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A WORLD WITHOUT HEROES

By George Roche

Editor's Preview: This issue in a series on political leadership is by Hillsdale College President George Roche, who discussed this theme in our November CCA as well as Shavano seminars around the country in 1985-86. "I am torn between delivering a jeremiad or hopeful tidings," he admits, "but the dangers of our current cultural course are just too compelling to be dismissed lightly." Dr. Roche's book, *A World Without Heroes* will be going to press this fall.

"It is an unhappy country that has no heroes," says Andrea Sarti, puzzlingly, in Bertolt Brecht's 1939 play entitled *Galileo*. Odder still is the fictional Galileo's reproach: "It is an unhappy country that needs heroes." What are we—dwellers in a world without heroes—to make of this?

We cannot address the question of leadership until we find an answer to the dogged and pervasive unhappiness in our time. We cannot explain it. What has become of life on the human scale and the value of one life well lived?

It is bewildering. We have, after all, spent the whole of this century attacking human afflictions and social problems with the finest tools the modern mind can devise. We have applied the most enlightened theories, state-of-the-art science and advanced statecraft. We have fostered invention and built great engines of prosperity. Every source of discontent and injustice has been reformed to a fare-thee-well, and at no niggardly expense. Our political leaders have actually had to resort to solving the same problems in every session of Congress since the Great Depression. These problems are trotted out every year, faithfully, and new bureaus are created to take care of them, differing from the previous bureaus only as one zebra differs from another. What more can be done? I can only describe this as the greatest outpouring of caring, compassion and concern the world has ever seen. But its principal result has been to make everybody cynical about politics, along with everything else. It leaves us unhappier than ever, and a good deal poorer.

Americans are resourceful. When the system fails to



provide happiness, we pursue it all the more resolutely with our own devices. To judge from cultural indices, we are concerned with little else. The mighty mechanism we have erected to glut our senses and escape our unhappiness is a marvel to rival our science and industry. It puts at our fingertips everything from the soaps and sitcoms to hard-core porn, from fast foods to frozen beef Wellington. Of our presumed 72 hours of leisure per week, we spend, on average over 44 staring at the tube. Catering to every visual or tactile sensation, vicarious thrill and carnal urge, our culture promises happiness in every measure, for every purse, to every taste. We pursue it till we are weary, but can never hold it long.

Perhaps one day we wake up emptied, unable to try one more taste or seek one more liaison or even change channels, wondering what it was all about. Perhaps we conclude, at last, that it is time to put the externals aside, and instead, seek to "self-actualize" our happiness from within. We will then find another subculture ready to cater to our new determination. It grinds out unending

articles on self-improvement techniques and “more meaningful relationships.” It peddles its secrets at retreats, on cassettes, in seminars. It fills the paperback racks with how-to counseling. Every month another nostrum hits the market with a new, improved promise of Life Experience Enrichment. Like addicts, we swallow every one. But again, the fixes wear off. And the maddening thing is, the more carefully and determinedly we follow each prescription, the quicker happiness dances out of reach—only to leave us more frustrated and miserable than ever.

“We misread our dilemma—and hugely underestimate our peril, I fear—if we suppose that the nature of world struggle is geographic, or economic, or one system of government versus another. The conflict is between our Christian heritage and secular power, between keeping the faith and having none, between God and clever monkeys who are astonished at their ability to add and subtract.”

We had better climb off the carousel and listen to Sarti. His statement about our condition is light years away from the things we usually hear: “It is an unhappy country that has no heroes.”

About the Author

George Roche has served as president of Hillsdale College since 1971 and since that time has attracted international attention for establishing the Center for Constructive Alternatives, the Hillsdale College Press, *Imprimis*, the Ludwig von Mises Lecture Series, and the Shavano Institute for National Leadership, as well as his battle in the courts to protect the school from federal intrusion. *Firing Line*, the *McNeil-Lehrer Report*, *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, the *Today Show*, the *Wall Street Journal* and scores of other television, radio, magazine, and newspaper sources have chronicled his efforts to maintain Hillsdale College's independence.

Formerly the presidentially-appointed chairman of the National Council on Educational Research, the director of seminars at the Foundation for Economic Education in New York, and a professor of history and philosophy at the Colorado School of Mines, George Roche is also the author of seven books on education, history, and government.

