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Statesmanship and Its Betrayal

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Mark Helprin was raised on the Hudson and in the British West Indies. After receiving degrees from Harvard College and Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, he did post-graduate work at the University of Oxford and served in the British merchant navy, the Israeli infantry, and the Israeli air force.

He was published in the *New Yorker* for almost a quarter of a century, and his stories and essays have appeared in the *Atlantic*, the *New Criterion*, *Commentary*, the *New York Times*, and many other publications in the United States and abroad.



Contributing editor of the *Wall*

Street Journal, senior fellow of the Hudson Institute, and fellow of the American Academy in Rome, Mr. Helprin was advisor in defense and foreign relations to Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole. Translated into more than a dozen languages, his books include *A Dove of the East and Other Stories*, *Refiner's Fire*, *Ellis Island and Other Stories*, *Winter's Tale*, *Memoir from Antproof Case*, and (with illustrations by Chris Van Allsburg) *Swan Lake*, *A City in Winter*, and *The Veil of Snows*. He is best known for *A Soldier of the Great War*. ♣

In February, best-selling novelist and Hudson Institute Senior Fellow Mark Helprin made a rare public appearance during Hillsdale College's Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Heroes for a New Generation and a New Century," in Scottsdale, Arizona. His remarks addressed one of the central issues of our time: the qualities we must look for in our leaders, who must rise above the short-term and selfish concerns of politicians to become true statesmen with vision and courage.

When Marco Polo entered Xanadu, the capital of the Great Khan, he crossed ring after ring of outer city, each more splendid and interesting than the one that had come before. He was used to greatness of scale, having traveled to the limits of the ordered world and then doubled that distance into the unknown, where no European had ever set foot, over the Hindu Kush and beyond the Pamir, and through the immense empty deserts of Central Asia. And yet after passing through the world's most ethereal regions he was impressed above all by Xanadu, a city of seemingly infinite expanse, the end of which he could not see, no matter in which direction he looked.

For almost a thousand years, this city floated at the peak of Western imagination. Unlike Jerusalem, it had vanished. Unlike Atlantis, someone had actually seen it. Even during the glory of the British Empire, Coleridge held it out for envy. But no more. Now it has been eclipsed, with ease, by this, our country, founded not as a Xanadu but with the greatest humility, and on the scale of yeomen and their small farms, and as the cradle of simple gifts.

This country was not expected to be what it became. It was expected to be infinite seeming in its rivers, prairies, and stars, not in cities with hundreds of millions of rooms, passages, and halls, and buildings a quarter-mile high. It was expected to be rich in natural silence and the quality of light rather than in uncountable dollars. It was expected to be a place of unfathomable numbers, but of blades of grass and grains of wheat and the crags of mountains rather than millions upon millions of motors spinning and humming at any one time, and wheels turning, fires burning, voices talking, and lights shining.

But this great inventory of machines, buildings, bridges, vehicles, and an incomprehensible number of smaller things, is what we have. A nation founded according to a vision of simplicity has become complex. A nation founded with disdain for power has become the most powerful nation.

When letters took a month by sea and the records of the United States government could be moved in a single wagon pulled by two horses, we had great statesmanship. We had men of integrity and genius: Washington, Hamilton, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and Monroe. These were men who were in love with principle as if it were an art, which, in their practice, they made it. They studied empires that had fallen, for the sake of doing what was right in a small country that had barely risen, and were able to see things so clearly that they surpassed in greatness each and every one of the classical models that they had approached in awe.

Now, lost in the sins and complexity of a Xanadu, when we desperately need their high qualities of thought, their patience for deliberation, and their unerring sense of balance, we have only what we have. Which is a political class that in the main has abandoned the essential qualities of statesmanship, with the excuse that these are inappropriate to our age. They are wrong. Not only do they fail to honor the principles of statesmanship, they fail to recognize them, having failed to learn them, having failed to want to learn them.

