

THE NATIONAL PURPOSE

by

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Any suggestion that the next generation of Americans will live less well than the present one seems unworthy of the country's historic faith in material progress. Still, such predictions are not strange or necessarily disturbing. Unprecedented numbers of Americans have achieved standards of living that far exceed what the nation's economy can sustain. American consumption since mid-century has outstripped the country's productivity and has required a national and personal indebtedness that would appear to defy repayment. Without a limitless increase in the nation's debt structure, and a corresponding inflation, the economy seems incapable of performing at all. What feeds both the indebtedness and the inflation—and causes the need for multiple wage-earners in most families—is a widespread compulsion to maintain standards of living created by a quarter century of artificially stimulated prosperity. If millions of Americans have not achieved material well-being amid such economic stimulants, it is not clear what levels of business and credit expansion will enable them to do so. Rising oil prices endanger the country's economic security largely because American society has grown accustomed to high levels of energy consumption. Past reliance on nonrenewable energy, scarce resources, and credit-induced purchasing power cannot continue indefinitely; the nation has entered a period of adjustment in which it must reexamine its behavior in light of the known limits of its wealth and the vulnerability of its environment.

This necessary adjustment will come hard, especially for those who believe that the country's uniqueness lies in its material triumphs rather than in its buoyancy, freedom, and opportunities for self-expression. Basically, America's historic goals have embraced the creation of a just and prosperous society at home, with the added conviction that the nation's internal achievements would not be lost on others. The Founding Fathers agreed that the country would make its major contribution to human progress simply by maintaining

America as a civilization worthy of emulation. From the beginning, the US has been too dynamic, too innovative, too successful to avoid being such a model for the world. But the measure of its distinctiveness has shifted through the decades. Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Madison represented an America that was not rich or powerful, but one that possessed a free, congenial environment and political wisdom of the highest order. Even in recent years the gains of the US in civil rights have rekindled among Asians, Africans, and Europeans the notion that the US is indeed concerned with human welfare. President Carter has proclaimed that national purpose to the world. Despite this historic identification of the US with individual rights and equal opportunity, the country's impact over the past generation has been overwhelmingly material. Even in foreign affairs the great achievements of the US—the maintenance of a large defense structure, the rebuilding of Western Europe and Japan, and the extension of aid to much of the underdeveloped world—have been measures of what the country could buy.

By almost any standard, the postwar American economy has been a wonder of the modern world. Even before the 1960's the standard of living for most Americans had reached levels undreamed of before Pearl Harbor. The gross national product reached \$285 billion by 1950, then rose rapidly to almost \$400 billion by 1955, to more than \$500 billion by 1960, to \$650 billion by 1965, and to almost a trillion by the end of the decade. Thereafter the GNP climbed to \$2 trillion. Unfortunately, inflation wiped out two-thirds of that gain, but the actual advances in production and consumption were little less than astonishing. Despite labor-saving machinery, the economy created millions of new jobs. The civilian labor force increased from about 60 million at mid-century to 78 million by the end of the 1960's; by 1979 it had exceeded 90 million. Automation had reduced the percentage of

blue collar labor in the US to far less than half of the total, but the expansion of service, financial, business, educational, and governmental operations had also created new opportunities for mass employment.

Behind this operation of the free market, determining in large measure the nature and quality of the nation's economic growth, was an industrial momentum that responded less to national need than to previous investments, available technology, anticipated profits, and carefully contrived consumer demand. After mid-century the momentum in automobile production, highway construction, large-scale agriculture, and university expansion characterized the continuing revolution in American economic life. The number of automobiles in the US increased five times as rapidly as the population, reaching 1.4 cars per family during the 1960's. Automobiles became increasingly larger, more powerful, and more expensive. In 1965, the Ford Galaxy, with its small engine, weighed approximately 3500 pounds, as did the Chevrolet Impala. Soon, both automobiles with more powerful engines would gain 1000 pounds in weight, while Cadillacs and Lincolns would eventually come to exceed 5000 pounds. Nothing remained small, cheap, or simple very long. Whether all these changes answered any national need was viewed as immaterial; they merely demonstrated that large automobiles could be sold at a greater profit than small

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ones. Under the assumption that efficient power in the form of gasoline would remain cheap and plentiful, the American public cooperated with the automobile industry in eliminating other forms of public transportation such as railroads, streetcars, and electrical interurban lines. In order to underwrite this shift toward use of automobiles, the federal government spent \$60 billion for a 42,000-mile interstate highway system—the largest single public work in history.

