



Essay by Wilfred M. McClay

THE SOURCES OF AMERICAN RENEWAL



THese past few years have been a rough and discouraging stretch for Americans in general, and perhaps especially for American conservatives. Yet in such times all of us should recall the counsel of Shakespeare, expressed by the exiled and deposed Duke Senior in *As You Like It*:

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.
(Act 2, Scene 1)

There is, in other words, something to be said for the sheer gravity of the challenges we now face as a nation, challenges that we can no longer evade or postpone. Their weightiness may even turn out to be a providential gift, albeit one shrouded in deep and unattractive disguise.

Arnold Toynbee saw the dynamic of challenge-and-response as the chief source of a civilization's greatness. Far from being the fruit of a steady inner-directed maturation, a civilization's higher development arose out of its skill and stamina in overcoming a succession of ordeals. "Creation," he asserted, "is the outcome of an encounter," and "genesis is a product of interaction." Great civilizations die from suicide rather than murder, which is to say that

they die when they no longer possess the will to respond confidently and creatively to the very challenges that would otherwise make them stronger and better.

He was right. Challenge and response is the way of life, and the way of national renewal. The challenges facing us are so great now, as we look at our massive and unsustainable deficits, our faltering economy, our fragile families and fraying moral fabric, and our diminishing place in the world, that we have no choice but to respond to them. The gravity of the situation forces us to think our way back to our first principles. This is not quite what President Obama's Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel had in mind in his now famous words—probably the chief ones for which history will remember him—that "you never want a serious crisis to go to waste." But we would be doing just that, wasting the crisis by failing to learn from it, were we to respond with acts of mere band-aid pragmatism and temporizing.

Some think the way to respond is to ramp up the comprehensive supervisory power of our cultural elites, and of the political class that embodies and serves them, over our society and economy. This is the view of the Obama Administration, with its centralized and technocratic vision of social reform, and its stress on the uses of expert knowledge in the proper

governance of human affairs—ideas that are far from new, but rather are throwbacks to the central contention of the Progressive movement a hundred years ago, and a clear gesture in the direction of the vast, all-embracing, and severely strained welfare states of northwestern Europe. It is also the view of those like *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who has warmly embraced the Obama Administration, praised its "pragmatism" and reliance upon "professional expertise," and admonished conservatives for choosing to "stick with Reagan" in perpetuating an "insane" antagonism to a large, powerful national government.

Reagan's Example

BUT THERE IS ANOTHER APPROACH TO THESE problems, and it is precisely the approach that Ronald Reagan promoted throughout most of his career, an approach that emphasized personal liberty, economic growth, individual enterprise, decentralization, traditional values, personal responsibility, religious faith, and reliance upon the organs of civil society.

In particular, the ascendancy of Reagan represented something enduringly important and distinctive about American life: its remarkable openness to infusions of new energy and cre-



ativity from below, i.e., from the non-accredited, non-credentialed, and unheralded non-elite sectors of its society. That these avenues of fresh energy and creativity be kept open is of crucial importance, particularly when so much of the parlous state of American life, and particularly American culture, in the past half-century or so has come from the manifold failures of our accredited elites, our best and brightest, which have sought to transform American life beyond recognition, and had not-inconsiderable success in the undertaking.

This is not, strictly speaking, a populist argument. Elites we shall always have with us, and it is an illusion to imagine that “the people” can ever rule in any unmediated way. But there are better or worse elites, with better or worse lines of communication with those they govern, and there is always a tendency for elites to become inbred, brittle, and enervated, and therefore unworthy to govern. This is one of the challenges to which they must either respond or succumb. One of the greatest strengths of American social life has been its ability, again and again, to incorporate and assimilate the waves of contributions of new energies and new blood to the elite class. The steady opening up of our elite institutions in recent years to more meritocratic criteria of admission, even if imperfectly achieved and marred by various forms of preferential treatment, would seem to testify to that strength.

