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# THE NATIONAL PURPOSE: CONFLICT AND CREATIVITY

by

DR. SAM A. BANKS

*This article is adapted from the annual opening address to the entering class of the US Army War College given by Dr. Banks on 5 August 1975.*

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**T**he gracious introduction of your Commandant confirms the words of Sophocles written 2400 years ago in his play, "Oedipus at Colonus": "It is the merit of a general to impart good news and to conceal the bad!"

As a senior in high school, I had planned to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point but found a barrier to my entry to the halls of "Hell on the Hudson." Having passed the academic requirements and being assured of an appointment, I was foiled by a right eye that refused to display 20-20 vision without glasses, a requirement of the time. I could sympathize with James Whistler, the famous painter, who left the Academy for a different reason—he failed chemistry. Later he stated, "If silicon had been a gas, I would have been a major general!" Having subsequently chosen the path of psychologist-professor-administrator, I suppose that my value to you today lies precisely in my divergence from a military career. In one author's terms, "The gift that I have to give you is the gift of my difference from you."

Nevertheless, the task that I have been offered makes me pause. How does one speak adequately in fifty minutes on "The National Purpose"? I'm a bit like a young friend of mine, a boy of eight years who received a visit from a thirteen-year-old cousin. During her two-week stay, he developed a desperate crush, and when it came time for her to leave, he tried to think of some way to keep her with him. He approached her with some trepidation and blurted, "Will you marry me?" She was affronted by this impetuous proposal from a much younger man, replying haughtily, "Don't be silly. You're too young!" He was stymied for a moment. Then, still seeking to relate to her in some way, he gave it one more try: "Then will you be my grandmother?"

**I**n this hour, I invite you to explore with me the challenge imbedded in our struggle to grasp our purpose as a nation. We do not suffer a *lack* of purpose. On the contrary, we experience a plethora of purposes and the potential conflict among them. Our history

has been marked by good and worthy goals that do not always mesh neatly. In these recent years of rapid change, we can feel more than ever the unacknowledged centrifugal pull of divergent purposes, stresses that (if intensified and continued) could lead to fragmentation. In James Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy*, one character asks another, "Why don't you just make up your mind?" The confused reply echoes our predicament: "That's easy for you to say, but if you had as many minds as I have . . ."

Descriptions of human nature abound. Each commentator on man's destiny has his own interpretation. I see human beings as higher primates undergoing a crucial transition in their history. We have gained power *through* our symbolic activity, but we have not attained full power *over* that activity. We have created nations but are imperiled by the threat of international war. Businesses, markets, the national economy—these structures we have provided for our security are now threatened by inflation and depression. The labors of our scientific history have resulted in both promise and peril through nuclear power. Mary Shelley's Frankensteinian myth pinpoints the modern dilemma. Our symbolic creations intended to serve mankind too often become monsters. Still, the promise implicit in our institutional development is real, if unfulfilled. A Galilean summarized our condition 2000 years ago: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

Recently, Warren Bennis, President of the University of Cincinnati, outlined six problems confronting all human organizations.

- Each must attempt to integrate the needs of its individual members with specific institutional goals. Our nation's struggles with the intricacies of welfare programs and the military draft are cases in point.

- Each organization must deal with issues regarding the distribution of power and influence. Current concerns regarding congressional ineffectiveness and presidential power reflect the importance of this task.

- Another problem centers on the control of internal conflicts besetting all

organizations. The riots and violence of the turbulent 1960's highlight the challenge at a national level.

- Conversely, in facing outward, the organization must deal with environmentally produced changes, e.g., oil embargoes and wheat shortages.

- An additional constellation of tasks is directed toward the achieving of clarity, consensus, and commitment regarding the goals of the organization. Our dilemmas in Viet Nam and the threats of the Near Eastern situation are primarily tests of our national vision, understanding, and dedication.