The same technology that transformed the American economy to one of heavy reliance on petroleum produced a revolution in American agriculture by unleashing large-scale farming operations. Throughout much of its history the US had regarded its many independent farmers as the backbone of its phenomenal agricultural production and the special guardians of its values. New Deal measures had attempted to keep a maximum number of citizens on the soil, but nothing could protect the farm population from the impact of large, complex, and efficient machinery that by the 1960's enabled individual operators, with little help, to cultivate as many as 1000 acres of prime agricultural land. Farmers, propelled by the need for ever-greater productivity to cover the mounting costs of machinery, gasoline, and fertilizer, faced a choice of either assuming heavier debts to buy larger and more expensive machinery or giving up. Thousands of farmers, glimpsing a profitable future in such expensive operations, often accumulated debts of a half million dollars in order to buy additional land and machinery. Others in even larger numbers, unwilling or unable to follow the trend, sold or rented out their land and left. The abandoned houses and decaying barns that dot the countryside of this nation's richest agricultural regions stand as mute testimony to the erosion of old family farms. The number of farms in the US had declined from 4 million in 1960 to 2.8 million in the mid-1970's. Some predict that eventually no more than a half million farms will produce

the nation's food. The changes wrought by this momentum toward larger operations have not necessarily served any national or human need. For consumers there are no discernible benefits; the new efficiency did not reduce the price of food. Even for the large, efficient producers the costs of operation have eliminated sizable profits except under the most favorable market conditions.

Motivated by the fear unleashed by Sputnik that the US might become second-best in scientific and technological achievement, the nation began in the late 1950's to spend more on higher education than at any time in its own or the world's history. These expenditures, stimulated as well by the promise of endless employment for the educated in an ever-expanding and more sophisticated economy and by legislatures well attuned to public and institutional demands for ever-larger educational appropriations, soon had no visible limits. Higher education became one of the nation's leading growth industries. Caught in a momentum that responded to unprecedented public and private funding, many of the country's colleges and universities quickly doubled or tripled in size. Outlays for public education soared more than seven times as rapidly as enrollments. Whether the effort served any national requirement is unclear. University administrators seldom acknowledged any need for growth except that of qualifying for the available state and federal appropriations. Overselling education as a personal and social panacea, colleges and universities brought far more students into higher education than could benefit from the experience or find positions upon graduation commensurate with their education and expectations. A disenchanted public soon discovered that the monetary and occupational promises of learning were exaggerated. The expense ensuing from overexpansion and overstaffing in tandem with the ultimate need for contraction would in time plague college and university

administrators. These problems were predictable from the beginning; the expansion lacked a sense of direction and a sense of limits.

This progress and prosperity rode forward on a public and private indebtedness which was growing almost beyond belief. It was approaching \$2.5 trillion by 1970. McGraw-Hill economists provide the following breakdown: \$1 trillion in corporate debt; \$600 billion in mortgage debt; \$500 billion in federal government debt; \$200 billion in state and local government debt; and \$200 billion in consumer debt. The repayment of such indebtedness, at least with stable dollars, was unthinkable. Yet in the 1970's the country's credit structure soared to even grander heights, with total debt approaching \$4 trillion in 1979. This indebtedness, however, seemed to cause little public concern. In such booming times there is rarely a regard for economic discipline; a recession-free economy demands that government, business, and consumers alike spend more than they acquire from taxes, profits, and wages. Banks, lending agencies, and merchandisers encouraged Americans to go into debt and remain there. The credit card symbolized American affluence and consumerism. The resulting inflation, which at times reached double-digit figures, injured most those who could afford it least. For millions of Americans with low or fixed incomes, the prosperity of the 1970's brought few if any benefits. Those whose incomes were not protected by indexing or wage-and-price manipulation suffered a persistent decline in living standards.

If the prosperity of the 1960's rolled millions of Americans out of the poverty class, the subsequent inflation drove large numbers back below the poverty line—which by the mid-1970's had reached \$5500 for an urban family of four. Whether poverty's victims lived in the rural south or in the urban slums, their presence in a nation of plenty was a disturbing anachronism. But poverty, if an anachronism, had its reasons for existence. American society demands a

measure of ability, preparation, and determination from those on whom it bestows economic success. Within the nation there are many men and women who, because of health, education, environment, or other factors, cannot compete satisfactorily in the economic life of the country. Both the southern hill regions and the urban slums so completely deprive many of their inhabitants of useful skills, energy, and incentive that few find it possible to break the stranglehold of the past on their hopes and expectations. Too often the existence of opulence and opportunity elsewhere creates resentment instead of a meaningful urge for self-improvement. The recent past has proven that prosperity alone cannot create the jobs necessary to permit the poor an escape from privation. The stimulant of indebtedness benefited most those who needed it least.