Who are our heroes, and how can they make us happier? Heroes are a fading memory in our times, but we can still recall a little about them. We know, at least, that what sets the hero apart is some extraordinary achievement. Whatever this feat, it is such as to be recognized at once by everyone as a good thing; and somehow, the achieving of it seems larger than life. The hero, furthermore, overcomes the ordinary and attains greatness by serving some great good. His example very nearly rebukes us; telling us that we fail, not by aiming too high in life, but by aiming far too low. Moreover, it tells us we are mistaken in supposing that happiness is a right or an end in itself. The hero seeks not happiness but goodness and his fulfillment lies in achieving it. In truth, the question is less about heroes than about the frameworks of belief in which they can, and cannot, flourish. In the end it concerns what we ourselves believe in and what we ask of life. What the hero gives us is a completely fresh, unfailed way of looking at life, and perhaps, the answer to our pervasive, mysterious unhappiness. Heroes, by their example, remind us that to pursue happiness for its own sake is the surest way to lose it.

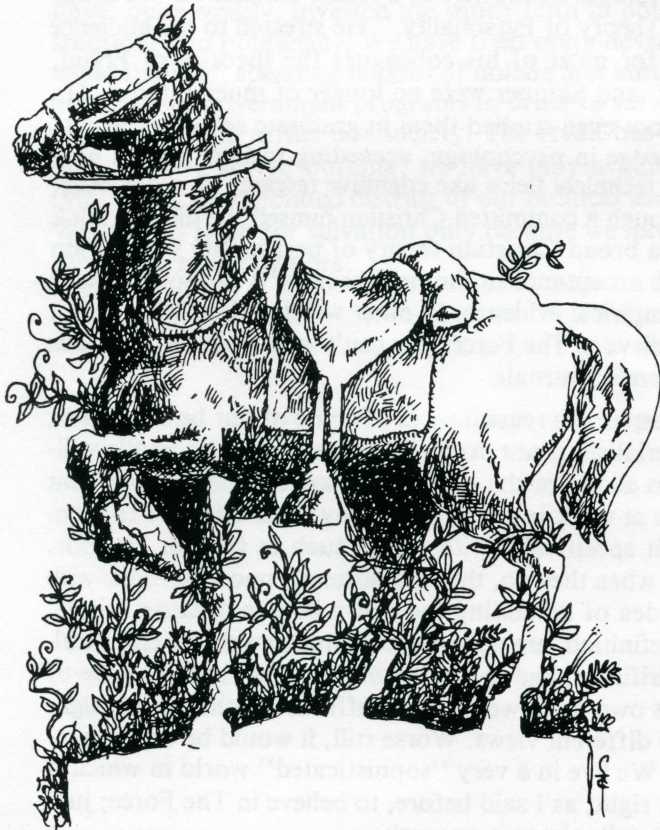
Modern experience certainly bears this out. If nothing else, then, the hero yanks us out of the old rut and bids us to reexamine our values and goals. At the same time, he shows us by his own example that higher purposes in life, far from being an illusion, are the key to our richest potential. Already, this is much more than the how-to books can promise.

Real heroism requires courage. It entails peril or pain. The dictionary says heroes are “distinguished by valor or enterprise in danger, or fortitude in suffering.” Plainly, heroism also has a selfless quality. The hero's deed is enobled not by courage alone, but by the call to duty or by service to others. In this it gains a larger symbolic value that can inspire and bind the whole nation. The hero acts for what is common and precious to all, and thereby replenishes the strength of our shared convictions.

Our debt to heroes is no metaphor, but the very substance of a free society. And our duty to one another and to moral law is exemplified by the hero's selflessness. But we have not kept our end of the bargain. The very words we need to think about when we discuss heroes—valor, magnanimity, fortitude, gallantry—rust from disuse.

If I were to depart from this theoretical discussion of heroes for a moment and ask you to name a dozen who are living today, who are generally recognized as heroes, who would you name? It ought to be an easy list to make, but on the contrary, most people cannot think of half a dozen who fulfill the requirements which I have outlined. Rock stars, movie idols, sports figures, and political celebrities as well as the occasional ordinary person who acts bravely in an emergency are the substitutes for absent heroes and are thus a symptom of a paralyzing moral division in America. If our knight-errant rode out and slew a dragon, half the editorials the next day

would brand him "insensitive" if not an outright warmonger and they would remind us that dragons are on the endangered species list. If we cannot agree that dragons are evil, we will have no dragon fighters. Unhappy is the country that loses its moral bearings. Unhappy the many, bereft of spiritual leadership, who are doomed to cling to the self as the only reality in an unfathomable existence. Small wonder that we fling ourselves on the treadmills of sensation and turn for our redemption to the purveyors of clinically tested guilt-free selves.