- Finally, organizations must deal continually with change. Each moment offers potential growth or decay. Modern nations are finding in technological development and urbanization two examples of the challenge of change.<sup>1</sup>

**E**xplore with me one instance of America's struggle to achieve a sense of purpose amid conflicting goals. During the two centuries of our history, Americans have sought both liberty and security, often experiencing a tension between these two purposes. The search for security has expanded in recent decades, taking the form of increasing demands for health care, education, and a minimum income. Prior to the 1930's, one's right to the best medical care or to a college education was based upon socio-economic status. This aristocratic emphasis upon participation in a particular class or stratum of society gradually gave way to meritocratic bases for access. In Horatio Alger fashion, opportunities for education and care were given increasingly to those achievers showing promise of effective contribution to society. Admission test scores and grade point averages took precedence over family background as keys to college scholarships and job opportunities.

However, the meritocratic trend seems to have been a transitional one. In the last fifteen years, we have witnessed a shift to egalitarian criteria for access to higher education, careers, and health care delivery. The sociologist, Daniel Bell, has written recently in *Fortune* of the "rising

entitlements" in these areas, new assumptions that people are entitled to these securities and services by virtue of their existence as human beings.

It is a historic irony that we have expanded our expectations to include a much wider range of recipients for these securities and services at just the time when our country is becoming painfully aware of resource limitations. We are facing the unpleasant fact that shortages of oil, food, land, labor, and money are not isolated occurrences but symptoms of long-range trends. Recognition of scarcity intensifies the conflict of purposes underlying our great expectations. Our national homework is stated succinctly in our motto, "E Pluribus Unum." How can wholeness and unity of purpose emerge from a plurality of competing objectives?

Americans will not achieve a community of purpose as an accident of altered circumstances. The opportunities will not lie "in our stars but in ourselves," a product of our particular style of response to the problems that beset us. Let us examine some unproductive reactions characterizing our recent national struggles. It should be admitted at the outset that people are often most destructive when they see themselves as representing groups or larger collectives. The Nazi guards in concentration camps, anti-Semitic rioters vandalizing and looting Jewish stores on the infamous "crystal night," and American subjects in recent social psychology experiments share a common willingness to act destructively when participating anonymously as members of a group serving a "cause" under acknowledged authority.

We are not immune to the tendency to see our nation and its citizens as passive victims of circumstance rather than shaping, responsible agents. We are continually attempting to barter the dignity and anxiety of responsibility for the shallow safety of the victim's role. That revered Western institution, the committee, is a fruitful organizational tool. Its abuse as camouflage for avoidance of decisions has led to a recent description of committees as "a collection of the unfit chosen from the unwilling by the incompetent to do the unnecessary."<sup>6</sup>

The nation that contributes to history significantly must reject the self-victimizing process. The renowned commentator on current events, Flip Wilson, once summarized the point, "You can't expect to hit the jackpot if you don't put a few nickles in the machine."<sup>6</sup>

Closely related to avoidant passivity is a draining restlessness resulting from the increasing gap between expectation and reality. Herzberg has indicated that while *extrinsic* rewards of increased comforts and material goods may lower dissatisfaction, they do not create satisfaction.<sup>4</sup> A satisfying sense of fulfillment must be found through *intrinsic* rewards such as pride in one's activity, a sense of meaningful service, and awareness of competence. Americans have whetted their appetite for increasing consumption of goods and services (and a higher salary to buy them). These expectations have not resulted directly in increased satisfaction. Further, our growing recognition of our economic and technological limits spotlights the gap between desire and actuality.

Nevertheless, our demands have not been satiated; expectations are on the rise. These in

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themselves are not bad. A goal is only destructive when it becomes an obsession obscuring other good purposes. The demonic is never simply evil. It is the "good running wild," an absolutizing of one element of a nation's promise (e.g., freedom, equality) to the neglect of all other perspectives and virtues.