Meritocracy or Monoculture?

YET THERE IS SOME REASON TO DOUBT whether the intellectual meritocracy, the interlocking directorate of elite institutions that has evolved over the past 50 years, is really doing that job effectively anymore, if it ever did. Instead, it seems to be fostering an intellectual monoculture that is ripe and smug and heavy with a sense of entitlement. It is no coincidence that Barack Obama is, of all the presidents in American history, most fully the product of elite academia, from his elite Hawaiian prep school to his Columbia and Harvard degrees, and his years on the faculty of the University of Chicago Law School. His smooth baritone voice is the quintessential tone of certified, accredited intelligence, the American equivalent of what in Great Britain would be called Received Pronunciation, that gold-plated Oxonian intonation that used to be the standard of the BBC. It hardly matters what he says with such a voice, and indeed, a reading of his transcripts shows that he is generally not saying very much. He has no other bank of experience than elite academe to draw upon, aside from tactical lessons drawn from the school of Chicago politics.

We have for decades now had a growing problem of fundamental loyalties in our cur-

rent elite academic culture. It is entirely fitting that there should be some distance between the two, and that academia be preserved as an island of free reflection, where even the most basic premises can be questioned freely, within the bounds of rationality and civility. But that is something very different from the pervasive atmosphere of our present academic institutions, which seem reflexively to teach disdain for fundamental American principles, and have for a generation or more inculcated in its charges a lack of confidence in the American project in the world. Even students who have never read a word of the late Howard Zinn can repeat his slanders verbatim, because they take them in with the air they breathe. Students know that such assertions are always the “safe” response in an academic setting, hence they offer them up automatically, mindlessly.

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But we also have a different, if not completely unrelated problem, which is the rise of an identifiable “political class,” of those, now including the leadership of powerful public-employee unions which also enjoy the protections of civil-service laws, whose interests are quite distinct from the interests of those they are supposed to serve, and who live parasitically off the productive economy. The inability of either political party to come to terms with this growing problem—and indeed, the Democratic Party’s astonishingly flagrant indifference to it—now suggests to a growing number of Americans that “the political class,” those who make their living off the political system, is so insulated from rebuke that even the prospect of electoral defeat will change very little in their behavior. Elite academia has given us a president who presumes to apologize to the world for his country, while a political class entrenched in Washington and Sacramento and Albany has put us on a path to swift and certain bankruptcy.

American Renewal

IT SHOULD ENCOURAGE US SOMEWHAT, THOUGH, to realize that we have been here before. These kinds of concerns were precisely what Ronald Reagan’s rise was about. Reagan offered a healthy affirmation of the core of American life, an affirmation coming from a man who was uncredentialed in any of the usual senses. Those of us old enough to remember will recall that he paid for this affirmative spirit by being constantly adjudged a hot-headed cretin, not least by the leadership of the Republican Party in the 1970s. What a joke he seemed to be: a man of obscure Midwestern origins, graduate of a no-name college, who parlayed his odd jobs as lifeguard and radio announcer into a minor acting career and then into lucrative flackery for General Electric and a stint in California politics. Who was such a man to presume to reform American politics?

Now that he is so widely and generally venerated, it is easy to forget—but important to remember—how savagely and dismissively he was treated from beginning to end. This is especially relevant when one contemplates both the sources of, and the reaction to, the Tea Party movement, an expression of popular outrage specifically directed at the political class and the experts whom they employ. This is an example of energy emerging from below, of the vitality of the uncredentialed again asserting itself—even if at times such energy may assert itself crudely, in the manner of an unguided missile. And the very name—Tea Party—represents an effort to claim for such energy the mantle of a great and historic American precedent, the American Revolution itself.

