

For II Manifesto
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Pain -- and a Plea
a comment on the 1984 election

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It's hard to write about the 1984 election without pain. It's bad enough when powerful rulers impose war and degradation on their people. It feels more hopeless still when the people of a country themselves ratify that imposition. The reelection of Ronald Reagan will constitute an endorsement by the American people of his Administration's criminal attacks on other countries and its cruelty to the less fortunate at home.

Three factors shaped the ballance of forces in this election. First is the collapse of establishment liberalism. Economic depression and failure in international competition have destroyed the traditional industrial economy. Union strength is at its lowest ebb in half-a-century; only about 15% of workers are in unions, and many of them are disaffected from union policy and leadership. At the same time, the sector of large capital which believed in responsible management of the national economy and social condition has been seriously weakened and politically paralyzed. The contradictions in establishment liberalism reached the breaking point in the Carter Administration, as the attempt to manage unmanageable economic and international crises led to a public disaffection which Mondale inherits today.

Second is the rise of the political Right. The Right was a powerful though not dominant force in the Republican Party from the end of World War II well into the 1960s, but in the later years of the Vietnam war it went into suspended animation. In

the late 1970s it started to revive, based on a variety of constituencies which responded with hostility to the changing roles of women, the decline of traditional sexual mores, the ethic of social responsibility for the poor, the demands for equality of blacks and other minorities, and the effort to adapt to the decline in America's monopoly of world political, economic and military power. Furthermore, four years of Reagan as "educator" has inculcated in a new generation of young people conservative values of individual economic advancement, scorn toward those who don't come out on top in life's race, and a nationalist belief in America's moral and military superiority.

Third is Reagan's ability to win support among the majority who are not part of the Right and do not support its policies. Ronald Reagan knows less about the world, but more about the American psyche, than any American politician in modern memory. His long career of touring the American hinterland as a speaker and "personality," combined with the professional actor's ability to project sincerity, have made it possible for him to massage an American ego wounded by its contact with reality. Most Americans are less interested right now in fairness, justice, or democracy than they are in having a strong leader who can assert their national interests in a world perceived as dangerous and irrational; Reagan exploits that desire brilliantly by presenting himself as a TV version of such a leader, while in fact standing aloof from any situation where he can't win the kind of victory his overwhelming power allowed him in Grenada.

The press, and especially the TV networks, have contributed to the revival of America's nationalism and its willful blindness

to reality. Three private networks control TV news; they are highly profitable, but also worry about their own legitimacy. Well into the Vietnam War, they regarded themselves as allies of the government, "part of the team." During the 1970s, as America reacted to its disaster of Vietnam, the press began to feel some responsibility to provide critical perspectives on government action. But the networks felt tremendously vulnerable in such a role, fearing a "patriotic" backlash from the public. Today they have returned to their previous role as uncritical spokesmen for government policy and celebrators of the national leadership.

From the point of view of a rational imperialism, Reagan's policies have been a disaster. The ability of the U.S. to impose its will in Europe, the Middle East, and South America has already been seriously weakened, and its ability to co-manage world trouble spots with the Soviet Union has been eliminated. But rational imperialism is only one of the factors influencing U.S. politics, and at the moment jingoism and macho posturing seem to have a larger impact on policy.

Reagan's policies are of course shot full of contradictions. There is a limit to how long the U.S. can sustain an economic expansion on the basis of vast military spending financed through high-interest borrowing abroad. There are also sharp limits on how effective U.S. military force can actually be in suppressing regimes it dislikes abroad -- the U.S. was helpless against Islamic and leftist currents in Lebanon, and in four years Reagan has been unable to "clean out" Nicaragua or El Salvador. Future economic and international failures are

inevitable. But so far Reagan, far from being hurt by failures, has been able to capitalize on them.

Reagan will be far more dangerous in a second term. He has created a popular base for a renewed and expanded American interventionism. He has undermined every form of opposition to his policies, and has laid the basis for a much more repressive regime through administrative and court appointments and a revival of domestic surveillance by the FBI, CIA, and military intelligence agencies. There are few limits on what he may try to do other than a vague popular wariness of becoming entangled in a bloody foreign involvement like Vietnam.

As an American, I can only end with a plea. European opposition to U.S. nuclear weapons, domination of NATO, interventionism, and international bullying is one of the few forces that can limit Reagan's deprivations. The European disarmament movement has been a prime force activating the anti-Reaganite peace movement in the U.S. And the fear of loss of U.S. hegemony in Europe makes the more rational elements in the American establishment wary of Reagan's adventurism. As "the last bloody remnant" struggle here against the sanctification of greed and militarism, we will look for our inspiration and our comfort to those Europeans who likewise refuse to go along with the Reaganite juggernaut.

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