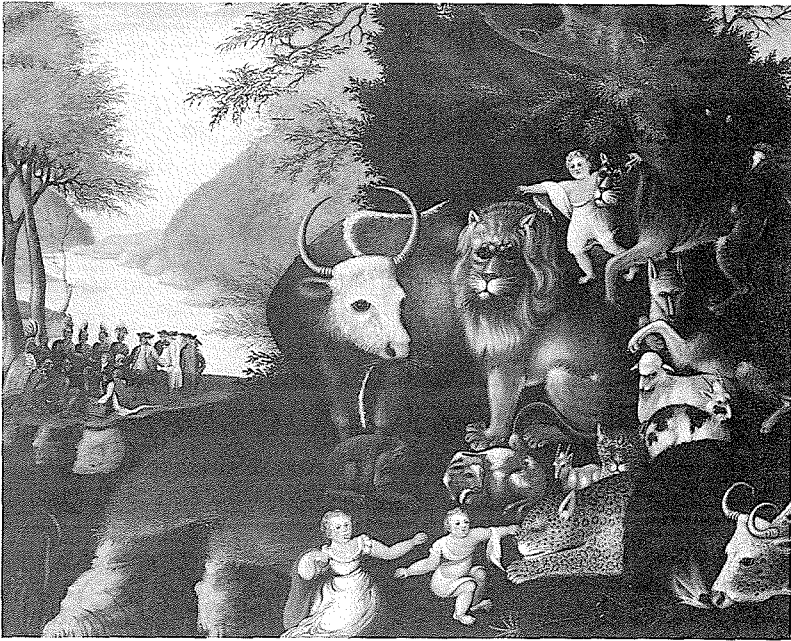
Latin America's intellectuals and artists have long been known for their leftist, even Marxist, sympathies. Few today emulate the late Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who remained loyal to Moscow even after the horrors of the Stalin era. But Colombia's Gabriel García Márquez, Argentina's Julio Cortazar, and others have ritually denounced Washington's *imperialismo* while singing the praises of Fidel Castro. Mexico's Octavio Paz is one of the exceptions. The widely read poet-essayist and former diplomat first learned to distrust communism when he supported the anti-Franco cause in the Spanish Civil War. And it was not long after Cuba's 1959 revolution that Paz voiced disenchantment with Castro's new workers' state. Paz, a self-described democratic socialist, is no cheerleader for the *Yanquis*. Here, however, he offers them an unusual view of their place in history.

by Octavio Paz

Faced with the concrete reality of the United States, the first, natural reaction of any visitor is utter amazement.

Few have gone beyond that initial shock of surprise—admiration mingled at times with revulsion—to realize the immense originality of that country. One of those few, and the first of them, was Alexis de Tocqueville. His reflections, set down in *Democracy in America* (1835), are still as pertinent as ever. He foresaw the future greatness of the American Union and the nature of the conflict that has lain at its heart ever since its birth, a conflict to which it owes, at one and the same time, both its great successes and its great setbacks: the opposition between freedom and equality, the individual and democracy, local freedoms and federal centralism.

Henry Adams's vision, though less broad, was perhaps more profound: Deep within American society he saw an opposition between the Dynamo, which transforms the world but



Peaceable Kingdom (1834) by Edward Hicks .

reduces it to uniform series, and the Virgin, the natural and spiritual energy that irrigates and illuminates the human soul and thus produces the range and variety of our works. Tocqueville and Adams saw, clearly and sharply, what was going to happen; we, today, see what is happening.

When I speak of America's originality, I am not referring to the familiar contrasts—great wealth and extreme privation, the cheapest vulgarity and the purest beauty, greed and altruism, active pursuit of goals and the passivity of the drug addict or the frenetic violence of the drunkard, proud freedom and the docility of the herd, intellectual exactitude and the fuzzy delirium of the nut case, prudishness and license—but, rather, to the *historical novelty* that the United States represents.

Nothing in our human past has been comparable to this reality that is made up of violent clashes and glaring contrasts, and is, if I may use the expression, full of itself. Full and empty. What lies behind this tremendous variety of products and goods flaunted before the eyes of the world with a sort of shamelessness born of generosity?

A wealth that is fascinating—that is to say, deceptive.

I am not thinking of the injustices and inequalities of Amer-

ican society. Though they are many, they are fewer and less grave than our own, than those of most nations. I say "deceptive" wealth not because it is unreal but because I ask myself whether a society can live trapped within the confines of the circle of production and consumption, work and pleasure.

