REAFFIRMATION AND SUBVERSION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Walter R. Fisher

The 1972 presidential election is over, a president has been re-elected, the American experiment continues. In these facts there is cause for hope, if not celebration. In these facts there is also cause for lament, if not despair. The principal cause for concern regarding this year's election is not the individual acts throughout the campaign, but what they symbolically implied. They implied, along with the actual election, a significant statement as to how Americans want to conceive of themselves, the particular myth they want to live by. It was clear at least by the time the Democratic and Republican slates were settled, however compromised they were by how they were determined and would be supported by their constituencies, that the campaign contest would be a struggle between rival definitions of the American Dream. It is from the perspective of this struggle that I shall examine the presidential campaign of 1972. My purpose is not to attempt to account for the outcome of the election by analyzing such traditional factors as party membership, organization, or funding, but to observe the larger rhetorical meaning, the symbolic message of the election and its foreshadowing of the future.

With one reservation, regarding the equity of the election contest, to be discussed later, the reelection of Richard Nixon may be viewed not as a mandate nor even an overwhelming endorsement of his record in domestic and foreign affairs. Those who voted for him were not categorically approving his stands on amnesty, busing, economic issues, or his handling of the Vietnam situation; they were indicating a preference for that aspect of the American Dream that Nixon personifies, an image more in harmony with their present, predominate self-concept than that represented by Senator McGovern. In a parallel fashion, those who voted for the Senator were not declaring their commitment to all of his positions on the major disputed questions of the campaign, including welfare, taxes, military spending, or even the war; they were registering their preference for that aspect of the American Dream that Senator McGovern's candidacy symbolized.

If one conceives of the American Dream as a monistic myth, it will seem odd to suggest that both Mr. Nixon and Mr. McGovern epitomize that dream. Actually, the American Dream is two dreams, or, more accurately, it is two myths, myths that we all share in some degree or other and which, when taken together, characterize America as a culture. "Myths are," as Joseph Campbell observed, "public dreams. Dreams are private myths. Myths are vehicles of communication between the conscious and the unconscious, just as dreams

Mr. Fisher is Professor of Speech Communication at the University of Southern California. Another version of his paper was presented at the November 1972 Western Speech Communication Association Convention in Honolulu.

are." Their functions are to provide meaning, identity, a comprehensive understandable image of the world, and to support the social order. Without dreams or myths, a man or nation is without a past, present, or future.

In the context of this analysis, Clinton Rossiter’s observation regarding the relationship of the presidency and myth is most pertinent; he wrote: "The final greatness of the Presidency lies in the truth that it is not just an office of incredible power but a breeding ground of indestructible myth." Abraham Lincoln, our most legendary, charismatic president, embodied both myths of the American Dream: the rags to riches, materialistic myth of individual success and the egalitarian moralistic myth of brotherhood. Perhaps the reason why neither of this year’s candidates had charisma is that they tended to reflect exclusively one myth of the American Dream: Mr. Nixon the materialistic and Mr. McGovern the moralistic myth.

Each of these myths has its own rhetorical power and potential for destruction. The materialistic myth is grounded on the puritan work ethic and relates to the values of effort, persistence, "playing the game," initiative, self-reliance, achievement, and success. It undergirds competition as the way of determining personal worth, the free enterprise system, and the notion of freedom, defined as the freedom from controls, regulations, or constraints that hinder the individual’s striving for ascendancy in the social-economic hierarchy of society. Unlike the moralistic myth, the materialistic myth does not require a regeneration or sacrifice of self; rather, it promises that if one employs one’s energies and talents to the fullest, one will reap the rewards of status, wealth, and power. The materialistic code assumes that one will pursue one’s self-interest, not deny it for the betterment of someone else.

The materialistic myth is susceptible to subversion from several angles. The myth is not inherently persuasive to those who are convinced that it does not work for them. The myth is not believed by those who have tried to live by it and found in practice that it is flawed by favoritism and corruption. The myth is suspect with those who have abided by its values but were troubled by the avarice, resentment, envy, and vindictiveness that often accompany its manifestation in real life situations. And it is naturally opposed by those who place highest value on moral rather than material goods. In naked form, the materialistic myth is compassionless and self-centered; it encourages manipulation and leads to exploitation.

