

By MICHAEL A. WEINSTEIN

America no longer can afford the luxury of feeling blue

The "new patriotism," which swelled popular sentiment during Ronald Reagan's ascendancy, has now been deflated by the Iran-contra disclosures and the perplexities and hard choices attendant upon intervention in the Persian Gulf. Ever since the protracted agony of withdrawal from Vietnam, the American temper has been subject to extreme mood swings, similar to the emotional vacillations of a manic-depressive. Are we in for a new period of national self-questioning bordering on self-contempt?

The characteristic disease of our collective psyche is enthusiasm. Our greatest national philosophers, William James, John Dewey and George Santayana, were of a single mind in warning against outbreaks of excessive self-inflation. Perhaps Dewey named it best as "zealous faith" when he criticized the religious right of his time.

During the 1980s we have been treated to a steady outpouring on the virtues and benefits of feeling good about ourselves. For the individual a positive self-image has been hailed as

the key to happiness and success. On the national level a belief and pride in ourselves has often been deemed sufficient to secure economic well-being and political strength in the world.

Far more than being the "great communicator," Ronald Reagan has been the national cheerleader. From the beginning of his presidency he stimulated a constant upbeat mood, sustained by a mix of his own optimistic enthusiasm and a series of pleasing political fantasies. Illusionary dreams like the "new federalism" and "supply-side economics" promised a costless efficiency and prosperity. They have now faded into dim memory, if not oblivion.

Star Wars is still on the fire, but it has lost its flash as the cloud of its budgetary impact and practical difficulties becomes visible on the horizon. "Tax reform" has come and gone, and now the accountants are learning to live soberly with its consequences.

The danger of enthusiasm is that it depends upon belief in a mythical future. Once the luster of illusion fades there is a tendency for the enthusiast to become cynical or depressed.

The Teflon coating on the Reagan presidency, before Iran-contra cracked it last November, was made of zealous faith. Ronald Reagan was permitted all sorts of lapses and mistakes because he made us feel good about ourselves. There might be severe disagreement with his administration's policies, but people believed in him because he was a "nice man." That is, he felt good about us and believed in our future. We always tend to like those who flatter us and give us hope.

But our capacity for credulity is not limitless. The public mind may not be sensitive to the constitutional fine points raised by conducting foreign

policy out of the White House basement, but it does react against what it perceives as mendacity. A majority is now convinced that Reagan is "like any other politician." Flattery will get you everywhere, but only if those who are beguiled do not feel they are being used. And that sense of having been used, that politics have returned to dull normal, is back with us again.

The Reagan presidency cannot be revived, because its vigor and vitality depended on enthusiastic belief in impossible dreams. There is nothing on the agenda of collective imagination to replace the grand schemes of the early and middle Reagan years, and even if there were, the president's image has been tarnished in the public mind beyond any hope of polishing it up. Will we now drift into feeling ill of ourselves and enter a cycle of self-doubt?

The demands upon public policy in

the coming decade are not the things that inspire self-inflation. The line of banks increasing their loss reserves signals a period in which massive debt will have to be confronted and managed at all levels of the economy. Dreams are not made of debt-for-equity swaps and austerity. The new sophisticated leadership in the Soviet Union spells the need for diplomatic subtlety rather than grand pronouncements about the "evil empire."

Sober deliberation on policy and a sense of limits will have to replace easy pride unless we are willing to let the Soviets seize on the diplomatic front what we have prevented them from taking militarily. We will not be able to meet our challenges if we descend into defensiveness and distraction.

The need of the times is to replace the "new patriotism" which has aged so fast with a sound nationalism based on a realistic will to survive in an increasingly threatening world. We can no longer afford the luxury of depression which so easily follows a manic binge of enthusiasm.

Weinstein is professor of political science at Purdue University.

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