There are those who will say that this situation is not unique, but common, rather, to all industrial countries. That is true, but in the United States, since it is the nation that has gone the farthest along this path and is thus the perfect expression of modernity, the situation has reached its extreme limit.

I repeat my question: What lies behind this wealth? I cannot answer; I find nothing, there is nothing. I explain myself: All institutions in America—its technology, its science, its energy, its education—are a means, a *way toward*. Freedom, democracy, work, inventive genius, perseverance, fulfillment of promises and obligations: Everything is *useful*, everything a means to attain—what? Happiness in this life, salvation in the life beyond, the good, the truth, wisdom, love? Ultimate ends, those that really count because they give meaning to our lives, are not visible on the horizon of the United States. They exist, that is certain, but they appertain to the private domain.

Questions and answers as to life and its meaning, death and the life beyond, traditionally taken over by Church and State, have heretofore always been matters in the public domain. The great historical novelty of the United States lies in its attempt to return them to the private domain, the private life of each and every citizen. What the Protestant Reformation achieved in the sphere of beliefs, the American Union has achieved in the secular sphere.

American society, unlike all other societies we know of, was founded in order that its citizens might realize their private ends in peace and freedom, on the theory that the common good lies not in a collective or metahistorical end but in the harmonious coexistence of individual ends. Can nations live without common beliefs and without a metahistorical ideology?

In the past, the acts and deeds of each people were nour-

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ished and justified by a metahistory; in other words, by a common end that lay above individuals and had to do with values that were, or were presumed to be, transcendent. Americans naturally share beliefs, values, and ideas: freedom, democracy, justice, work, and so on. But all such concepts are a means, something *for* this or that. The ultimate ends of their acts and thoughts lie not in the public domain but in the private. The American Union was the very first historical attempt to give back to the individual what the State had stolen from the person in the beginning.

I do not mean by that that the American State is the only liberal State: Its founding was inspired by the examples of Holland, England, and the philosophy of the 18th century. But the American nation, and not only the State, is different from others precisely because it was founded on these ideas and principles. Unlike what happened elsewhere, the United States Constitution does not modify or change a prior situation (in its case, the monarchical regime with its hereditary classes, estates, and special jurisdictions); it institutes, rather, a new society. It marks an absolute beginning.

It has frequently been said that in liberal democratic societies, especially in the United States, the power of individuals and groups, above all of capitalist enterprises but also of workers' bureaucracies and other sectors, has grown without restraint, to the point where State domination has been replaced by that of special interests. The criticism is a fair one. It must be added, however, that while this reality seriously distorts the original design, it does not nullify it altogether. The founding principle is still alive. Proof of that can be found in the fact that it continues to inspire the movements of self-criticism and reform that periodically shake the United States. All of these have represented themselves as a return to the country's origins.



The great historical originality of the American nation, and also the root of its contradiction, lies in the very act by which it was founded. The United States was founded in order that its citizens might live, among themselves and by themselves, free at last of the weight of history. It was a construct aimed against history and its disasters, oriented toward the future, that *terra incognita* with which it has identified itself.

The cult of the future fits naturally within the American design and is, so to speak, its condition and its result. American society was founded by an act of abolition of the past. Its citizens, unlike Englishmen or Japanese, Germans or Chinese,

Mexicans or Portuguese, are not the offspring of but the beginning of a tradition. Instead of carrying on a past, they inaugurate a new time. The act (and the document) of foundation—a canceling-out of the past and a beginning of something different—has been repeated throughout its history.

But the United States is not in the future, a region that does not exist; it is here and now, among all the rest of us, in the midst of history. It is an empire, and its slightest movements shake the whole world. It would like to be outside the world but it is in the world—it *is* the world. Hence the contradiction of contemporary American society: Being at once an empire and a democracy is the result of another, deeper contradiction, having been founded against history yet being itself history.



The United States has undergone a period of doubt and disorientation. If it has not lost faith in its institutions—Watergate was an admirable proof of this—it no longer believes as fervently as it once did in the destiny of the nation. The present state of mind of the American people is in all likelihood the consequence of two phenomena that used to be opposites but, as frequently happens in history, have now become conjoined. The first is the sense of guilt that the Vietnam War aroused in many minds; the second is the waning of the puritan ethic and the waxing of the hedonism of abundance.