The claim is justified, and worth contemplating. For the renewal of American life is not going to be administered from the top down, by administrative or legislative fiat. That is not the nation’s history, nor is it firmly grounded in our national myths and lore. Instead, our history indicates that much of the energy must come from the bottom up. One can think, for example, of the enduringly vital role of immigration in American life, and specifically of the ways in which America’s steady flow of legal immigrants has always served to renew a sense of the national calling, and reaffirm America’s promise, precisely because the life-changing experiences of immigrants gave them a more vivid sense of that promise than those of many native-born. Emma Lazarus’s famous poem engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty did not entreat the world to “give us your well-credentialed”; quite the contrary.

Or consider the profound symbolic meaning for Americans of the term “frontier.” For much of the world, a frontier is simply a border, and the word accordingly has a somewhat forbidding as-



pect. You don't go there, not unless you have to. But for Americans a frontier is a place you *do* go. It is a verge between nature and culture, where the unsettled has not yet been disciplined into the settled, and where scope for the most fundamental human striving is still open and widely available. It is the point of creative contact with the energies of nature, a contact thought to be uniquely powerful and renewing. It is a matrix of challenge and response. Small wonder that the historian Frederick Jackson Turner believed, even if wrongly, that the existence of a frontier "explained" American development. Small wonder that Turner's "thesis" has lived on, despite its many detractors and persuasive refutations by careful historians, since it still expresses something profound and living in the national ethos.

Lincoln the Frontiersman

IT IS, I WOULD ARGUE, THE SAME ELEMENT IN the national ethos that informs a considerable part of our veneration of Abraham Lincoln. In fact, as historian Merrill Peterson has shown in his fascinating book *Lincoln in American Memory* (1994), there have been many Lincolns over the years, some of them virtually archetypes—Lincoln as the Savior of the Union, the Great Emancipator, the Man of the People, the Self-Made Man, and so on. But looming large among these archetypal visions of Lincoln is that of Lincoln as a frontiersman, a common man who was born in a log cabin to humble circumstances, a man whose character and outlook were molded, not by the advantages of birth or pedigree, but by his own immense striving toward self-betterment, and his labor to wring a better life out of the hard opportunities presented to him.

Not everything about this was good, and Lincoln especially regretted the absence of educational opportunities in his own life. But one cannot separate the resourcefulness of his character from the fact of his frontier origins. Nor can one separate those humble origins from his iconic and enduring meaning in American life. There was nothing ordinary about Lincoln. But his ascension to the presidency was a clear example of the common man's potential. As Lincoln said in announcing his candidacy for the Illinois General Assembly in 1832, he "was born, and [had] ever remained, in the most humble walks of life," without "wealthy or popular relations or friends to recommend" him. But he had been given unprecedented opportunity to realize his potential by the right set of conditions.

By the way, this son of a more pioneering America was also the only American president to hold a patent. It stemmed from his time spent on riverboats, transporting farm produce and

other cargo down the Mississippi River. Lincoln had seen boats run aground on sandbars or in shoal waters, and the experience gave him the idea of "buoyant air chambers" made of "water-proof fabric" which could be inflated and deflated as needed to help keep a boat afloat.

He obtained a patent for this invention, "Buoying Vessels Over Shoals," in 1849. A decade later, on the lecture circuit, he described the first English patent laws as one of the three greatest "inventions and discoveries" in history (along with the written and printed word and the discovery of America), for their addition of "the fuel of *interest* to the *fire* of genius in the discovery and production of new and useful things."

This is a nice illustration not only of Lincoln's resourceful mind, but of the importance that he placed upon innovation, and the realistic view he took of human nature—that innovators would be more likely to innovate if the legal structure allowed them to profit from their innovation.

So the frontier experience of Lincoln's day by its very nature placed less importance upon pedigree. Yes, it was not universal in character. Specifically, it favored those who were white and male. It was not entirely free. But we can say that the frontier tended that way, in the direction of a rough and ready equality of opportunity.