True enough, the West has long suffered an affliction of the spirit—one either peculiar to, or exceptionally virulent in, those cultures that sprang from the Judeo-Christian heritage. Its onset was evident in 1850, and recent times have added little to what the better minds in Europe and America were saying about it by 1900. One might say that the particular manifestation was human pride, inflamed by cheap-shot philosophizers armed with a whole shipload of bad nineteenth-century information. Its most familiar carrier is secular humanism, that vision that has so strongly shaped this century and its "isms." Out of pride, it deified men's science and cut us off from the riches of life beyond the reach of laboratory instruments. Out of desire, it created a purely materialistic—and entirely fictitious—conception of reality. To secure man's status as creator of the new reality, it dismissed the old Creator and announced that hereafter

the universe belonged to the most intelligent of the apes. Human beings, in their quest for the stars, were therefore relegated to the status of beasts, and beasts, moreover, directed by nothing more than natural selection and economic principles. The West will regain its health in exact proportion to the speed with which it puts aside this whole banquet of utopian claptrap.

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Is it any wonder that the pinnacle of philosophy for young manhood this past century has been "go get yours?" With Albert Jay Nock, I defy the whole of this utopian theory to produce any behavior higher than what can be explained by the formula of Tolstoy's peasant character, Yashvin: "He is after my shirt, and I am after his shirt." There, in a nutshell, is the sum philosophy of evolutionary theory, sometimes remembered as the law of the jungle. If utopianism is to be believed, we animal-men cannot possibly rise above this and therefore can have no complaint about the predatory statism and slavery of our time. Chesterton warned us, if men won't believe in God, the danger is not that they will believe in nothing, but that they will believe in anything.

Malcolm Muggeridge, surveying the wreckage of humanist utopianism in this century, offers a more specific fate: "When mortal men try to live without God, they infallibly succumb to megalomania, or erotomania, or both. The raised fist or the raised phallus; Nietzsche or D. H. Lawrence." Just so. The Soviets officially choose the one, and we, unofficially, the other, but it is only too obvious that we both suffer the same infection.

We misread our dilemma—and hugely underestimate our peril, I fear—if we suppose that the nature of world struggle is geographic, or economic, or one system of government versus another. The conflict is between our Christian heritage and secular power, between keeping the faith and having none, between God and clever monkeys who are astonished at their ability to add and subtract. The conflict is between irreconcilable conceptions of man, the universe, and ultimate reality. C. S. Lewis, as usual, put our choice in plain words: "The Christian and the materialist hold different beliefs about the universe. They can't both be right. The one who is wrong will act in a way which simply doesn't fit the real universe.

The heroes we recognize all affirm, by their very deeds, the larger spiritual dimension to life. Materialist conceptions may purport to tell us what we are, but cannot touch our souls because, in the last analysis, they cannot

tell us what we should be. There is no “should” in the materialist cosmos, nor can it produce heroes. In Brecht’s play, Galileo says that “it is an unhappy country that needs heroes.” He is telling mankind, “it is your own reason and determination which control your destiny.” Here are the marching orders of Scientific Man to adherents of the humanist vision; or to put it less gently, the communists’ remonstrations to liberals.

Galileo’s is an ancient faith, man’s second oldest, as old as Eden, but reanimated by the seemingly invincible science of the nineteenth century: “Ye shall be as gods.” It is the vision of Man without God, of Man at the center of being, autonomous, free of external controls and in command of his own destiny. It is the promise of a new man and of a new world given purpose and plan by Man, the new Creator. It is the dream of an avenging angel that will fill men’s hunger for justice at last, not in any imaginary heaven but here and now, by sweeping away all that is weak and unclean. Its great Commandment, Whitaker Chambers remarked, “is found, not in *The Communist Manifesto*, but in the first sentence of the physics primer which reads: ‘All of the progress of mankind to date results from the making of careful measurement.’ ”

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Such a brew of science and vision is without historical parallel, and it struck the Western mind with tidal force. It purported to fit the older Christian foundations, both in the natural sciences, where the concept of an ordered cosmos was retained, and in the moral perceptions of justice and right that it borrowed from Christianity. The Marxists had only to substitute a new ruling troika—Man, Party and State—man for God, Lenin for Jesus, and New Jerusalem for eternal life, to stay in business at the same old stand. To a certain frame of mind it was, and is, irresistible. Men seized it with joy, and later yielded their conviction to reality with fierce reluctance or not at all—the signature of potent dogma. On its surface it seems a vision of good, and it has moved millions of good hearts. To a Christian, it is the original sin and the greatest of heresies.