The sense of guilt, coupled with the humiliation of defeat, has reinforced the traditional isolationism, which has always regarded American democracy as an island of virtue in the sea of perversities that is world history. Hedonism, for its part, takes no notice of the outside world or, along with it, of history. Isolationism and hedonism coincide in one respect: They are both antihistorical. Both are expressions of a conflict present in American society since the war with Mexico in 1847, but not fully apparent until this century: The United States is a democracy and at the same time an empire.

A peculiar empire, I must add, for it does not wholly fit the classic definition of one. It is something quite distinct from the Roman, Spanish, Portuguese, and British empires.

Standing bewildered in the face of its dual historical nature, the United States does not know which way to turn today. The dilemma is a fateful one. If it chooses a truly imperial destiny, it will cease to be a democracy and will thereby lose its reason for being a nation. But how to renounce power without being immediately destroyed by its rival, the Russian Empire?

It will be objected that Great Britain, too, was both a de-

mocracy and an empire. The contemporary situation is very different, however: Great Britain's imperial rule was exclusively colonial and exercised overseas; moreover, in its European and American policy it sought not hegemony but a balance of power. But the policy of the balance of powers belongs to another stage in history; neither Great Britain nor any other great European power was forced to confront a State such as the Soviet Union, whose imperialist expansion is inextricably linked to a universal orthodoxy. The Russian Bureaucratic State not only aspires to world domination but is a militant orthodoxy that does not tolerate other ideologies or systems of government.

If, instead of comparing the international situation that confronts the United States today with that prevailing in Europe during the second half of the last century, we think of Rome in the last days of the Republic, the comparison shows American democracy to be in an even more unfavorable position.

The political difficulties of the Romans of the first century B.C. were primarily internal in nature, and this partially explains the ferocity of the struggles among the various factions: Rome had already achieved domination over all the known world, and its only rival—the Parthian Empire—was a power on the defensive. Moreover, and most important, none of the powers that had fought the Romans sought to further a universalist ideology.



By contrast, the contradictions of American foreign policy—a result of the controversies among groups and parties as well as of the inability of the nation's leaders to formulate a long-term overall plan—exist side by side with an aggressive empire that embraces a universalist ideology. To make matters still worse, the Western alliance is made up of countries whose interests and politics are not always identical with those of the United States.

The expansion of the American republic has been the natural, and in some ways fatal, consequence—if I may so put it—of its economic and social development; Roman expansion grew out of the deliberate action of the senatorial oligarchy and its generals over a period of more than two centuries. The foreign policy of Rome is an outstanding example of coherence, singleness of purpose, perseverance, skill, tenacity, and prudence—precisely the virtues that we find lacking in Americans. Tocqueville was the first to see where the fault lay:

With regard to the conduct of the external affairs of society, democratic governments appear to me to be decid-

edly inferior to the others. . . . Foreign policy requires the use of almost none of the qualities that characterize democracy, and on the other hand calls for the development of almost all those which democracy lacks by its very nature. . . . Democracy would find it most difficult to coordinate all the details of a great undertaking, draw up a plan in advance, and stubbornly follow it to the end despite all obstacles. It has little aptitude for preparing its means in secret and patiently awaiting the results.

American democracy is religious in origin and extends back to the communities of Protestant dissenters who settled in the country during the 17th century. Religious preoccupations were later transformed into political ideas steeped in republicanism, democracy, and individualism, but the original religious tone never disappeared from the public conscience.

In the United States, religion, morality, and politics have been inseparable. This is the major difference between European liberalism, which is almost always secular and anticlerical, and the American variety. Among Americans, democratic ideas have a religious foundation, in some instances implicit and in others (the majority) explicit. These ideas served to justify the attempt, unique in history, to constitute a nation as a *covenant* in the face of, and even against, historical necessity or history as fate. In the United States the social contract was not a fiction but a reality, and it was entered into in order *not* to repeat European history. This is the origin of American isolationism: the attempt to establish a society that would escape the vicissitudes that European peoples had suffered. American expansion, up until the war with Mexico, was aimed at colonizing empty spaces (Indian peoples were always regarded as *nature*) and that space more empty still, the future.



If they could, Americans would lock themselves up inside their country and turn away from the world, except to trade with it and visit it. The American utopia—in which, as in all utopias, monstrous features abound—is an interweaving of three dreams: those of the ascetic, the merchant, and the explorer. Three individualists. Hence three American traits: Their reluctance to confront the outside world; their inability to understand it; and their lack of skill in manipulating it. Americans are citizens of an empire, surrounded by some nations that are allies and by others out to destroy it, yet Americans would rather be left alone: The outside world is evil, history is perdition.

