

The Common Good

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For a generation American politics has been bogged down by a debilitating argument as to whether welfare liberalism or free market capitalism is the best solution to our problems. The 1988 presidential campaign presents an opportunity for the discussion to be opened up in dramatic new ways by questioning many of the assumptions that both Democrats and Republicans have taken for granted for a long time. Both parties have seen the task of government as furthering the aggregate interests of individuals while providing a degree of security for our nation in a dangerous and complex world.

Reliance on welfare liberalism and free market capitalism as our only visions for guiding public deliberation has narrowed the ability of our political parties to confront changed realities. Both of these visions rest almost exclusively on a combination of cost-benefit analysis and interest-group mediation, techniques that allow manipulation of existing structures but do not permit discussion of the nature of those structures or the ends of society as a whole. The discussion of “the common good,” a discussion that would allow us to consider critically the present structure of our society and the directions we have previously taken for granted, would open up new possibilities, possibilities that might allow us to escape the debilitating impasses into which we have fallen both at home and abroad.

Our recent difficulties have arisen because of problems that come at us from many sources and from all directions. Chief among them are two related problems involving our economy and our position as a world power. While our economy has continued to grow, that growth has been very uneven, involving high levels of consumption by the affluent while our country’s infrastructure has been allowed to deteriorate. Furthermore, this growth has been sustained by unprecedented borrowing from abroad, turning the United States, in a breathtakingly short time, into the world’s largest debtor nation. Even more serious than our loss of international economic competitiveness is the fact that our economic growth has caused grave problems, not only for the

“truly deprived,” but for the affluent as well, whose lives seem to lack personal meaning and social cohesion. At the same time, we can no longer consider ourselves the dominant military power, despite our largest peacetime military buildup. Massive unsettling economic and military changes seem certain to mark the next administration’s tenure of office.

Things have not been going too well for the Soviet Union either. Yet the last couple of years have brought a surprising breath of fresh air from Russia. We have heard about *glasnost*, openness, and *perestroika*, restructuring. And we have seen a rather attractive man, Mikhail Gorbachev, eloquently arguing for and attempting to embody those terms. Could it be, despite our legitimate skepticism about these changes, that the new leaders of the USSR are sincere, that they believe that the conditions of an increasingly technologically sophisticated and interlinked world economy require that international relations, in Gorbachev’s words, “can and must be kept within a framework of peaceful competition which necessarily envisages cooperation”? Could the present moment mark a really new situation—one that poses difficulties for the United States because it requires major readjustments in thought and behavior, but also a moment of historic opportunity? The opportunity we speak of is the chance to lead this nation in a much more hopeful direction as we approach the year 2000.

In the face of our own seemingly intractable problems, but with these new opportunities in mind, it is appropriate to ask whether we too could use a change of direction, an opening up and a restructuring. Of course, our problems are different from the Soviet Union’s, and their agenda is not ours. Nevertheless, the theme of “the common good,” if attractively represented in the words and actions of the Democratic candidate, could be the breath of fresh air that we need, the “*glasnost*” that would allow us to consider our problems in a new way. Pope John Paul II was correct when he said in his recent encyclical, *On Social Concern*, that liberal capitalism is in as much need of fundamental reform as is Marxist collectivism, a remark that caused howls of pain among neoconservative intellectuals, but one that the Democratic candidate ought to take to heart.

There are two ways out of the double-barreled weakness in our economy and in our position as a world

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power. We can embark on a frenzied effort to “regain the competitive edge” economically and to increase our military invulnerability, or we can work for a new system of world order that would relieve the pressure both on us and on others. The former strategy is self-defeating, while the latter strategy involves the search for the common good at home and abroad.

Before sketching the *substance* of a vision of the common good, we would like to emphasize the importance of the vision itself, and the need for the Democratic candidate to challenge the rhetoric both of the Reagan administration and of some of its previous Democratic opponents. Ronald Reagan has consistently projected a fantasy image of an America immensely rich and powerful because of unrestrained free enterprise, an America in which small-town virtues can flourish “without government interference.” Americans have grown distrustful and cynical because this fantasy obviously has not produced what it has promised. But the Democrats have responded either by talking solemnly about “an era of limits” in which taxes must be raised, to which Americans have generally preferred the fantasy, or by embracing the Reagan promises and the agenda that the Republicans popularized and contending only that Democrats have better ideas or techniques to realize them.

Some strategists believe that the Democratic candidate should say as little as possible in the fall campaign about how he intends to govern while hoping to exploit any error or indiscretion committed by his opponent.