This was for Lincoln a kind of fulfillment of the spirit of the Declaration of Independence—which he revered and repeatedly recurred to—in its affirmation of the equal worth of all men, and their equal entitlement to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And the equal right of all men to the fruits of their own labors, a declaration grounded not in the will of governments or men, but in the dictates of Nature and Nature's God. Lincoln loathed slavery from his earliest youth—something he shared with his Baptist parents—but his deepest complaint about slavery seemed to be that it was a form of theft, which allowed one class of men to steal from another class the fruit of the latter's labors. The notion of distributive justice was less important to him than the notion of limitless human opportunity—a priority that was much more in keeping with the ethos of the frontier.

An Enduring Appeal

THE EXALTED IDEA OF THE FRONTIER IN American society goes far beyond the sort of flat-footed material explanations that Turner thought he had provided. It is something closer to an organizing myth, with deep roots in the entire history of European civilization. The idea of the frontier in a sense extended back to the very beginnings of European contact with and settlement of the Western hemisphere, and to the idea of the West itself—as a place

of renewal, of beginning again, and of America's naturalness *contra* Europe—which substituted the virtues of nature for the pedigrees of culture and history.

Hence, one sees a growing concern in 19th-century America, as the continent began to be settled and the frontier subdued, about the loss of this connection with nature and the possible effects. One sees it in forms of expression as different as the Hudson River School of romantic landscape painters, or the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—or, by the beginning of the 20th century, Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian* (1902), which, like all the genre fiction revolving around the Old West, seemed to celebrate the manly energy of "frontier justice," and speak to the perils of "over-civilization," a theme also stressed by Wister's friend Theodore Roosevelt, whose own Western sojourn was so central to his experience.

Turner's frontier thesis, put forward in 1893, stated simply: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development." Yet Turner ended his analysis with barely disguised anxiety. According to the 1890 census, the frontier was closed, which meant that an era of American history was closing as well. What would come next? Who could know? Might the loss of the actual frontier also mean the loss of something essential to American life? Would we cease to dream of frontiers and cease to seek them?

If that has happened, one would certainly not know it from our public rhetoric in subsequent years. John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign for the presidency dubbed itself the New Frontier, a direct tip of the hat to Turner's thesis, and an effort to reclaim and recover the strength of the idea of the frontier, applying it to the exploration of space, among other things. Or one might consider the rhetoric accompanying the incorporation of Alaska into the Union as the 49th state in 1959, the year before. The enduring appeal of Alaska to those who go there, the symbolic meaning of Alaska in American life, was well captured by one of the state's most enduring names, which one sees even today on every Alaskan license plate: The Last Frontier.

The Danger of Overorganization

WHAT THESE EXAMPLES SUGGEST IS A persistent sense that there is a danger of overorganization in American life, of an over-emphasis upon credentialism and specialization, forces that taken in excess can cripple our sense of human possibility, and along with it the health of our communities, and our liberty. President Obama wants everyone to go to college, and he sees this, not unjustifiably,



as the federal government's lending a generous helping hand of opportunity. But perhaps it is less generous than it seems. Perhaps we already have too much schooling in our culture, too much hegemony of the schooled, too much licensing, too much regulation of experience, too little space to move around and find our own way, to experiment and make mistakes, to exercise the power of personal initiative without the supervision of experts, nannies, busybodies, and others who should spend more time minding their own business.

Perhaps we have become too concerned with pedigree, with the right schools, the right career path, and so on. What does it tell us today, if the greatest politician in our history, our greatest orator, a man whose command of the English language and of the principles of constitutional democracy was without peer, was a largely unschooled and self-educated man without any social advantages? But he was a man who came of age with one inestimable advantage: he lived in the loose-jointed environment of antebellum America, an arena remarkably well-calibrated to the development of his talents.

