

Punitive Liberalism

What Reagan vanquished.

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WE HAVE HEARD a great deal in recent days about how Ronald Reagan brought a spirit of optimism to Washington after his election in 1980 and thereby renewed the nation's belief in itself after a period of self-doubt, pessimism, and "malaise." President Reagan said America's best days were still ahead, and he thus renewed our belief in progress and a better future for generations yet unborn. In this sense, he did for the nation in the 1980s what had been done in the 1930s by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who said "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

This narrative about Ronald Reagan is completely accurate, so far as it goes. The problem is that it does not go far enough. Why had Americans become so pessimistic about their country during the 1970s? Why had they been overcome by a sense of "malaise," as Jimmy Carter described it? There was, of course, the long ordeal of Vietnam, followed by Watergate, and then a sluggish economy--reasons enough for Americans to feel some sense of doubt and disappointment. But why was Ronald Reagan able to reverse these doubts when Jimmy Carter could not?

The answer to these questions is that while Americans in general were not down on their country, Jimmy Carter, along with the leaders of the Democratic party and its main constituent groups, certainly was. President Carter could not overcome the "malaise" of the 1970s because he and his fellow Democrats had played a large role in fostering it.

From the time of John Kennedy's assassination in 1963 to Jimmy Carter's election in 1976, the Democratic party was gradually taken over by a bizarre doctrine that might be called Punitive Liberalism. According to this doctrine, America had been responsible for numerous crimes and misdeeds through its history for which it deserved punishment and chastisement. White Americans had enslaved blacks and committed genocide against Native Americans. They had oppressed women and tyrannized minority groups, such as the Japanese who had been interned in camps during World War II. They had been harsh and unfeeling toward the poor. By our greed, we had despoiled the environment and were consuming a disproportionate share of the world's wealth and resources. We had coddled dictators abroad and violated human rights out of our irrational fear of communism.

Given this bill of indictment, the Punitive Liberals held that Americans had no right at all to feel pride in their country's history or optimism about its future. Those who expressed such pride were written off as ignorant patriots who could not face up to the sins of the past; and those who looked ahead to a brighter future were dismissed as naive "Pollyannas" who did not understand that the brief American century was now over. The Punitive Liberals felt that the purpose of national policy was to punish the nation for its crimes rather than to build a stronger America and a brighter future for all.

Here the Punitive Liberals parted company from earlier liberal reformers such as FDR, Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, who viewed reform as a means of bringing the promise of American life within reach of more of our people. The earlier reformers believed deeply that the American experiment in self-government was inherently good, and that the task of policy was to improve it. But in the troubled years following Kennedy's death, the reform tradition took on a furrowed brow and a punitive visage.

In many ways, Jimmy Carter, and his leading appointees, were the perfect exemplars of Punitive Liberalism. Given their sour outlook, it is no wonder that their leadership generated a sense of "malaise" among the American people.

During the 1970s an impressive network of interest groups was developed to promote and take advantage of this sense of historical guilt. These included the various feminist and civil rights groups who pressed for affirmative action, quotas, and other policies to compensate women and minorities for past mistreatment; the welfare rights organizations who claimed that welfare and various poverty programs were entitlements or, even better, reparations that were owed to the poor as compensation for similar mistreatment; the environmental groups who pressed for ever more stringent regulations on business; and the various human rights and disarmament groups who pressed the government to punish or disassociate the United States from allies who were said to violate human rights. These groups took up influential roles in the Democratic party and in the Congress, and ensconced themselves in university departments from which outposts they promoted and elaborated upon the finer points of Punitive Liberalism.

The punitive aspects of this doctrine were made especially plain in debates over the liberals' favored policies. If one asked whether it was really fair to impose employment quotas for women and minorities, one often heard the answer, "White men imposed quotas on us, and now we're going to do the same to them!" Was busing of school children really an effective means of improving educational opportunities for blacks? A parallel answer was often given: "Whites bused blacks to enforce segregation, and now they deserve to get a taste of their own medicine!" Do we really strengthen our own security by undercutting allied governments in the name of human rights, particularly when they are replaced by openly hostile regimes (as in Iran and Nicaragua)? "This"--the answer was--"is the price we have to pay for coddling dictators." And so it went. Whenever the arguments were pressed, one discovered a punitive motive behind most of their policies.

Naturally, it was somewhat difficult to advance the tenets of Punitive Liberalism in the public arena, and especially tricky to do so in electoral contests. The broader public, after all, is unlikely to take kindly to the idea that it needs to be punished for the sins of past generations. For this reason, Vice President Mondale, an experienced politician, felt that Jimmy Carter had made a serious mistake in calling the American people to task for their "malaise," since it is counter-productive for an elected politician to attack the voters. The Punitive Liberals thus chose instead to advance their causes in the regulatory bodies and in the federal courts--the latter being the perfect arena for leveling blame and exacting punishment. And they did so with considerable success.

Their success, however, was the undoing of the nation. The Punitive Liberals, because they sought to cultivate guilt in order to leverage policy, proved incapable of adopting practical measures to strengthen the economy or to advance American power in the world. Such goals, in any case, would have been contradictory to their deeper longings, which were to dispel American pride, and to shrink American ambitions at home and abroad. The Cold War, in particular, seemed to them a pointless struggle between two flawed empires, "two scorpions in a bottle." While they did not wish to see the Communists win, neither were they prepared to swallow the triumphalism that would accompany a victory by the West. A strong economy, meanwhile, would disproportionately reward the rich and the self-contented middle classes--the very groups that the Punitive Liberals wished to chastise.

And thus it was perhaps inevitable that the policies of the Punitive Liberals would give us the worst of all worlds--weakness and embarrassment abroad, inflation and unemployment at home, and a public that was beginning to lose hope in its future. By 1980, the nation had seen the results of its experiment with Punitive Liberalism, and was beginning to look for an alternative vision.

Fortunately for all of us, Ronald Reagan stepped into the void and supplied that vision. He understood, more than any other candidate of the time, that the pervasive negativism of the Democratic party was largely responsible for our national difficulties. And thus his pragmatic proposals for tax cuts, deregulation, and defense spending were accompanied with inspiring rhetoric about national pride and a hopeful future.

He stated the matter with abundant clarity in his acceptance speech before the Republican Convention in July 1980:

*The major issue of this campaign is the direct political, personal and moral responsibility of the Democratic Party leadership--in the White House and in Congress--for this unprecedented calamity which has befallen us. They tell us that they have done the most that humanly could be done. They say that the United States has had its day in the sun; that our nation has passed its zenith. They expect you to tell your children that the American people no longer have the will to cope with their problems; that the future will be one of sacrifice and few opportunities.*

"My fellow citizens," he continued, "I utterly reject that view. The American people, the most generous on earth, who created the highest standard of living, are not going to accept the notion that we can only make a better world for others by moving backwards ourselves."

Ronald Reagan during the campaign and then in office challenged the leaders who had encouraged the spirit of malaise and doubt. He exposed, confronted, and eventually defeated the bizarre and self-flagellating doctrine of Punitive Liberalism. For this, as for so many other things, he earned the eternal gratitude of the American people.

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