Prosperity contributed little to urban improvement. New York City's South Bronx, where property abandonment dislocated more than 250,000 people, symbolized the decay of the nation's inner cities. Harlem, like other black urban communities across the country, offered typical scenes of degradation reflecting its poverty in the encroachment of abandoned buildings. One bar owner exclaimed bitterly:

Anyone with half an eye can see that Harlem is dying. Ain't nobody around anymore. All those who could, have moved. Only ones left are those who can't go nowhere. Everywhere you look you see boarded-up buildings. People are gone. And those left don't drink whisky. They're on drugs.

Harlem's famous Savoy Ballroom and other popular clubs that once catered to great musicians and big spenders were gone, victims of the changing urban scene. Every street had its abandoned apartment complexes, monuments to the rapacity of landlords, generally white, who exacted whatever they could from their tenants until decay rendered the buildings uninhabitable. No other country would tolerate such

systematic decay. Unfortunately, areas of the cities that most needed help were precisely those least able to help themselves. Perhaps the inner cities had little chance of recovery as long as the wrong people lived in them. Those large urban areas in need of change teemed with people who could not find work, whereas the high-income middle class that inhabited the towering office buildings refused to live in the cities, thus denying them civic leadership and the necessary economic base.

Uncontrolled industrial expansion demanded its price in a damaged national environment. Much of the country's natural beauty suffered from the encroachments of highways, land developers, and urban sprawl. Society created an avalanche of solid waste that threatened to bury it. Americans, thriving on technology, discarded some 350 million tons of trash a year, including 60 million tons of paper and paper products. Discarded packaging alone weighed 25 million tons a year. Disposal of this waste cost the nation about \$4.5 billion annually. Much of the discarded paper, glass, steel, and aluminum could be recycled, but consumers and producers alike resisted the cost and inconvenience. Another assault on the environment, deadly dangerous in its effects, was industrial pollution. Smog in one form or another could be found in most regions of the US. Every city with a population of 500,000 or more dumped at least 50 million gallons of sewage a year into the nation's streams, rivers, and lakes. The decisions that polluted the nation's rivers and streams, contaminated its air, and clogged its city streets were not made by government, but by individuals operating in a free market in pursuit of their own private interests. The environmental problems that clouded the future represented the accumulated decisions of people who found those decisions profitable or assumed that they could escape paying the price of the resulting decay or reconstruction.

Washington came to accept the obligation to protect the public and business alike from the undesirable externalities of a complicated industrial and

economic system. That protective effort created a growing federal superstructure of regulatory agencies with their reports, inspections, hearings, civil and criminal proceedings, suits and countersuits, court orders, and fines. The federal government did not grow by accident. At every step along the way it has responded to the demands of organized groups seeking protection of their interests in the free market. Every restraint was for some a needless imposition, for others a procedural safeguard. The costs of added government afflicted the public with an ever-heavier burden of taxation. To defend the public from those who wielded dominant power in the nation's complex industrial economy, the government moved so steadily and quietly into the body of American life that its full impact was hardly discernible. Inasmuch as big government resulted from the accumulated cries of those unable to defend their own interests, there was no easy escape from its costs and impositions. Until the American people, whether as citizens or as members of organized groups, are prepared to behave with the restraint required for the operation of a just and orderly society, the federal bureaucracy will continue to expand. The growth of governmental power in all its forms rests on the continuing conviction that government alone can protect society from individual and group injustices.

Industrial and governmental growth has offered jobs, opportunities, profits, and comforts. To that extent it has served the interests of most Americans admirably. The fact that it imposes exorbitant social and economic costs seems equally apparent. But perceptions of these costs and the means to control them vary. Many Americans—perhaps the overwhelming majority—accept the need for some new directions in American life. They assume, however, that changes limited enough to demand little of the nation can still be effective. Conservative economists, business leaders, and much of the public, convinced that a free market responding to public preferences can exert the necessary restraints on corporate behavior and the uses of technology, favor policies and incentives that would expand the limits of

production and consumption. Those who believe that increased productive capacity can create a better life for most people argue that less materialistic values are not necessarily more humane than those of an expanding industrial order. America's middle-class citizens, it is argued, cherish their comforts. To decrease them would not reduce wants, but would generate frustration and tension.