Such a strategy would be a grave error for the Democrats regardless of the electoral outcome. It is incorrect to assume that a candidate and a party can win only in the way consumer products succeed—by becoming increasingly bland so as not to offend anyone. If he fails to articulate a vision of national life, the Democratic candidate will risk imitating recent administrations, which all too often have engaged in a pattern of merely reacting, adapting in an increasingly random manner to a bewildering environment.

A vision is necessary, in the first instance, because a candidate needs to project a vision of governance to be able to govern effectively. A coherent vision, a public philosophy, provides citizens with the means for understanding and sympathizing with the aims of the president and his party. Vision shapes public opinion. In this sense, vision is power to govern. More important, the role of the president, and consequently the greatness of a president, is measured by his ability persuasively to advocate a strong sense of the public good. Only in this way can a basis be laid for significant structural reforms as opposed to technocratic fine-tuning.

In a democracy the president must be more than the manager of the national administration and more than the shaper of public opinion. The president must also

act as the teacher, in the best sense of that term, by reminding his (or her, in the future) fellow citizens of their common commitments and standards. The president can do this by recalling common history: the record of our achievements, but also of our failures and defeats. The president teaches best when s/he encourages citizens to join actively with their fellows in considering the course of public life for themselves, when s/he generates vigorous debate. Thus, the Democratic candidate can be a catalyst for significant and enduring change in the nation’s political climate. The debate between the free market and the welfare state has exhausted its utility. New times demand a broadened focus. The notion of the *common good* can provide a new vision through which public deliberations can take focus and radical reform can take shape.

Consider the present international situation from the perspective of the common good. The Reagan administration has made significant inroads in nuclear arms reduction agreements with the Soviets, an achievement so historic that it may well be remembered as this administration’s most significant accomplishment. Testing the sincerity of the Soviet Union at every point, we can press ahead to further reductions, including reductions in conventional armaments. Of course, we should use the Strategic Defense Initiative as a bargaining chip—it probably will never work anyway. What we don’t need is to drop another trillion dollars in the black hole of a highly dubious weapons system.

Arms reduction is a vivid example of a policy motivated by the common good. It benefits not only the Russians and us. As Pope John Paul II recently pointed out, the enormous amount of money the Russians and Americans spend on armaments has a big impact on the suffering peoples of the third world. Although the pope’s concerns are moral and humanitarian, his point actually makes a great deal of economic sense, as many have argued recently. Capital transfers from the industrialized nations to the third world are on the agenda and are not just a matter of charity. Significant growth in the third world will provide the best possible market for our own reviving economy and will help to head off a depression caused by overproduction and overcompetition in the advanced nations.

All of these proposals will require prolonged and complex negotiations leading to a whole network of agreements. Any effort to strengthen the economies of third world nations must guard against neocolonial interference, on the one hand, and corruption and distortion in the receiving countries, on the other. The United States cannot dictate these agreements: those days are over. But we are still strong enough to take the lead in working out cooperative agreements and putting

pressure on recalcitrant allies to do their share. With vigorous leadership we can prove strong enough to help set up a cooperative world economic order that would replace the outmoded notion that a single great power must dominate the globe in order to ensure favorable economic conditions.

The notion of the common good could provide the touchstone for a domestic program that is hopeful and realistic as well. The international picture sketched above would have a great impact on the domestic scene. Reductions in the military budget would provide significant help with the deficit problem. Yet more needs to be done. We have been consuming a lot more than we have been earning (some of us have been consuming a lot more than others), and we are not making things as well or as inexpensively as others in the world. At a time of severe budget deficits, we must spend much more money on education and other parts of our social and material infrastructure if we hope to live in a viable and decent society in the twenty-first century. Above all, we need to concentrate our national energies on investment and on the prudent stewardship of our resources, and, even more important, on the human consequences of the material development of our society. In other words, while we have learned that the market is an effective mechanism of economic growth in all societies, we are still faced with working out the creative mechanisms for more effective social control of the economy, so that the market contributes to society's good rather than falsely defining it.

It is worth looking at the Reagan administration's rhetoric and its policies in order to understand why they generated great optimism and enthusiasm at first, only to lead eventually to confusion and cynicism. From the beginning, Reagan conveyed a double message: He legitimated the pursuit of self-interest in the form of large-scale private acquisitiveness, while eulogizing family, neighborhood, religion, and work—as they were understood by the new Christian right. One could say that he combined permissiveness with repression. Actually, the permissiveness was the real policy and the repression was largely window dressing, except for some significant changes in the judiciary due to Reagan appointments. Permissiveness toward the rich and the Pentagon has left us with an unbelievable debt, a huge debt service, and the sale of our assets to foreigners on a scale that threatens to make us a dependent nation—while family, neighborhood, religion, and work are as problematic as ever.

