

Pride in power; love of country

By Michael A. Weinstein

In the closing years of our century, patriotism is one of the difficult pleasures of life for a reflective American. In the recent past, when the United States was indisputably the leading power in the world, it was easy to experience patriotic sentiments. It's no great feat to love one's country when one can feel pride in its supremacy. But now things are different and on some level or other everyone knows it.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, in the suburbs of New York City, American pre-eminence suffused every part of life. I remember my first conversation in junior high. It was with an Irish kid, Jimmy, who was two years older than me. He regaled the newcomer Jew from a liberal-left family with an eager rap on military technology and the Cold War. America, he said with enthusiasm, was on the verge of building weapons that would assure us mastery over the whole world and would frighten the Communists into submission or obliterate them.

I didn't know how to respond to Jimmy because his words were so alien to what I had been learning about politics at home all my life. But I grasped immediately that he was more representative of Americans than I was. His rap had a double effect on me. I was repelled and frightened by the aggressive swagger and the visionary enthusiasm, but I was attracted by the self-assured premise that he was an American and proud of it. Jimmy knew who he was by birthright. I had never even considered the question.

I always think of Jimmy when I hear certain peace-movement liberals hector about the incalculable damage done to young personalities by subjecting them to air raid drills and Cold War rhetoric in the 1950s. At the time, I didn't know anyone among my peers who was seized by fears about nuclear war.

The test of patriotism comes when its sentiment of love can no longer be fortified honestly with pride in

power. Jimmy's patriotism, which has been emblematic of American self-feeling since World War II, is a form of what the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." It's the credo of Tom Paine's "summer soldiers and sunshine patriots," who in our times stake their devotion on technology, domination and entertainment.

It would be easy and equally cheap to get on a moral podium and denounce the Jimmys of the world for what they were and are, for what they have done to us and to themselves. Jimmy's spirit haunted the U.S. in the persona of Ronald Reagan, who fused the wish for power with faith in technology and the fantasies of mass entertainment. But how many of us were not possessed to some degree by this demon?

Let's admit that it was and would be a wonderful thing to live in the mightiest country in the world and to belong there by birthright or by naturalization. One might have a nobler vision than national strength and still appreciate that others would derive security, confidence and happiness from national power in all its forms. The first step toward sanity is to be aware of what one might genuinely desire.

All of the talk about the decline of America's position in the world is pointless if it is not referred to the truth that we are losing or have already lost something of great value. Power is often a dirty word in our public discourse, which is infected by a pious and unseemly moralism. But even those who rail against American might are parasites—that is, they benefit from it, and enjoy the security and confidence that power gives. The loss of that security and confidence is the gravest peril American society faces. If Jimmy's adolescent patriotism was cheap and sleazy, it served him and all the others like him. What will serve us today if we seek to love our country?

Perhaps American hegemony was always an illusion, but if we are now on the other side of that fantasy we must try to see what we should do with the Jimmy within us. How do we find security and confidence when we no longer can believe that we are supreme?



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