America is the opposite of Russia, another religious country but one that identifies religion with the Church and finds the confusion between ideology and party legitimate. The communist State—as was quite evident during the last war—is not only the successor of the tsarist State but its continuer. The notion of a social contract or “covenant” has never held an important place within the political history of Russia, or within the tsarist or Bolshevik tradition. Nor has the idea of religion as something belonging to the sphere of heartfelt individual belief; to the Russians, religion and politics appertain not to the sphere of private conscience but to the public sphere. Americans have endeavored, and are endeavoring, to construct a world of their very own, a world outside of this world; the Russians have endeavored, and are endeavoring, to dominate this world in order to convert it.

The basic contradiction of the United States has an effect on the very foundations of the nation. Hence our reflections on the United States and its present predicament lead to the question: Will it be able to resolve the contradiction between empire and democracy? At stake are its life and its identity.



Though it is impossible to answer this question, it is possible to venture a comment.

The sense of guilt can be transformed, can lead directly to the beginnings of political salvation. Hedonism, on the other hand, leads only to surrender, ruin, defeat. It is, admittedly, true that after Vietnam and Watergate we have been witness to a sort of masochistic orgy and seen many intellectuals, clergymen, and journalists rend their garments and beat their breasts as signs of contrition. These self-accusations, as a general rule, were not and are not false, but their tone was and is frequently hysterical (as when a journalist, writing in the *New York Times*, held American policy in Indochina responsible for the subsequent atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese).

Yet this sense of guilt, besides being a compensation that maintains a psychic equilibrium, carries moral weight: It stems from a searching conscience and the recognition that a wrong has been committed. Hence it can become a sense of responsibility, the one and only antidote against the intoxication of hubris, for individuals as for empires. On the other hand, it is more difficult to transform the hedonism of modern masses into a moral force. It is not blind illusion, however, to place our trust in the ethical and religious foundations of America: They are a living source whose flow has been obstructed but not yet en-

tirely dammed.

The foreign policy of the United States has followed a zig-zag, erratic course, frequently contradictory and at times beyond all understanding. Its principal defect, its basic inconsistency, is attributable not to the failings of American leaders, which are many, but to its being a policy more sensitive to domestic reactions than to foreign ones.

The United States' objectives are to contain the Soviet Union and its shock troops (Cuba, Vietnam), to consolidate its own alliance with Japan and the European democracies, to consolidate its ties with China, to bring about an agreement in the Middle East that will preserve the independence of Israel and at the same time strengthen friendship with Egypt, to gain friends in the Arab countries and in those of Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

These are its avowed ends, but its real ones are to win the votes and satisfy the aspirations and ambitions of this or that group at home, whether Jews or blacks, industrial workers or farmers, the "establishment" of the East or Texans. It is evident that the policy of a great power cannot be subordinated to the shifting and divergent pressures of various groups within the nation: The cause of the downfall of Athens was not so much Spartan arms as the struggles between internal parties.



Any list of the errors of American policy must end with the following reservation: These errors, magnified by the mass media and by political passions, are revealing of vices and faults inherent in plutocratic democracies, but they do not indicate an intrinsic weakness. The United States has suffered defeats and setbacks, but its economic, scientific, and technological power is still superior to that of the Soviet Union.

So is its political and social system. American institutions were designed for a society in perpetual motion, whereas Soviet institutions correspond to a static caste society. Hence any change in the Soviet Union endangers the very foundations of the regime.

There is much talk of the inferiority of the Americans in the military sphere, especially in the area of traditional weapons. This is a temporary inferiority. The United States has the material and human resources to re-establish the balance of power.

And the political will? It is difficult to give an unequivocal answer to that question. In recent years, Americans have suffered from a psychic instability that has taken them from one extreme to another. Not only have they lost their sense of direc-

tion; they have also lost control of themselves. What the United States has lacked is not power but wisdom.

Above all, the American people and its leaders lack that sixth sense that almost all great nations have had: *prudence*. Since Aristotle, this word designates the highest political virtue. Prudence is made up of wisdom and integrity, boldness and moderation, discernment and persistence in undertakings. The best and most succinct definition of *prudentia* was given recently by Cornelio Castoriadis: the ability to find one's bearings in history. This is the ability that many of us find lacking in the United States.