Such gun-barrel vision is hampering, to say the least. We become so accustomed to thinking in one groove that it becomes a rut. A tailor returned to his home in New York City after securing an audience with the Pope during a long-awaited visit to Rome. He was asked by friends, "What did the Pope look like?" He replied immediately, "A forty-one regular."<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, our very expectations as a nation can severely limit national vision at significant moments in our history. For example, the American concern for equality of *opportunity* is being extruded into an insistence on equality of *outcome*. HEW's requirement of quotas in university recruitment and promotion policies has been backed by the withdrawal of federal funds from those institutions resisting compliance. Transfer payments systems throughout our tax structure are powerful levelers which narrow differences of income. These measures go far beyond guaranteeing equal access to opportunities for advancement. Their intent is primarily the achievement of equal *results* in the lives of all citizens. Such steps are defended on the ground that unequal outcomes in the fulfillment of one generation become the foundations for inequity of opportunity in the next. Nevertheless, the construction of national energies into this narrow interpretation of one virtue leads to an imbalance of activity, fiscal drain, and rigidity of societal response. *US News and World Report* estimates that we will spend \$177 billion this year at national, state, and local levels on agencies and programs designed to monitor requirements for equality of outcome.<sup>7</sup>

How can we avoid the unsatisfactory national reactions of passivity, aimless discontent, and rigidity? It is essential that we

gain a fuller understanding of those cultural styles that strengthen and renew institutions. Healthy, productive nations seem to be characterized by a clear balance between openness to new perspectives and commitment to the traditions and values that provide a skeletal framework of consensus. John Dewey described human experience as an oscillation between "doing" and "undergoing." Life seems to require an alternation between the sharp closures of decision-making and the reopening of choices in new awareness and evaluation. There must be a balance of acting and being acted upon.

One head football coach of a large university was unusually enthusiastic regarding the prospects for the season. He described his line as both powerful and fast, his backs as the most skillful in his career. At the end of the season, he had won only one game in ten. He summarized the failure ruefully to one friend, "I knew that I had a great team, and I was right. There were only two flaws. My quarterback stuttered, and my center was ticklish!"

Nations, too, run into difficulties when they do not carry out decisions with clear articulation and unhesitating action. By the same token, such decisiveness must be balanced by an "unticklish" realism that does not flinch in the face of life's painful demands and tragic consequences. Neither blind dedication nor sophisticated paralysis will serve as a national life style. John Gardner, former Secretary for Health, Education, and Welfare, focuses the issue, "Where human institutions are concerned, love without criticism brings stagnation and criticism without love brings destruction. The swifter the pace of change, the more lovingly men must care for and criticize their institutions to keep them intact through the turbulent passages."<sup>3</sup>

The commitments of a nation are expressed effectively as decisions, ordered priorities in the form of corporate action. As such, these choices avoid the twin pitfalls of impulsivity and obsession. Having served as a professor in a college of medicine for thirteen years, I find an interesting analogy in the medical chart. A chart can be seen as the crystallization of

many shared decisions: diagnoses, prognoses, referrals, prescriptions, orders. Such decisions are marked by three discrete steps: (1) carefully analyzed experience; (2) selection of a course of action; (3) communication of the first two elements to appropriate parties. National commitments, however complex, require a similar corporate process. This balance is described vividly in sentences found on two road signs. One, at the entrance to a slick clay road in Georgia, warns, "Choose well your rut for you will be in it a long time." The second, marking a rough jungle road in Central Africa, advises, "Too rough to go slow!"

Decisions must be bracketed by periods of planning and evaluation. Both processes require clear hearing, a sensitivity to other nations' responses and an awareness of the results of our actions. The words of Albert Einstein deserve attention, "Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding."

Such understanding, based on clear communication, does not come easily. A World War II tale portrays a frustrated old enlisted man, a British veteran in the North African campaign. Muttering that "someone is just going to have to capture Rommel," he took a camel and headed into the desert alone. His company commander received no word from him for days. Finally, his faint voice was heard on the short-wave radio, "Have captured Rommel and am returning." Some days later, he trudged into camp on foot with his battered radio but without the German general or the camel. When questioned about Rommel's capture, he replied, "You obviously misunderstood me. I said, 'Have ruptured camel and am returning.'"