The moralistic myth is well expressed in basic tenets of the Declaration of Independence: that “all men are created equal,” men “are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” “among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” governments are instituted to secure these rights, and governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” These tenets naturally involve the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for the dignity and worth of each and every individual. In turn, these val-

---

2 Cited in Time, 17 Jan. 1972, p. 50. This statement of the nature of myth and dream reflects similar expressions to be found in various of Campbell’s works. For instance, see The Hero With a Thousand Faces (New York: Bollingen Series XVII, Pantheon Books, 1949), p. 19, where he writes: “Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche.”


ues sustain the continuing endeavors to invest all public institutions with guarantees that all men will be treated equally and, in addition, serve to inspire cooperative efforts to benefit those who are less fortunate than others. Where the materialistic myth involves a concept of freedom that emphasizes the freedom to do as one pleases, the moralistic myth tends toward the idea of freedom that stresses the freedom to be as one conceives himself.

The rhetorical weaknesses of the moralistic values become apparent when they are seen in conflict with materialistic values, when they are the dominant motives of rival proposals, programs, or presidential candidates. The weakness is twofold. First, whether moralistic values are used to promote altruistic schemes, reform policies, or revolutionary movements, their appeal is to our better nature; however, that appeal is predicated on the arousal of guilt for what we are in respect to what we should be. Put another way: in order to be moved by moralistic appeals, one must condemn himself in some way or other. For instance, those who wanted to vote for McGovern had to concur, at least tacitly, in his view of the immorality of the Vietnam war and admit by implication their guilt for its continuance. On the other hand, those who preferred to vote for Nixon did not have to concede the immorality of the war or guilt for its conduct; on the contrary, their vote would signify loyalty and patriotism and perhaps serve as a way of relieving them of any sense of guilt they might have felt.

There is a tendency to derogate advocates of moralistic causes and campaigns. They are accused of taking a “holier-than-thou” attitude, of being self-righteous, or as Ernest Conine described Mr. McGovern four days before the election: “McGovern comes across as a scold, and the electorate is not much in the mood for scolds—particularly a humorless, self-righteous scold who portrays himself as the embodiment of virtue and his opponent as the embodiment of evil.”

Second, moralistic values are also weakened by their association with movements to produce fundamental social and political change. They are especially evident in movements of “liberation,” liberation being a god-term variant of “freedom.” Because of this association, moralistic values not only engender feelings of guilt, they also tend to arouse fear and feelings of threat. The rejection of McGovern must be considered a rejection of what some have called the “movement” in America, what Jean-François Revel, author of Without Marx and Jesus, has called the revolution. There is significant overlap in the “hot issues” of the current American “insurrection” identified by Revel and the key positions taken by McGovern throughout the campaign. Among the “hot issues” named by Revel are these:

. . . the black revolt; . . . the rejection by young people of exclusively economic and technical social goals; . . . the acceptance of guilt for poverty; the growing demand for equality; the rejection of an authoritarian culture in favor of a critical and diversified culture that is basically new, rather than adopted from the old cultural stockpile; the rejection both of the spread of American power abroad and of foreign policy; and a determination that the natural environment is more important than commercial profit.

Seen as a spokesman for the “movement,” McGovern, as is the case with . . .

---

5 The most eloquent expression of the moralistic myth in recent times is Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream.”

6 Los Angeles Times, 3 November 1972, part 2, p. 11. All references to the Los Angeles Times are to the morning edition.

other advocates of moralistic programs of social-political change, aroused feelings of guilt, fear, and threat; and, furthermore, was susceptible to the traditional charges made against such leaders. The chief terms of derision are: "radical," "utopian," and, perhaps the most persuasive term for most Americans, "unrealistic."