In the main, they are in it for themselves. Were they not, they would have a higher rate of attrition, falling with the colors of what they believe rather than landing always on their feet—adroitly, but in dishonor. In light of their vows and responsibili-

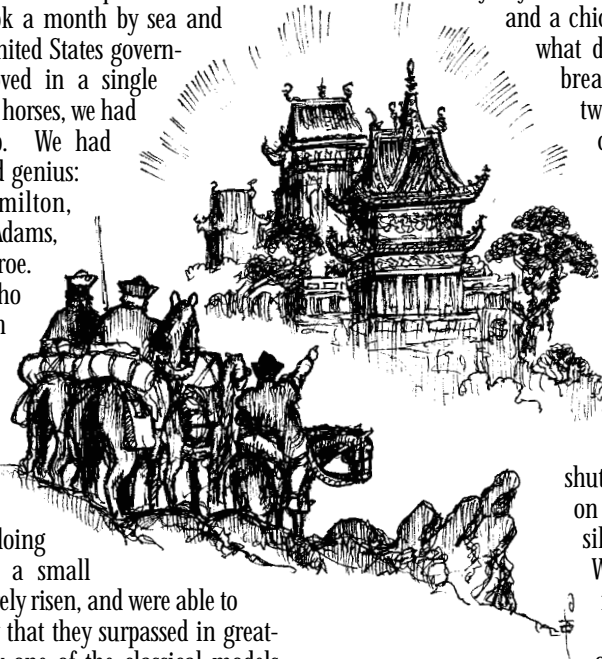
ties, this constitutes not merely a failure but a betrayal. And it is a betrayal not only of statesmanship and principle but of country and kin.

Why is that? It is because things matter. Even though it be played like a game, by men who excel at making it a game, our life in this country, our history in this country, the sacrifices that have been made for this country, the lives that have been given to this country, are not a game. My life is not a game. My children's lives are not a game. My parents' lives were not a game. Your life is not a game.

Yes, it is true, we do have great accumulated stores—of power and wealth, and decency—against which those who pretend to lead us can draw when, as a result of their vanities and ineptitudes, they waste and expend the gifts of previous generations. The margin of error bequeathed to them allows them to present their failures as successes.

They say, as we are still standing, and a chicken is in the pot, what does it matter if I break the links between action and consequence, work and reward, crime and punishment, merit and advancement? I myself cannot imagine a military threat (and never could), so what does it matter if I weld shut the silo hatches on our ballistic missile submarines? What does it matter if I weld shut my eyes to weapons of mass destruction

in the hands of lunatics who are building long-range missiles? Our jurisprudence is the envy of the world, so what does it matter if, now and then, I perjure myself, a little? What is an oath? What is a pledge? What is a sacred trust? Are not these things the province of the kinds of people who were foolish enough to do without all their lives, to wear the ruts into the Oregon Trail, to brave the seas, to die on the beaches of Normandy and Iwo Jima and on the battlefields of Shiloh and Antietam, for me, so that I can draw from America's great accounts, and look good, and be presidential, and have fun, in all kinds of ways?



That is what they say, if not in words then, indelibly, in actions. They who, in robbing Peter to pay Paul, present themselves as payers and forget that they are also robbers. They who, with studied compassion, minister to some of us at the expense of others. They who make goodness and charity a public profession, depending for their election upon a well-manured embrace of these things and the power to move them not from within themselves or by their own sacrifices but, by compulsion, from others. They who, knowing very little or next to nothing, take pride in eagerly telling everyone else what to do. They who believe absolutely in their recitation of pieties not because they believe in the pieties but because they believe in themselves.

Nearly four hundred years of America's hard-earned accounts—the principles we established, the battles we fought, the morals we upheld for century after century, our very humility before God—now flow promiscuously through our hands, like blood onto sand, squandered and laid waste by a generation that imagines history to have been but a prelude for what it would accomplish. More than a pity, more than a shame, it is despicable. And yet, this parlous condition, this agony of weak men, this betrayal and this disgusting show, are not the end of things.