For the optimists, technology itself possesses the power to eliminate most physical challenges to the nation's well-being. Scientist Philip Handler, speaking at the University of Virginia, identified science and technology with an improving future.

By what means shall we make a better tomorrow? I know of none but the wise application of yet more technology rooted in science already available and that to be developed in the years to come, but examining carefully all conceivable consequences of each new technology before its introduction into society. Those who scoff offer no alternatives.

To lose faith in science and technology is to lose faith in the country and its capacity for ingenuity and inventiveness. Moreover, economic expansionists argue that scarcity, not abundance, governs the lives of most Americans; thus growth alone can satisfy the economic needs of all. With all of its wealth and prosperity the US has been conspicuously good to only a few million of its citizens—professionals, executives, and businessmen. In contrast, the average working man is far from affluent. Without economic growth any general improvement in the lot of the poor and lower-income groups would require a corresponding loss of income and status elsewhere in American society. To protect the gains of the past the country must increase its wealth, not divide it. Still, if the prodigious economic expansion of the postwar era, with federal deficits soaring eventually to more than \$50 billion a year, could scarcely touch the disadvantaged millions who comprise the nation's poor, it is not clear what level of

economic growth and government spending would do so.

Environmentalists argue that the country has already entered an ecological crisis that demands a government which can respond to the challenges of scarcity with a new creed that most Americans ultimately can share. Some writers wonder how the free market can resolve questions of pollution and ecological catastrophe, or of resource and energy depletion, when supply and demand are geared to the gratification of immediate wants. Reduced growth might reduce industrial jobs, but some economists point to areas where national needs can command energies and resources no longer required in other economic production. Many tasks in environmental recovery would be labor-intensive—the rehabilitation of forests, the restoration of the soil, and the reclamation of polluted bodies of water. The rebuilding of the American railway system would require an incalculable human effort. The roadbeds have deteriorated so badly, one writer observed, that freight cars have become derailed while standing still. Labor-intensive employment will always be less harmful to the environment than that which relies on heavy technology. Not all Americans are convinced that technology has created a better, more humane, and satisfactory civilization; further, any advanced technological society will become increasingly vulnerable to accident and sabotage.

Consumption and waste seem wedded to the endless exploitation of cheap fuel and raw materials. Cheap oil was the foundation of the modern consumer economy. During the 1950's, and again in the following decade, the world consumed more oil than had been consumed in all history before 1950. The energy problem was created simply by the exponential growth of demand against a limited supply of an essential commodity. Rising prices restrain the use of the scarce resources and redouble the efforts of investors, scientists, and businessmen to find cheaper substitutes. Such avenues might postpone the need for limited growth; they

cannot eliminate it. Some experts predict that world oil resources will be depleted in 50 years. What technological miracle will substitute for the massive reliance on oil is not clear. The known supplies of uranium can generate the nation's electricity for scarcely another half century. Coal remains a major source of energy, but its use as a replacement for oil and nuclear power would require prodigious levels of production. There is no clear answer to the energy problem that does not begin with the need for restricted consumption.

Countless Americans are troubled less by the underconsumption of the poor than by the overindulgence of the affluent. The US, with a mere six percent of the world's population, consumes one-third of the world's energy. At present growth rates, the country's energy needs will double in 10 years. Some experts estimate, however, that 50 percent of the fuel consumed in the US could be saved by greater efficiency. Most citizens, at least those measured by opinion polls, question the morality of the country's heavy consumption of energy, raw materials, and food. Foreign observers join the chorus of criticism. Many of the young, having made a conscious choice to limit their expenditures and uses of energy, have discarded their automobiles and have taken up bicycling and walking. James Reston of *The New York Times* doubts that further shortages of gasoline or the loss of other trinkets of a consumer economy would be injurious to the nation. What Americans need are more shortages:

We need to cut down, slow up, stay home, run around the block, eat vegetable soup, call up old friends and read a book once in a while. Americans have always been able to handle austerity and even adversity. Prosperity's what's been doing us in.

This new creed assumes that growth and technology are subject to social control, and that human experience based on restrained tastes can be rewarding.

