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Innocence regained: looking Forward by looking back

1980 marked a major turning point in our history. It signified the beginning of a trend that may irrevocably alter all aspects of American life. It is in a trend of returning to our former selves, of going "backwards" so to speak. To fully understand what is happening, we have to step back and take a broad historical perspective.

Throughout our first 150 years, America was a predominantly rural society. There was a strong belief in individual enterprise and the work ethic. Horatio Alger stories of rags to riches were important parts of the American mentality: all that was needed to acquire wealth was hard work and perseverance. We felt we were special in the world — we had a manifest destiny — whatever was American was necessarily good. Coming at home and abroad were reduced to good vs. evil. We always wore white hats, the other side wore black, and there were no shades of gray. Everyone believed that right would create might and always triumph over evil.

This innocent view of life permeated our society. One could see it in the politics, the arts, the writings, the culture, even in the school books of the day. These assumptions formed the foundation of American life.

This naive America was shattered during the last fifty years. The great depression destroyed the work ethic — one could not become rich, no matter how hard one is willing to work, if there are no jobs. World War II showed that the world is too dangerous a place for a peaceful, isolationist democracy. The McCarthyism of the fifties ruined any faith in the fairness of family importance, the work ethic, and the industrialism that was so constant.

The concept of the environment as master of his own fate. No man was longer regarded as good, decent fellow. He had the Horatio Alger appeal of the self-made man. He touched basic Jacksonian yearnings for a democracy of the common man ("making the American Government as good as its people"). He believed, like the rest of us, that anyone could govern — all that was required was honesty and common sense. He believed we were reindustrializing, and the entrepreneur is increasingly revered. The materialism that was so condemned in the 60's is now being praised. Even Jerry Rubin is now a stockbroker.

Perhaps the single best example of this trend was the election of 1980. Ronald Reagan, himself a traditional values. People did not vote for him because they were for Kemp-Koresh or against Sati II. Indeed, they did not understand the significance of these issues. They voted for him because they admired his ideals and vision of America.

Jimmy Carter got elected in 1976 in exactly the same way. After the trauma of Watergate, Carter presented himself as a good, decent fellow. He had the Horatio Alger appeal of the self-made man. He touched basic Jacksonian yearnings for a democracy of the common man ("making the American Government as good as its people"). He believed, like the rest of us, that anyone could govern — all that was required was honesty and common sense. Hence, we got a government of good boys from Georgia. Later, when it became apparent that Jimmy was not going to restore our former selves, he lost popularity and was booted out in favor of someone who would. Elections are not the only manifestation of this trend. One can see it all around us: Religion is on the upswing, perhaps to the point of becoming a Third Great Awakening. Many economists are advocating laissez-faire policies and denouncing the Keynesian concepts that formed much of the basis of modern economics. Profit is no longer a dirty word. More and more advertised goods and services are geared to the up and coming business executive (special banking services, business magazines, small computers, etc.). We are reindustrializing, and the entrepreneur is increasingly revered. The materialism that was so condemned in the 60's is now being praised. Even Jerry Rubin is now a stockbroker.

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