Although the American Dream is two myths and a person may exemplify or strongly prefer one over the other, it is important to recognize that no American can entirely escape the whole dream. There is a sense in which the two-fold nature of the Dream leads to schizophrenia. When one of the myths tends to dominate, whether in the culture or in an individual, the other myth is always hauntingly there in the background. Insofar as one votes for himself in a presidential election, one also votes against himself.  

In dichotomizing the American Dream into materialistic and moralistic myths, there is danger that one may assume that there is virtue in one and only vice in the other. But this is an inaccurate view. Both are based on traditional American values, especially religious values. Max Lerner, for instance, saw Mr. Nixon and Mr. McGovern as basing their platforms on "different elements from the Calvinist ethos"; Nixon the hard work, striving element and McGovern the idealistic element. It would seem that in the 1972 presidential election that McGovern preached what Americans profess in principle and that Nixon preached what most Americans practice in their daily lives.

The author of _The Symbolic Uses of Politics_, Murray Edelman, observes:

> "Through the taking of roles of publics whose support they need, public officials achieve and maintain their positions of leadership. The official who correctly gauges the response of publics to his acts, speeches, and gestures makes those behaviors significant symbols, evoking common meanings for his audience and for himself and so shaping his further actions as to reassure his public and in this sense 'represent' them."  

10 The role taken by Mr. Nixon was to reaffirm the materialistic myth; the role taken by Mr. McGovern was to reaffirm the moralistic myth. While reaffirmation necessarily implies rejection of other positions, in politics one cannot merely reaffirm, one must also subvert the position of one's opponent in order to win. Thus the central message of the 1972 presidential election concerns the reaffirmation and subversion of the American Dream.

That Mr. Nixon and Mr. McGovern saw the election as a contest between their rival perceptions of the American Dream is manifest throughout their campaign communications. Their views were evident from the outset, from statements in their acceptance addresses. Mr. Nixon declared that he spoke "not as a partisan of party . . . but as a partisan of principles that unite us." He asked that voters join him "as members of a new American majority bound together by . . . common ideals . . . " on the basis of what Americans "believe in their hearts," on "principles" he believed "should determine" America's "future." He declared his faith in the "American system," its cardinal principle apparently being

10 (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 188.

11 The nature of discourse that functions to affirm (give birth, gain acceptance) and to purify (correct, cleanse) as well as to reaffirm (reanimate, revitalize) and to subvert (undermine, discredit) is explored in "A Motive View of Communication," 131-159.

that a person should get what he works for and work for what he gets." The entire theme of McGovern's speech was that voters should join him in calling America "home to the founding ideals that nourished" the nation "from its beginning." He said: "Come home to the affirmation that we have a dream."14

The fundamental issue in the presidential election of 1972 was whether we should reaffirm—in the person of Richard Nixon—the materialistic myth of the American Dream and the kind of change he would enact; or reaffirm—in the person of George McGovern—the moralistic myth and the kind of change he would bring about.15 As Nixon's chief surrogate, John Connolly, expressed it in a television spot: the election would "confirm or deny" where America would go, the kind of America we want to live in. The outcome of the election indicates that more people believed Nixon's statement that: "The choice in this election is not between radical change and no change. The choice is between change that works and change that won't work";16 than those who were inspired by McGovern's perception that: "We are entering a new period of important, hopeful change in America comparable to the political ferment released in the years of Jefferson, Jackson and Roosevelt."17

Nixon enhanced his embodiment of the materialistic myth in two strategic ways. First, he traded on the symbolic, persuasive potential of the office of the presidency. By running on the theme of

"Reelect the President," Nixon borrowed from the inherent credibility of the office. Since the office reflects values such as power, pragmatism, productivity, and achievement, Nixon's identification with the office strengthened his identification with the materialistic myth. Identifying with the presidency also aided Nixon in overcoming a natural limitation of a materialistic stance—that it is ahistorical and its basic principle is expediency. Identifying with the presidency enabled him to argue with some force that he should be continued, as the office is continued, as an inevitable course in American history.