The problems of clear communication between nations are even more profound! Carl R. Rogers, the noted American psychologist, has suggested that international relations would be improved if each nation, before stating its own position in a controversy, would be required to describe clearly, forcefully, and as persuasively as possible the opposing perspective held by the antagonistic country. While the

implementation of such a process is very difficult, the need for such "creative hearing" is great.

Alfred North Whitehead has described the creative interplay between commitment and critical understanding:

Those societies which cannot combine reverence for their symbols with freedom of revision must ultimately decay either from anarchy or from the slow struggle of a life stifled by useless shadows. . . . The art of society consists first in the maintenance of the symbolic code and secondly in the fearlessness of revision.<sup>1</sup>

**A** second condition for the development of coherent national purpose is a profound sense of history, the ability to remember and reassess our past purposes and their effects. Eric Sevareid once remarked that "the cause of problems is solutions." Our past solutions are the seedbeds for the new challenges that will arise. If we cling blindly to old styles of problem-solving, the means become solidified as ends in themselves. Such myopia has been the death-knell of numerous nations. In a remarkable movie, "The Bridge on the River Kwai," a British colonel in a Japanese concentration camp during the Second World War develops a brilliant plan for maintaining the morale of his men. They have been forced to labor on the construction of a bridge. He stuns their Japanese captors and rallies his men by transforming the slavery into creative strategy. At his orders, the prisoners go far beyond the captors' requirements, working happily and unremittingly on the completion of the bridge, even whistling as they march to and from the task. However, the colonel is gradually captured by his own magnificent obsession. The means become literally the end of his life, for he identifies his whole being with the completion of the bridge. When allied troops attempt to free him and his fellow prisoners, he gives his life blindly in a tragic struggle to safeguard his precious bridge from the new threat of his own countrymen.

James Russell Lowell reminds us that "new occasions teach new duties." It is difficult for

societies, as well as individuals, to step away from old styles of problem-solving and review them. The growth of America from a loose confederation of colonies to a primary world power has rested on varied expressions of a frontier mentality. We have seen our country as an open system with ever available resources just beyond the horizon. Having consumed the buffalo or timber in one area, we simply had to move further west. Reaching the Pacific Coast, we continued to develop industry and trade, bridging the seas in our acquisition of new materials and services. Experiencing geographical boundaries, Americans turned successfully to sophisticated technology and organization as means of conquering new frontiers. We have rebuilt Western Europe, developed nuclear power, launched constellations of satellites, and walked the moon. Nevertheless, there is a growing apprehension that the frontier model will no longer serve us. We have felt the pinch in materials, manpower, and money. The technology which has provided new goods also exhausts our resources. Part of our national unrest comes from the growing recognition that new and very different skills of governance are necessary. Unthinking reliance on "open systems" approaches must yield in some sectors to realistic priority-setting and foresight in the allocation of our diminishing wealth.

**A** third condition for developing and actualizing national purposes involves a new way of seeing our nation as both limited and worthwhile in the midst of those limitations. Both individuals and nations experience difficulty in maintaining self-esteem while acknowledging their own finitude. They fall prey to either of two destructive trends: (1) an unhealthy denial of limitation as a basis for maintaining self-regard and (2) a despairing acknowledgment of life's constrictions with consequent loss of self-value. Some of the images by which we have interpreted our national development have lent themselves to denial of realistic boundaries for purpose and action. Understandings of manifest destiny and of our duty as monitor or saviour of the world represents such grandiose inflation of

expectations. On the other hand, our country and its leaders must avoid a self-deprecating stance by the recognition of the worth of our purposes as characterized by *both* our capacities and our limits. A sound recognition and valuing of past performance and future promise takes into account both the flaws and strengths of a people. The crucial question is one of realism. That profound social commentator, Dizzy Dean, put it succinctly, "It ain't braggin' if you done done it!"

Realistic self-assessment goes beyond a clear evaluation of the past and present to an open-eyed assessment of future alternatives and plans. The antidote to remorse is found in imaginative but tough-minded futurism. An analogy is offered in the story of two highly intoxicated gentlemen who purchased tickets to a ballet performance on the misassumption that they were buying entrance to a burlesque show. Watching the ballerinas pirouette across the stage, toe-dancing throughout one scene, one blurry-eyed drunk commented sagely, "If they *wanted* tall girls, why didn't they *hire* tall girls."