Perhaps even more destructive has been Reagan's continuing attack on the idea of government as a positive force—a campaign that according to recent opinion polls has been only partly successful. We have had enough of hypocritical populism, of candidates running

against the government they are seeking to lead. We need government. How else can the United States possibly organize and direct its scattered energies during this period of difficult international restructuring? But we must innovate to make government more effective. From the perspective of the common good, innovation means reexamining the relationship of government to the larger society of which it is a part. In America, nongovernmental institutions that are in many respects more public than private are critical to the effective functioning of our political life.

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The partnership of government with what is often too loosely called “the private sector” should not be confused with a merely reactive “privatization.” Government is not always inefficient—think of the TVA—nor is business a paragon of efficiency—think of the automakers in the 1970s before the government's loan to Chrysler. We need to engage the energies of both the public and private sectors, or rather to see that “government” and “public” are not synonymous. Business is “private” only in the sense that it is partly independent of government, but it remains an important part of our public communal life. So do the organizations of working people and the myriad nonprofit organizations of intermediate scale. The involvement of all of these vital elements in our national life is critical to a renewed effort toward attaining the common good. Effective government does not replace other forms of organization; rather, it assists them to do what they do best. That is one way that the common good is realized.

The current Democratic candidate must project a strong positive program, calling on all Americans to share in the task of making our nation sound again, and promising to ensure that whatever sacrifices are required will be shared fairly. In particular, he must promise that labor will not pay the whole price for making our economy more efficient. As the military budget declines, the government must develop agencies to encourage investment in human as well as material resources that will make for a socially healthier economy. If the Democratic candidate can involve the nation in a major effort to rethink the place of work and the economy in our lives, Americans will respond positively.

The “common good” argument can be used to support

significant shifts from recent policy. Such shifts do not mean simply a return to an earlier day, characterized in the popular imagination, however unfairly, as the period of “welfare handouts.” Problems that the “truly deprived” face can be linked to problems that affect all Americans. The task is to build a better society for all of us, and, where possible, advantages should be broadly shared. Social Security is a good example. The middle class defends this form of welfare because it shares in the return. For this reason, means testing for Social Security would be a disastrous move that could easily lead to its severe curtailment for the poor. Removal of tax exemption of Social Security income for those above a certain level of affluence would, however, be an appropriate reform. But the notion of a government that simply services more effectively the vast client constituencies (some of them deprived, but most of them middle class or affluent) that have been growing during the last fifty years is not what we have in mind when we speak of a dramatic new turn.

A healthy nation in a healthy world requires the full participation of all of its citizens. The issue is not “welfare,” which is a phony issue since most Americans are in some way or another dependent on government payments or services that effectively put us all on “welfare.” The issue is whether we can afford as a nation to let a significant proportion of our citizens, most of them children or young adults, sink into illiteracy, skilllessness, addiction, and crime. And it is not only the poor who suffer. Burglary, unsafe streets and public transportation, and the high cost of public and private security systems affect us all. But the moral costs of these problems outweigh the material costs. For a society that does not keep its promises to a significant number of its citizens weakens all its citizens, not only the deprived.

The common-good position can enable the Democrats to link the programs they propose more explicitly to the general aspirations of American citizens. The housing situation is a clear example of the need for a change of direction. As with everything else, the Reagan administration has argued that the free market would take care of housing needs. It has eliminated long-standing government programs in support of low-cost housing. In truth, the free market has eliminated inexpensive housing units or left them to decay and abandonment because the return was inadequate. Whatever the smokescreen of excuses, the major cause of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing.

But housing is a problem not only for the poor and the near poor. The middle class spends a much larger percentage of its income on housing than it did a generation ago. Fewer people can look forward to

owning their own homes than their parents could, and the rate of mortgage foreclosures is rising. Clearly, housing is not an area where the market, left to itself, produces tolerable results for anyone but the very rich. A broad-based housing program that would link the needs of the poor to those of the middle class is urgently needed and would have massive public appeal. “Home” is a fundamental symbol of American life. We are shocked when people are deprived of it, when they have to make do with overcrowded and inadequate housing, or when they are hard-pressed financially to pay for what they have. Furthermore, we are not apt to be effective workers, good citizens, or responsible parents if we are without adequate housing or are worried about our ability to hold on to it. Here is a common-good issue with wide public appeal.

Yet to phrase policy discussion only in terms of meeting wants and needs, even the most legitimate wants and needs, is to remain locked into the assumptions about our life together that most need to be questioned. Granted, we need to return with renewed vigor to eliminating what Albert Borgmann calls “brute poverty,” the poverty that is simply not necessary in a nation as rich as ours. But we also need to address the problems of what Borgmann calls “advanced poverty,” what in *Habits of the Heart* we called “the poverty of affluence.” The notion of the meaning of life as consisting of competition, consumption, and security produces stunted lives and cultural deprivation in a different form from brute poverty, but in a way more disturbing since advanced poverty is the primary cause of brute poverty.