Principles are eternal. They stem not from our resolution or lack of it but from elsewhere where, in patient and infinite ranks, they simply wait to be called. They can be read in history. They arise as if of their own accord when in the face of danger natural courage comes into play and honor and defiance are born. Things such as

courage and honor are the mortal equivalent of certain laws written throughout the universe. The rules of symmetry and proportion, the laws of physics, the perfection of mathematics, even the principle of uncertainty, are encouragement, entirely independent of the vagaries of human will, that not only natural law but our own best aspirations have a life of their own. They have lasted through far greater abuse than abuses them now. They can be neglected, but they cannot be lost. They can be thrown down, but they cannot be broken.

Each of them is a different expression of a single quality, from which each arises in its hour of need. Some come to the fore as others stay back, and then, with changing circumstance, those that have gone unnoticed rise to the occasion.

Rise to the occasion.

The principle suggests itself from a phrase, and such principles suggest easily and flow generously. You can grab them out of the air, from phrases, from memories, from images.

A statesman must rise to the occasion. Even Democrats can do this. Harry Truman had the discipline of plowing a straight row ten, twelve, and fourteen hours a day, of rising and retiring with the sun, of struggling with temperamental machinery, of suffering heat and cold and one injury after another. After a short time on a farm, presumptions about ruling others tend to vanish. It is as if you are pulled to earth and held there.

The man who works the land is hard put to think that he would direct armies and nations. Truman understood the grave responsibility of being the president of the United States, and that it was a task too great for him or for anyone else to accomplish without doing a

CAN YOU NAME THIS COUNTRY?

In the question-and-answer session after his speech at the February 1998 Shavano, Mark Helprin presented the figures below which are based on Table 1, "U.S. Military Force Developments," *The Military Balance, 1997-1998* (published by the International Institute of Strategic Studies and available from the Oxford University Press):

- 709,000 regular army soldiers;
- 293,000 reservists;
- 8 regular army divisions;
- 2 reserve divisions;
- 20 air force and navy air wings with approximately 2,000 combat aircraft;
- 232 strategic bombers;
- 13 SSBNs (ballistic missile submarines) with 3,114 nuclear warheads on 232 missiles;
- 500 ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles) with 1,950 warheads;
- 4 aircraft carriers; and
- 121 surface combatants and attack submarines, plus all the support basing, transport, and logistical access, not to mention the tanks, armored fighting vehicles, helicopters, etc., appropriate to such a force.

In this decade, this "country" has all but vanished; that is because the above figures represent the difference between the U.S. armed forces of 1990 and the Clinton administration's proposed (and largely achieved) "target force."

great deal of injury—if not to some, then to others. He understood that, therefore, he had to transcend himself. There would be little enjoyment of the job, because he had to be always aware of the enormous consequences of everything he did. Contrast this with the unspeakably vulgar pleasure in office of President Clinton.

Truman, absolutely certain that the mantle he assumed was far greater than he could ever be, was continually and deliberately aware of the weight of history, the accomplishments of his predecessors, and, by humble and imaginative projection, his own inadequacy. The sobriety and care that derived from this allowed him a rare privilege for modern presidents, to give to the presidency more than he took from it. It is not possible to occupy the Oval Office without arrogantly looting its assets or nobly adding to them. May God bless the president who adds to them, and may God damn the president who loots them.

America would not have come out of the Civil War as it did had it not been led by Lincoln and Lee. The battles raged for five years, but for a hundred years the country, both North and South, modeled itself on their character. They exemplified almost perfectly Churchill's statement, "Public men charged with the conduct of the war should live in a continual stress of soul."