To Montesquieu, the decadence of the Romans had a twofold cause: the power of the army and the corruption of luxury. The first was the origin of the empire, the second its ruin. The army gave Rome dominion over the world but, along with it, irresponsible sybaritism and extravagance. Will the Americans be wiser and more temperate than the Romans; will they show greater moral fortitude? It seems most unlikely. However, there is one aspect of the situation that would have raised Montesquieu's spirits: The Americans have succeeded in defending their democratic institutions and have even broadened and perfected them.

In Rome, the army backed the despotism of the Caesars; the United States suffers from the ills and vices of freedom, not those of tyranny. Though deformed, the moral tradition of criticism that has accompanied the nation all through its history is still alive.

In the past, the United States was able to use self-criticism to resolve other conflicts. It continues to give proof of its capacities for self-renewal. During the last 20 years it has taken great strides in the direction of resolving the other great contradiction that tears it apart, the racial question. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that by the end of this century the United States will have become the first multiracial democracy in history. Despite its grave imperfections and its vices, the American democratic system bears out the opinion of antiquity: If democracy is not the ideal government, it is the least bad.

One of the great achievements of the American people has been to preserve democracy in the face of the two great threats of our day: the powerful capitalist oligarchies and the bureaucratic State of the 20th century. Another positive sign: Americans have made great advances in the art of human cohabitation, not only in terms of different ethnic groups that live peacefully to-

gether but also in domains heretofore ruled by the taboos of traditional morality, such as sexuality. Some critics lament that permissiveness and the relaxation of morals; I confess that the other extreme strikes me as worse—the cruel puritanism of communists and the bloody prudery of Khomeini. Finally, the development of the sciences and technology is a direct consequence of the freedom of investigation and criticism predominant in the universities and cultural institutions of the United States. American superiority in these fields is no accident.

How and why, in a democracy that has proved itself to be so endlessly fertile and creative in science, technology, and the arts, should its politics be so overwhelmingly mediocre? Can the critics of democracy be right? We must grant that the will of the majority is not a synonym for wisdom: The Germans voted for Hitler, and Chamberlain was elected democratically. The democratic system is exposed to the same risk as hereditary monarchy; the popular will is no more unerring than the genes, and elections that turn out badly are as unpredictable as the birth of defective royal heirs.

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The remedy lies in the system of checks and balances: the independence of judicial and legislative power, the weight of public opinion in governmental decisions through the healthy and sensible exercise of their critical function by the communications media. Unfortunately, neither the U.S. Senate nor the media nor public opinion has given signs of political *prudence* in the years just past.

The inconsistencies in American foreign policy are attributable not just to officeholders and politicians but to the entire nation. Not only do the interests of groups and parties come before collective ends, but American opinion has shown itself incapable of understanding what is happening beyond its borders. This criticism is as applicable to liberals as to conservatives, to clergymen as to labor leaders. There is no country better informed than the United States; its journalists are excellent and they are everywhere, its specialists have all the data and background facts needed for each case—yet what comes forth from this gigantic mountain of information and news is, almost always, the mouse of the fable.

An intellectual failure? No: a failure of historical vision. Because of the very nature of the endeavor that founded the nation—sheltering it from history and its horrors—Americans suffer from a congenital difficulty in understanding the outside world and orienting themselves in its labyrinths.

Another defect of American democracy, already noted by Tocqueville in his day: egalitarian tendencies, which do not suppress individual selfishness but merely deform it. These tendencies have not prevented the birth and spread of social and economic inequalities, while at the same time they have held the best back and hampered their participation in public life.

A major example is the situation of the intellectual class: Its first-rate achievements in the sciences, technology, the arts, and education stand in sharp contrast to its scant influence in politics. It is true that many intellectuals serve and have served in government, but this has almost always been as technicians and experts—that is, *in order to do* this or that, not in order to help define ends and goals. A few intellectuals have been counselors of presidents and have thus contributed to planning and executing American foreign policy. But they are isolated cases. The American intellectual class, as a social entity, does not have the influence that its counterparts in European and Latin American countries enjoy. For one thing, society is not inclined to grant this class such a role.

American intellectuals, in turn, have shown little interest in the great philosophical and political abstractions that have roused deep passions in our era. This indifference has had a positive aspect: It has kept them from going as badly astray as many European and Latin American intellectuals. It has also kept them from the despicable moral lapses and relapses of so many writers who, without so much as blinking an eye, have accepted public honors and international prizes as they hymned paeans of praise to the Stalins, the Maos, and the Castros.