Similarly, the US faces the challenge of a declining role on the world scene. Until the

1960's the country confronted questions for which economic and military power seemed to furnish simple and generally satisfactory answers. While the American defense effort underwrote Europe's stability, the new international agencies for trade and monetary stabilization, all supported by the American economy, contributed to unprecedented world prosperity. The destruction of Germany and Japan and the decline of Britain and France as world powers enhanced and facilitated the American role. This development permitted the US, with little opposition, to exert influence in areas far exceeding the limits which the world normally imposed upon a major power in modern times. The expansion itself assumed a dangerous world and a monolithic enemy centering on the Kremlin.

Long before the 1970's the comparative power of the US, as measured by almost any standard, had declined markedly. In the same period the comparatively simple cold war environment in which power was the essence of policy had evaporated. With its disappearance the nation's international authority receded in like measure. By fighting in Vietnam, Washington perpetuated for more than a decade the notion of effective global leadership, based on power and the will to use it. But in that struggle the American commitment to resist communism in all of its forms reached a dead end. After Saigon's fall in 1975 the US remained the world's leading power, but now the troublesome issues that captured the headlines challenged few traditional American interests and thus discouraged the exertion of will. Meg Greenfield, writing in *Newsweek* on 13 February 1978, saw the dilemma facing the country.

So what *are* we going to do about it if the rulers of Cambodia embark on a policy of national genocide, if the Cubans take up (Soviet) arms in Africa, if the Saudis lower production or increase the price of oil, if Southern Africa moves toward all-out racial war, if the Indians continue to build nuclear explosives, if the Western Europeans vote Communists into office? Is there anything

we can do in an era in which we have even been admonished for expressing the hope that Italy remain a democracy? If that is regarded as an act of aggression, it tells you something about our role as a 'superpower' in the post-Vietnam world.

The US had reached that stage where it could neither admit that what happened abroad was not its concern nor act effectively when it insisted that it was.

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger caught the meaning of the changing times in their new approaches to relations with Russia and China. Behind the policy decisions of 1971 and 1972 was the realization that America's global posture had become too expensive and perhaps was no longer necessary. Yet these decisions sustained the country's commitments to all Third World governments that claimed to be anticommunist, whatever the importance of those governments to American security. President Carter's relaxed attitude toward possible communist movements in individual countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America encouraged a major reversal of policy. At Notre Dame University in May 1977, he declared, "Being confident of our own future, we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear." No longer would the US oppose Vietnam's membership in the UN. American embassies in Latin America would cease to be the bastions of dictators who had terrorized their opponents with electronic torture. The Carter Administration refused to adopt policies designed to counter the Soviet or Cuban presence in such African and Middle Eastern countries as Angola, Ethiopia, South Yemen, and (during the pre-invasion period, at least) Afghanistan. At the same time the administration completed the normalization of relations with China and maintained a moderate attitude toward the Soviet Union itself. Still, however, Carter could not prevent the growth of Soviet power from becoming a major issue in American politics.

As the President responded to this challenge with larger military budgets and

recriminations against the Russians for waging an aggressive struggle in Africa, critics challenged the fears that underwrote his new toughness. They reminded the country that Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, and Spain had abandoned their possessions in Africa because they found them to be economically unprofitable and impossible to govern. How others could succeed where the Europeans had failed was thus not clear. It seemed incredible that African countries which had sought independence for so long would willingly become puppets of Cuba or the Soviet Union. Most Africans could detect nothing objectionable in Soviet behavior, for the Russians and Cubans had gone only where they were invited. "Let both sides, imperialists and dependents," advised columnist Jonathan Power, "find out for themselves what the cost is." When New York Senator Daniel Moynihan and former Secretary Kissinger charged that the US should not have permitted the Cubans to enter Ethiopia, *The New York Times* editorialized:

One man says threaten anything, no matter what the chances of making good on the threat. The other says never mind the particular stakes or possibilities, in geopolitics everything is tied to everything else. . . . There, we submit, walks the ghost of Vietnam. . . . Whatever the stakes on the ground, or the possibilities, for geopolitical reasons Hanoi had to be stopped. . . . To resurrect that logic against a President who seeks new techniques for applying American influence around the world is a dangerous game indeed.

Far better, said the *Times*, to portray the risks and costs to Moscow. Experience suggested that the Kremlin would be no more successful than Washington had been in converting Ethiopia into a bulwark against anything.