Second, Nixon reinforced his materialistic image by emphasizing the practical, realistic accomplishments of his term in office. The strategy was set in motion at the Republican convention where a long line of speakers glorified the Nixon record and where Nixon himself stated: "In asking for your support I shall not dwell on the record of our Administration, which has been praised, perhaps too generously, by other speakers at this convention."18 He went on then to do what he said he would not do; eighty per cent of the speech reviews the accomplishments and goals of the Nixon Administration. Although Mr. Nixon made a series of ten radio broadcasts, his message was communicated primarily by surrogates, including thirty-five official and countless unofficial spokesmen.19 Consistent with the materialistic myth, the argument in foreign affairs was that Nixon was providing historical leadership; his trips to Russia and China were recounted and his Viet Nam initiatives were cited as proof that he was going to achieve "peace with honor." It was contended, on the domestic scene, that he

15 Louis Harris, "Nixon Not Afraid to Take Action," San Gabriel Valley Tribune, 30 Oct. 1972, section B, p. 3. All references to the Tribune are to the evening edition.
was successfully exercising control over the economy and was on the right side of the busing, amnesty, and welfare issues.

Although reaffirmation of the materialistic myth implied subversion of the moralistic myth, the major effort of Republican presidential supporters was not reaffirmation but subversion, attempts to undermine the credibility of McGovern and the feasibility of his programs. McGovern was ridiculed for his "moralizing" and called inconsistent, indecisive, irrational, dangerous, unrealistic, and elitist; his platform was called unAmerican, radical, and paternalistic. Mr. Nixon's particular approach was to ignore McGovern by name and to characterize his programs negatively without responding to his arguments or appeals. Nixon's method is revealed by his Labor Day message. Without mentioning him, Nixon asserted that McGovern's economic proposals constituted a "welfare ethic," challenging the traditional "work ethic" of America. He claimed that McGovern's "welfare ethic" ignored "a human value essential to every worker's success—the incentive of reward"; it "was a dangerous detour away from the traditional value of measuring a person on the basis of ability"; and its advocates "spend their time discussing how to cut up the pie we have—but those who believe in the work ethic want to bake a bigger pie, and I am for baking a bigger pie."20 Such attacks served to show the realistic, American character of Nixon's positions in contrast to the fanciful, alien nature of McGovern's moralistic proposals. They undoubtedly contributed to McGovern's credibility problems throughout the campaign. But whether they were more influential than his handling of the Eagleton matter, or his economic and Viet Nam policies is open to debate.

McGovern's basic strategy was to per-

sonify the moralistic myth. Where Nixon identified with the office of the Presidency and extolled the materialistic values and accomplishments of his administration, McGovern identified with presidential heroes, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Kennedy, and championed the cause of the "people." Where Nixon's materialistic position had appeal for those who were, by and large, satisfied with the course of recent events, McGovern's "populist," idealistic orientation attracted those disillusioned with the materialistic thrust of our times and those who felt disenfranchised from the "system" which leads to materialistic rewards. As McGovern realized that his proposals to reorder American priorities in regard to the economy, minority rights, military spending, and welfare were not being received well, that they were seen as idealistic rather than realistic schemes, his only recourse was to run on the essence of the myth he represented—morality. By reaffirming American idealism, the moral-democratic spirit of the country, he took a position not only constructive of his candidacy and the moralistic myth, but also subversive of Nixon and the materialistic myth. A typical example of McGovern's theme throughout the election comes from his Wall Street address; he said: "I believe the greatness of America lies in its capacity to renew itself by reasserting from time to time those enduring ideals of human dignity and brotherhood with which we began. I find those ideals fully compatible with good jobs for our workers, good services for our people, compassion for the poor, the old, and the afflicted—solid, socially useful investment opportunity for our business community."21 Late in the campaign, McGovern was asked if he saw the election as involving a crusade of good against evil,
and he replied "That's exactly the way I see it." During a speech that same day, he stated that the central issue was whether Americans were "going to stand for decency, for equality, for justice and these old-fashioned ideals that provide the underpinning of society, or whether we're going to vote for four more years of . . . manipulation and deceit and deception that has cursed this country since January 1969."\(^{22}\)