American intellectuals' mistrust of ideological passions is understandable; what is not understandable is their ignoring the fact that these passions have moved several generations of European and Latin American intellectuals, among them some of the best and most generous. In order to understand these others and to understand contemporary history as well, it is necessary to understand these passions.

When the subject under discussion is the American character, the word *naïveté* almost invariably crops up. Americans themselves value *innocence* very highly. Naïveté is not a character trait that fits well with the pessimistic introspection of the puritan. Yet the two coexist within the American character. Perhaps introspection allows Americans to see themselves and discover, within their heart of hearts, the traces of God or of the devil; naïveté, in turn, is their mode of presentation of self to

others and their manner of relating to them.

Naiveté is an appearance of innocence. Or, rather, it is protective gear. Thus the apparent defenselessness of one who is naive is a psychological weapon; it preserves that person from the contamination of the other and, by isolating him or her, makes it possible to escape and launch a counterattack. The ingenuousness of American intellectuals in the face of the great ideological debates of our century has fulfilled that double function. It has kept them from falling into the moral errors and perversions into which certain Europeans and Latin Americans have fallen; and it has permitted them to judge and condemn those who have strayed from virtue—without understanding them. Both American conservatives and liberals have substituted moral judgment for historical vision. Admittedly, it is not possible to have a view of the other, that is to say a vision of history, without moral principles. But a moral perspective cannot replace true historical vision, above all if this moral perspective is that of a provincial puritanism combined with variable but strong doses of pragmatism, empiricism, and positivism.

The two missions of the modern intellectual are, first, to investigate, create, and transmit knowledge, values, and experiences; and, second, to criticize society and its usages, institutions, and politics. Since the 18th century, this second function, inherited from the medieval clerics, has assumed greater and greater importance. We are all familiar with the work of Americans in the fields of the sciences, literature, the arts, and education; they have also been honest and courageous in their criticism of their society and of its defects. America's intellectuals have been faithful to the tradition upon which their country was founded and in which the scrutiny of conscience occupies a central place.



This puritan tradition, however, by emphasizing and encouraging separation, is antihistorical and isolationist. When the United States abandons its isolation and participates in the affairs of the world, it does so in the manner of a believer in a land of infidels.

American writers and journalists have an insatiable curiosity and are extremely well informed about what goes on in today's world, but instead of understanding, they pass judgment. It must be said, in all truth, that they reserve their severest judgments for their compatriots and those in public office. That is admirable; yet at the same time it is not enough. In the days of their country's intervention in Indochina, they denounced, with good reason, the policy emanating from Washington; yet their criticism, based

almost exclusively on moral grounds, generally neglected to examine the nature of the conflict. Critics were more interested in condemning President Lyndon B. Johnson than in understanding how and why there were American troops in Indochina. Many said that this conflict "was no concern of America's," as though the United States were not a world power and the war in Indochina were a local episode.

Morality is no substitute for historical understanding. That is precisely why many liberals were so surprised at the outcome of the conflict: the installation of a military-bureaucratic dictatorship in Vietnam, the mass murders under Pol Pot, the occupation of Cambodia and Laos by Vietnamese troops, the punitive expedition by the Chinese, and, in recent days, the hostilities between Vietnam and Thailand. And today, confronted by the situation in Central America, liberals mouth the same simplistic nonsense.

Apart from the fact that it is not always sincere, the moralizing attitude does not help us to understand the reality that lies outside ourselves. Morality, in the sphere of politics, must be accompanied by other virtues. Central to all of them is historical imagination. This intellectual faculty has a counterpart in the realm of sensibility: sympathy for the other, for others.



The image presented by the United States is not reassuring. The country is disunited, repeatedly torn apart by dissensions that do not have the least element of grandeur, eaten away by doubt, undermined by a suicidal hedonism, dazed by the ranting of demagogues. It is a society divided, not so much vertically as horizontally, by the clash of tremendous selfish interests: great corporations, labor unions, "the farm bloc," bankers, ethnic groups, the powerful communications industry.

The remedy is to regain unity of purpose, without which there is no possibility for action—but how? The malady of democracies is disunity, mother of demagogism. The other road, that of political health, leads by way of soul-searching and self-criticism: a return to origins, to the foundations of the nation. In the case of the United States, this means to the vision of its founders—not to copy them, but to begin again. Not to do exactly as they did but, rather, like them; to make a new beginning. Such beginnings are at once purifications and mutations: With them something different always begins as well.