**Q**uo vadis? Where do we go from here? In this uncertain world, perhaps only fools and college presidents are prone to prediction. Recently I came across a diary entry that I wanted to share with you. The writer states, "Many thinking people believe America has seen its best days."<sup>3</sup> Would you agree? That sentence was written two hundred years ago on July 26, 1775, by James Allen. It is difficult and of questionable value to attempt to predict the zenith or nadir of a nation's endeavors. We can probably agree, however, that in our era the stakes have reached an all-time high. Both biologically and culturally, increased awareness and complexity of life are accompanied by both enhanced opportunity and more terrifying risk. One might say that the current international scene is a deadly global game of "truth *and* consequences."

Although I am by nature optimistic, there is much in man's history which gives one reason to pause before attempting to formulate a prognosis. General George C. Marshall, a superb statesman and thoughtful administrator, warned, "If man does find the

solution for world peace, it will be the most revolutionary reversal of his record we have ever known."<sup>5</sup> Of course, all species attempting to survive and thrive have faced such quantum leaps. Man is no exception.

We find in the current Middle East turmoil a case study of man's ambivalence toward war. Americans could find a number of secondary gains through involvement in a Near Eastern conflict. On this side of the scale, one might place a release from frustration resulting from our decreasing faith in rational solutions, the unity which comes in fighting a common foe, the satisfaction in directing our attention and hostilities beyond our own borders and domestic difficulties, a horribly effective control of over-population, and an easing of the unemployment situation. On the other side of the balance, one must weigh the overwhelming costs in human life, property, and the possible destruction of civilization itself.

There is little disagreement regarding the insanity of such an undertaking. We know what we *should not* do, but what *will* we do? Warren Bennis in a recent volume on organizational development cites five key factors that can tip the balance toward life and health for a society: adequate time, appropriate interaction, basic trust, clear communication, and profound commitment.<sup>1</sup>

Our national future will be determined by the way in which we develop and incarnate purposes that provide these basic conditions. Loren Eiseley, in his magnificent book, *The Night Country*, gives us a parable to ponder:

I should like to recount the anecdote of a European philosopher who, over a hundred years ago, sensed the beginnings of the modern predicament.

It seems that along a particularly wild and forbidding section of the English coast—a place of moors, diverging and reconverging trackways, hedges, and all manner of unexpected cliffs and obstacles—two English gentlemen were out riding in the cool of the morning. As they rounded a turn in the road they saw a coach bearing down upon them at breakneck speed. The foaming, rearing horses were obviously running wild; the driver on the seat had lost the reins. As the

coach thundered by, the terrified screams of the occupants could be heard.

The gentlemen halted their thoroughbred mounts and briefly exchanged glances. The same thought seemed to strike each at once. In an instant they set off at a mad gallop which quickly overtook and passed the lurching vehicle before them. On they galloped. They distanced it.

'Quick, the gate!' cried one as they raced up before a hedge. The nearest horseman leaped to the ground and flung wide the gate just as the coach pounded around the curve. As the swaying desperate driver and his equipage plunged through the opening, the man who had lifted the bar shouted to his companion, 'Thirty guineas they go over the cliff!'

'Done!' cried his fellow, groping for his wallet.

The gate swung idly behind the vanished coach and the two sporting gentlemen listened minute by minute, clutching their purses. A bee droned idly in the heather and the smell of the sea came across the moor. No sound came up from below.

There is an odd resemblance in that hundred-year-old story to what we listen for today. We have just opened the gate and the purse is in our hands. The roads on that fierce coast diverge and reconverge. In some strange manner, in a single instant we are both the sporting gentlemen intent on their wager and the terrified occupants of the coach.<sup>2</sup>

**A**mericans are familiar with two endings for stories. In childhood we came to love and longed to hear the words, "And so they lived happily ever after." As we grew into maturity, we found more often that life's tales end with the sobering but promising words, "To be continued."

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