By its own view and the Christian’s alike, “good” is the one thing the vision and its works cannot be. The natural universe, according to the vision, is all there is, and there is no good or evil in it; only natural events. What, then, makes a priest or an artist or a teacher or even a politician choose his vocation when he knows he can receive greater material rewards doing something else? What then, drives men and women to suffer and die for their family, their country, their beliefs? Don’t these acts suggest that man may have a spiritual side if not a pervasively spiritual nature?

A great many experts will tell you that the materialist

vision is stone dead today; an empty husk. The purely scientific explanation of man is no longer viable in popular or intellectual circles. Even the atheists and agnostics among us admit that they believe that “something” out there in the cosmos is bigger than all of us. The clearest expression of this sentiment is to be found in the enormously successful *Star Wars* films. There is a Force in the universe. It is all-powerful, it is mystical, it can only be tapped by those who have enough faith to believe in it. So far as it goes, this is not a bad message, but it is a limited one and it cannot be regarded as an adequate repudiation of the materialistic view.

I offer you a case in point. A very bright young psychologist spoke here at a recent seminar on “A Christian Theory of Personality.” He stressed to the audience that for most of his colleagues the theories of Freud, Jung, and Skinner were no longer of much interest. He had not even studied them in graduate school. The cutting edge in psychology, according to him, was in narrow, technical fields like cognitive research or cybernetics. Although a committed Christian himself, he did not think that a broad Christian theory of personality would gain much acceptance in the field because it cannot be based on empirical evidence. In other words, while it is all right to believe in The Force, you can’t write about it in serious academic journals.

Despite the reassurances of some of our best thinkers, materialism is not dead. While people are generally willing to allow for the existence of some vague transcendent force at work in the world, many resist attempts to identify it specifically with words such as God or Creator. And when they do, they are distinctly uncomfortable with the idea of defending their own beliefs because beliefs, by definition, are not objective, measurable, or empirically verifiable, and to give witness to them in the course of one’s own work would be an affront to others who might have different views. Worse still, it would be embarrassing. We live in a very “sophisticated” world in which it is all right, as I said before, to believe in The Force; just don’t talk about it at work.

This is why we need heroes so desperately. By deed and symbol, they replenish our spiritual strength: They are tangible proof that man does not live by reason alone—that he has a moral conscience which is divinely inspired, that he may freely choose virtue over sin, heroism over cowardice or resignation.

But another kind of image has become dominant in the twentieth century; it is that of the antihero. While you may have had trouble thinking of genuine heroes, you will probably have no trouble recalling names in this case. In literature and in the movie industry, the antihero is a common phenomenon, and more often than not, he is a smash hit. Modern Western culture has been inundated with the antihero in various shades. He is generally an iconoclastic, angry young man who cynically writes off religion (except for some vague thing such as The Force) as a tool of the Establishment. For him, God cannot be

an authority because he is against *all* authority, and he owes no responsibility or allegiance to anyone except himself or those under his immediate protection. He may exhibit many heroic qualities like bravery and self-sacrifice, but he does not recognize purpose in human life. He is a complete cynic.

Quite conversely, the genuine hero tells us that life *can* be what it *should* be; that bravery and self-sacrifice occur because there are beliefs and responsibilities which warrant bravery and self-sacrifice. The hero tells us there is indeed purpose in human life.

I am certain that the status of the hero in our world is directly linked to the status of our political leaders. We have, quite simply, invested too much faith in political solutions and politicians. We have tried every device we could think of, spending billions of dollars and initiating hundreds of government programs in order to solve the problems which afflict our society. The result has been that we have solved nothing; we have only acquired a cynical and disappointed distrust of our political leaders. We look to them for salvation only because we have no faith in heroes anymore.

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I submit to you that unless we recover our ability to recognize heroes and our will to become heroes, it makes no difference whether a Democrat or a Republican wins the American presidential election in 1988, or any other election anywhere, for that matter. Political leaders have valuable contributions to make, but they cannot revive a sense of moral and divine purpose and they cannot save the world from the dangers which confront it. It has always been fashionable to speak of “the crisis” of Western civilization. This specter is raised by every generation and each is convinced that it is at great historical crossroads. Every generation is right. We are always faced with crucial decisions to make. There are always dangers which threaten our way of life with extinction. But it is our heroes who enable us to survive. It is up to you and me to recover them—and to recover the view of our world which makes heroes possible.