This continual stress of soul is necessary as well in peacetime, because for every good deed in public life there is a counterbalance. Benefits are given only after taxes are taken. That is part of governance. The statesman, who represents the whole nation, sees in the equilibrium for which he strives a continual tension between victory and defeat. If he did not understand this, he would have no stress of soul, he would be merely happy—about money showered upon the orphan, taken from the widow. About children sent to day care, so that they may be long absent from their parents. About merciful parole of criminals, who kill again. Whereas a statesman knows continual stress of soul, a politician is happy, for he knows not what he does.

It is difficult for individuals or nations to recognize that war and peace alternate. But they do. No matter how long peace may last, it will end in

war. Though most people cannot believe at this moment that the United States of America will ever again fight for its survival, history guarantees that it will. And, when it does, most people will not know what to do. They will believe of war, as they did of peace, that it is everlasting.

The statesman, who is different from everyone else, will, in the midst of common despair, see the end of war, just as during the peace he was alive to the inevitability of war, and saw it coming in the far distance, as if it were a gray wave moving quietly across a dark sea.

The politician will revel with his people and enjoy their enjoyments. The statesman, in continual stress of soul, will think of destruction. As others move in the light, he will move in darkness, so that as others move in darkness he may move in the light. This tenacity, that is given to those of long and insistent vision, is what saves nations.

A statesman must have a temperament that is suited for the Medal of Honor, in a soul that is

unafraid to die. Electorates rightly favor those who have endured combat, not as a matter of reward for service, as is commonly believed, but because the willingness of a soldier to give his life is a strong sign of his correct priorities, and that in future he will truly understand that statesmen are not rulers but servants. It seems clear even in these years of squalid degradation that having risked death for the sake of honor is better than having risked dishonor for the sake of life.

No matter what you are told by the sophisticated classes that see virtue in every form of corruption and corruption in every form of virtue, I think you know, as I do, that the American people hunger for acts of integrity and courage. The American people hunger for a statesman magnetized by the truth, unwilling to give up his good name, uninterested in calculation only for the sake of victory, unable to put his interests before those of the nation. What this means in practical terms is no focus groups, no polls, no triangulation, no evasion, no broken promises, and no lies. These are the tools of the chameleon. They are employed to cheat the American people of honest answers to direct questions. If the average politician, for fear that he may lose something, is incapable of even a genuine yes or no, how is he sup-

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posed to rise to the great occasions of state? How is he supposed to face a destructive and implacable enemy? How is he supposed to understand the rightful destiny of his country, and lead it there?

At the coronation of an English monarch, he is given a sword. Elizabeth II took it last, and as she held it before the altar, she heard these words:

Receive this kingly Sword, brought now from the altar of God and delivered to you by us, the Bishops and servants of God, though unworthy. With this Sword do justice, stop the growth of iniquity, protect the holy Church of God, help and defend widows and orphans, restore the things that are gone to decay, maintain the things that are restored, punish and reform what is amiss, and confirm what is in good order; that doing these things you may be glorious in all virtue; and so faithfully serve our Lord.

Would that we in America come once again to understand that statesmanship is not the appetite for power but—because things matter—a holy calling of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. We have made it something else. Nonetheless, after and despite its betrayal, statesmanship remains the manifestation, in political terms, of beauty, and balance, and truth. It is the courage to tell the truth, and thus discern what is ahead. It is a mastery of the symmetry of forces, illuminated by the genius of speaking to the heart of things.

Statesmanship is a quality that, though it may be betrayed, is always ready to be taken up again merely by honest subscription to its great themes. Have confidence that even in idleness its strengths are growing, for it is a providential gift given to us in times of need. Evidently we do not need it now, but as the world is forever interesting the time will surely come when we do. And then, so help me God, I believe that, solely by the grace of God, the corrupt will be thrown down and the virtuous will rise up. ▲

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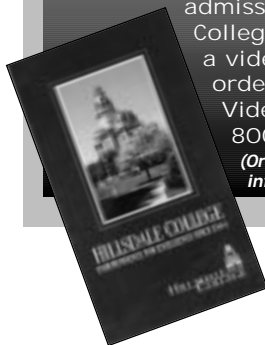
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