McGovern tried to subvert the Nixon "myth" at first on the corruption issue, by attempting to prove that the materialistic myth was only working for the few. On September 24 in Sioux City, for instance, he asked: "do we want a government of the special interest, by the special interest and for the special interest or do we want a government, in Lincoln's phrase, of the people, by the people and for the people."\(^{23}\) As the campaign wore on, and his frustration grew, McGovern became more sharp in his attack. In mid-October, he told an audience in Detroit that the election was a "struggle between our better impulses and our more selfish, baser instincts," that he hoped "American people do care, that they are disturbed about saboteurs, about disruption of the political process, about . . . the demeaning of the Supreme Court, deliberate efforts to intimidate the free press, bypassing Congress . . .," and that the most "important single question before this country" was "the total erosion of political, moral, and public values. . . ."\(^{24}\) McGovern's charge at the end of the campaign, that Nixon's peace move was a "deliberate conniving deception," must have seemed strident even to some of his supporters.

Observations on the larger significance of the 1972 presidential election must be tempered by the fact that it was not an equitable contest between the candidates or the aspects of the American Dream that they represent. Disregarding what they stood for, Nixon clearly held the advantage throughout the campaign. First, he was the incumbent President seeking reelection, a position having inherent strengths. For instance, unlike his opponent, he was known by virtually everyone from the outset; no matter what he did, he was newsworthy; and, very important, he had the power to create events that could undermine or coopt positions taken by his opponent.\(^{25}\) A second reason why Nixon held the advantage in the campaign was money. By October 26th, the Nixon reelection committee had spent $36.05 million, while the McGovern committees had spent about half as much, $18.47 million.\(^{26}\) The third reason for Nixon's advantage concerns unity, organization, and strategic errors. Republicans working for the President had unity, organization, and made few, if any, crucial errors. McGovern did not lead a unified effort, had organizational problems, and committed several errors, not the least of which was the handling of the Eagleton matter.

What, then, is the larger rhetorical meaning, the symbolic message of the election and its foreshadowing of the future? The message does not relate as much to the issues of Viet Nam, economic policies, amnesty, busing, or welfare so much as it concerns what we have reaffirmed and subverted. Elections are rituals; by participating in the election we have participated in the warranting of its message. Despite the uneveness of the contest between Nixon and Mc-

\(^{22}\) San Gabriel Valley Tribune, 30 Oct. 1972, section A, p. 3.
\(^{26}\) Los Angeles Times, 4 Nov. 1972, pt. 1, p. 29.
Govern, one may hazard several hypotheses. The overwhelming endorsement of Nixon would appear to signify difficulties present and ahead for liberation movements in America. It suggests increased polarization, a heightening of what Samuel Lubell has called the “hidden crisis” in American politics.27

Recognizing that only 56 percent of the electorate voted, the election may portend a widening and deepening of disenchantment with politics and the American Dream. Even for those who voted, as time goes on and sober reflection sets in, some sense of uneasiness must develop, knowing that they either denied their moralistic or their materialistic impulses. The gravest danger that the election may have fostered is an increased loss of faith in the American Dream, the whole dream. If we neglect our moral ideals, America is headed pell mell toward 1984. If it is true that Nixon and McGovern did a better job of subversion than reaffirmation, if the nation becomes disheartened with both its moral ideals and its materialistic values, America will lose its identity. And as Jesuit philosopher John Courtney Murray observed: “The complete loss of one’s identity is, with all propriety of theological definition, hell. In diminished forms it is insanity. And it would not be well for the American giant to go lumbering about the world today, lost and mad.”28 America needs heroes and rituals, presidents and elections, to signify her whole meaning—moralistic and materialistic; she requires symbols that her citizens can identify with and can gain sanction from for what they are as individuals and what they represent as a nation. The American experiment goes on but we may very well lament the disenchantment.