In many respects the nation's record at home and abroad has been superb, but still the unanswered challenges confronting the American people are profound. Those who

expect greater resolution in government complain of the absence of leadership. Unfortunately the perceived failure of leadership is only symbolic of the pervading disagreement among Americans on questions of national purpose. No government can lead a people that does not know where it wants to go. Not one issue before the country—not even inflation and unemployment, which impinge directly on the public's economic well-being—has created the necessary consensus on a proper national response. For most Americans the challenges of the 1970's and 1980's remain abstractions of no truly pressing concern, though recent events in Iran and Afghanistan may possibly change this insouciance. The energy debate has less to do with technology, exploration, and conservation than with the protection of individual and group interests under the pressure of contemplated, not immediate, shortages. The average American's aversion to the cost of environmental reconstruction as expressed in increased taxes, public restraints, and reduced standards of living appears greater than his aversion to social ills and a slowly diminishing environment. The interests that matter are narrow. "I can't remember a time in Washington," observed Meg Greenfield in the 24 April 1978 issue of *Newsweek*, "when interest-group issues and politics so dominated events. And every day the units of protest and concern seem to be subdividing into even smaller and more specialized groupings." The decline of the political parties as purveyors of national issues reflects simply the pulverization of the electorate into small competing interest groups.

In the absence of a consensus to guide them, both Congress and the executive branch respond most acutely to those with high expectations who are organized to define and defend their policy preferences. Often national decisions emerge from compromises worked out among interest groups that appear to have special legitimacy. By definition, consensus becomes not general agreement on national needs, but agreement among those in positions of power who establish national policy with a minimum of

public involvement and controversy. The ease whereby federal officials and the spokesmen of industry and labor arrive at basic decisions suggests the existence of a broad mutual interest among them. Seldom does a congressional majority choose to oppose such organized power. Widespread public acceptance of private or corporate influences on congressional and bureaucratic decisions is underwritten by the fact that the benefits, whatever their magnitude, are always specific, whereas the costs to society are distributed so widely that often they comprise no perceptible burden at all. If the chief goals of most Americans remain convenience, comfort, and tranquility, it is not strange that they prefer the prevailing tendencies in national life to costly forms of social and economic restraint.

Only some agreement on national purpose can counter the dominant moods of satisfaction, complacency, and hopelessness that sustain the power of organized minorities in American life. And there can be no national purpose without the subordination of the most narrow and potentially destructive personal and corporate ambitions to a broad concern for society as a whole. For Russian exile Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, speaking at Harvard in June 1978, the major defect in American life was the tendency of citizens to be bound only by law, not by conscience or morality. "One almost never sees voluntary self-restraint," he said. "Everybody operates at the extreme limit of the legal framework." President Carter recognized the problem when he admonished the nation: "We favor sacrifice, so long as someone else goes first. We want to abolish tax loopholes, unless it's our loophole. We denounce special interests, except for our own." But the Carter Administration has done little to encourage self-restraint, while it repeatedly has fallen away from national purposes to satisfy constituent pressures, yielding to their claims group by group. Having lost confidence in the capacity of such unstatesmanlike conduct to deal effectively with matters of general

concern such as energy and inflation, countless Americans have developed a "looter's mentality" to get what they can while there is yet time. Those unable to protect their interests have simply discounted the government's commitment to their welfare.

Any public effective enough to direct government toward some national purpose can exist only as some politician engenders that public. The public of the media and the pollsters is not a political body; it has neither a voice nor an institution through which it can act. "The making and remaking of a genuine public, as distinct from the phantom public of the media," wrote British journalist Henry Fairlie in the December 1977 issue of *Harper's*, "is the highest task of the politician, whether his constituency is a district or a state or the country." Political leadership alone can forge a collection of individuals with many special concerns into a civic entity that can act in behalf of public purposes. But a politician, to be effective, requires some confidence in his or her leadership role, and a badly splintered public

offers no assurance of adequate support. Benjamin Barber has defined the necessary role of the public in a functioning democracy:

It is no good for us to go looking for leaders; we must first rediscover citizens. It will not help to indict the faceless system if we are without common purpose that can be used to challenge facelessness and turn systems back into servants. If America is to have leaders to follow, it will have to agree upon goals. If we wish to have leaders to follow, we will have to show them the way.

The consensus required for fundamental change will come either as the result of an intelligent examination of alternative courses or in the wake of catastrophe. To avoid the latter the American people, with their leaders, must recognize the fact that the new scientific, technological, and financial revolution has changed the world faster than the people who inhabit it. Living amid restraints and shortages which they cannot escape, they face the necessity of learning to live with less.