One might be tempted to ask what governments can do about something that is primarily a moral sickness; yet we must remember that our institutions, both economic and political, create the conditions for this moral sickness. Specific proposals, well within our political tradition, could combat this problem. We should consider, for example, requiring two years of public service from all our young people at the end of high school. This requirement should include a wide range of options. The armed services would be one possibility, but programs such as VISTA and the Peace Corps, as well as a set of designated and monitored nongovernmental programs, could meet the requirement. What all the options would involve is service, with minimal material compensation, that would contribute to the good of others while postponing the individual’s own career advancement. Such a program should not be adopted without wide public discussion and the achievement of an effective consensus that it would strengthen an ethic of public service.

As this example indicates, the Democratic candidate, in focusing on the common good, will be advocating particular policies, but will also be doing something

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even more important: encouraging a process of public

discussion and long-range consensus formation. Indeed, the politics of the common good is above all the politics of discussion.

The candidate should also raise the issues of family, neighborhood, and work and be open to what religion may have to say on these matters—not in order to invite some prefabricated answer from the Christian right, but because these issues are critical to a recovery of what in *Habits of the Heart* we call “moral ecology.” Changes in these areas are essential in the effort to deal with advanced poverty.

Most people in America still have very positive feelings about the family. Yet much about the life we lead, particularly our occupational life, pulls the family apart. Democrats could advocate a family policy similar to that of Social Democrats in Western Europe, which would provide family allowances and leave-time for parents, and would require businesses to schedule their work hours with family needs in mind—benefits that, again, would apply to everyone, not just the “deprived.” These policies would make life much easier for American women, but it is not just a question of women’s rights, but again of the common good.

Rising medical expenses, especially for those over eighty-five, are rapidly leading to a crisis where there will be an intense struggle between advocates of life-extending care for the aged and proponents of all other forms of social spending. Here, as Daniel Callahan has proposed, we need a national discussion about the meaning of old age, the dignity and value of the aged, and the limits that must be set that will be fair to old and young alike. The effort simply to deny that old age is significantly different from other periods of life avoids discussion of the particular virtues and responsibilities of old age and is an example of advanced poverty.

Most contemporary discussions of social policy are premised on the value of economic growth, and much of what we have said in this article makes the same assumption. Yet growth comes in many forms, some more efficient and socially beneficial than others. Western Europeans, for example, enjoy virtually the same living standard as Americans while consuming only one-half as much energy per person. Furthermore, some forms of growth are life-threatening. If the whole world had as many automobiles per capita as the United States, we would expire in a cloud of carbon monoxide. Yet what does third world economic growth mean if it does not mean automobiles for every private family? And if we oppose the general use of the automobile elsewhere in the world how can we justify our own addiction to it? Surely it would be a certain ticket to defeat to ask Americans to give up their private automobiles today. Nevertheless, we must at least begin to discuss environmental responsibility in transportation and other fields.

Here too the question of the common good is involved. The threat of growth to the natural ecology inevitably leads to the even deeper question of the threat of growth to our moral ecology, of how to think about increasing wealth and technological advancement in ways that will not destroy our capacity to act together as morally responsible persons.

A president who leads us into a serious discussion of the common good, both at home and abroad, will make a contribution that would far outlast his own administration. The climate a president creates is as important as what he does. Reagan corrupted the American people by lying to them and simultaneously encouraging them to be self-indulgent and self-righteous. He pretended to be a teaching president but he taught us badly. He encouraged illusion and discouraged responsible discussion.

We need a teaching president who will encourage us to be self-restrained, devoted to the creation of a good society, and willing to engage in vigorous debate about the common good, which is, as Dennis McCann has put it, not something any of us has a certain definition of in advance, but the good we seek in common through a politics of discussion. The one thing it is not is simply the aggregation of private interests, with no agreement as to what the outcome means in terms of the general good.

We Americans have undoubtedly been corrupted by the affluence of the postwar era and, most recently, by the fantasy world of Ronald Reagan. But we have maintained enough common sense and genuine civic virtue to be able to respond to serious, intelligent leadership.

Leaders who talk about sacrifice and a new age of limits in a grim and tight-lipped way will be rejected. Americans will still prefer fantasy. But if serious thought and hard work are presented as the necessary prelude to a society and a world that are safer, more peaceful, and, in a deeper sense than we now fully understand, more prosperous, then Americans can rise to the challenge with joy and enthusiasm. It wouldn't hurt to have a leader whose vision, joy, and enthusiasm could infect us all. □