Indeed, there was a time well within the memory of many living Americans when one's advancement in life was not so heavily determined by the credential of where, or even whether, one attended college. To be sure, one didn't easily make the leap from Eastern Illinois State Teachers College to a white-shoe Park Avenue law firm. But other things were very different. Politics, for example. One of the greatest of America's 20th-century presidents—and one of the most literate and historically informed since the time of the founders—was Harry S. Truman, who did not have a college education at all, but instead began working for the Santa Fe Railroad when he graduated from high school.

That less organized America had many faults, and I do not want to romanticize away those faults. But in fact the worst of its faults was its failure to extend the opportunities that a Truman enjoyed to all Americans. That is a fault that only serves to confirm the worthiness of the ideal itself. For all its imperfections, a more loose-jointed America is more open to sheer human possibility than the putatively meritocratic iron cage of standardized tests and glib interpersonal skills that we are now so proud of having constructed, and imagine to be less elitist than the world it replaced.

Open to All

WE NEED TO RESTORE AND PRESERVE A less regimented, less status-stratified, less school-sorted, more open-ended America. We need an economy and legal structures that are as open as possible to enterprise and innovation. An educational system that is open to all, and geared not to the manufacturing of credentials (or artificial and dysfunctional rites of passage) but to the empowering of individuals. A society that concerns itself with the knowledge and skills a person can acquire, not where or how he acquired them.

I mentioned Alaska. Consider for a moment the national reception of John McCain's vice-presidential pick, that state's then-governor, Sarah Palin—a working-class woman with a scrappy education, many different jobs, no clear career track, and a working-class husband—a

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woman who was, like so many women of the American West, both untraditional and profoundly traditional at the same time, a combination that makes no sense in the settled East but makes perfect sense in the context of frontier societies. Reasonable people can differ widely in their estimation of the cogency of Palin's political views or campaign style, or whether she was, or is, adequately prepared for high office. Those are legitimate points of debate. But it was strange and deeply disconcerting to see her mocked and pilloried for the unpedigreed aspects of her own social background, notably the obscurity of the colleges she attended. There was, and is, something profoundly unseemly about it, particularly when it emanates from some of the most powerful and privileged in our land.

This ought to have been infuriating to many Americans. For with her checkered and educationally modest background she represented Abraham Lincoln's America, and Reagan's America, much more than did either her running mate, a Naval Academy graduate and son and grandson of admirals, or the two Ivy-credentialed Democratic presidential candidates, or the three presidents before the present one: Bush, Clinton, Bush, all having Yale or Harvard pedigrees. When David Brooks, writing in November 2008 about the glittering credentials and "superb personnel decisions" of the new Obama Administration, joked about the possibility that a foreign enemy might find America especially vulnerable if it were to strike during a Harvard-Yale football game, he was pointing in an approving way toward a development that is not at all healthy.

We should think once more of Lincoln, and of his great speech at the dedication of the cemetery in Gettysburg. As everyone knows, there were two notable speeches that day. The first—and the longest and most learned—was given by the supremely well-pedigreed Edward Everett, former president of Harvard and the first American to receive a German Ph.D. But it was the self-educated frontiersman president who gave the speech whose words ring down through the ages.

Hence, when we celebrated in 2009 the 50th anniversary of Alaskan statehood and the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, we were, in a sense, celebrating the same thing: the enduring frontier spirit in America, which far from being deplored, ought to be celebrated and nurtured. In doing so, we will be celebrating the ability of this country to give unprecedented scope to the amazing and unpredictable depths of the human person, depths that cannot be produced factory-like by the right schools or the right social arrangements, but emerge from the unpredictable and often surprising potential in the minds and hearts and spirits of ordinary people when they are left free to pursue their ambitions. The examples of Lincoln and Alaska exemplify qualities of character and spirit that are at the heart of what this country is at its best, and that we should want to foster and preserve in the years ahead. This is a sentiment that Ronald Reagan would surely have endorsed, for it was one that he embodied and fought for his whole life. It is one worth sticking with.

Wilfred M. McClay is the SunTrust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities and a professor of history at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

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