RUGGED INDIVIDUALISM

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This is repeated here, though it appears in Policy Perspectives, because of some variations.
Rugged Individualism

There has been a whole spate of books, articles, and speeches bewailing America's lost leadership. Politician after politician cries out for "bold and imaginative" action — seldom defined at all and never with any precision. Religious leaders bewail moral decay, as preachers have since exhortation began; you can "read all about it" in the Old Testament. Publishers dominant in the field of mass media, who not so long ago called this "the American Century," now assert that we have lost our sense of mission and are lacking any faith in a national purpose. The wailing wall is crowded, and ululations fill the air. When one asks where new leadership is to come from, who is to define the national purpose, and who will summon us from moral lassitude, the answer is an embarrassed silence.

Recently there was a symposium on the national purpose. A number of people gave their view of what it had been, when it was lost, and what should be done to recover it. I found it intriguing that not one of the great minds even mentioned the individual and his responsibility. Every criticism was cast in collective terms, in terms of society.

This experience was a dramatic manifestation of the manner in which we have reacted away from the ideal of the individual living his life in an atmosphere of liberty and pursuing those inner satisfactions which Thomas Jefferson subsumed under the word "happiness" in the Declaration of Independence. Happiness is an intriguing word; it was not a casual choice on the part of Jefferson. He did not say "pleasure" or "gaiety"; he did not say "diversion"; he did not say "leisure" or "recreation." He used a word deeper and more profound in meaning than any of those. Happiness is not the external pleasure that comes from wealth, diversion, distraction. It never comes to societies but only to individuals.

Moreover, we should note that Jefferson did not lump the three values together. Two of them, life and liberty, he spoke of as absolute. But with regard to happiness there was a vital qualification — the only right was the right of the individual to pursue it. The Declaration carried no guarantee of attainment of happi-
ness. At the outset we might as well face the fact that many will pursue happiness with energy, amounting to devotion, and still not attain it. One may have life and liberty, yet still find only misery. There is the rub. Many have neither the will nor the courage to accept the challenge and pursue the good which life and liberty may make possible. They will ask a leader to take over the task and give them a free ride. But of that more in a moment.

II

There was a time when the individual was at the core of our political, religious, and economic thought. Indeed, the key to our history is the concept of freedom. One man may chase the dollar and consider it almighty. Thoreau could go to Walden Pond in search of his own goals; Emerson could exalt the thinker; Walt Whitman could extol the pioneers and assert that "the crowning growth of the United States is to be spiritual and heroic." Franklin, Jefferson, Edison, Theodore Roosevelt — and millions more — could follow their insatiable curiosity. Initiative is decentralized; responsibility is personalized; the individual is the ultimate value. His freedom is the key. Judge Learned Hand put the philosophy in a few words: "It is enough that we set out to mould the motley stuff of life into some form of our own choosing; when we do, the performance is itself the wage. 'The play's the thing.'"

In far-off days we were not ashamed to speak even about rugged individualism. We respect men like Elijah Lovejoy, a Maine product, who lost his property and ultimately his life at the hands of a mob, because he stood for principles. Even at the cost of life itself, he would not surrender his opposition to slavery. We still pay him, and others like him, formal homage with ceremonies and tablets and prizes. But such heroes of the past do not seem very real to us. They are story-book men, or material for a television serial. Even in that medium it is the men of physical, rather than moral, courage who are depicted — or rather I should say romanticized. Some of you may have memories long enough to recall the Davy Crockett rage.

Somewhere in the 1930's, or thereabouts, rugged individualism became associated with industrial piracy, with defiance of moral checks, with exploitation of one's fellow men. If I may borrow an expression familiar in Britain, when we denounced rugged
individualism, we "threw the baby out with the bath water." We went too far, for nothing is more obvious than that leadership is a word which describes a quality of individuals, not of a society.

Surely the century which has known Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Charles de Gaulle, and Ghandi should not find it difficult to realize that leadership requires not only individuals but rugged individuals. All those men were tried by fire; all came to power against striking odds. Indeed, if we look at the new nations of Asia and Africa, we will find that a great majority of their leaders — like Nehru, for example — spent a good many years in prison. It was their courage and faith that inspired their nations.

There were other rugged individuals in this century, also, such as Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Nasser, and, closer to home, Trujillo, Perez Jimenes, and many more. Many of those rugged individuals were not, to put it mildly, on the side of the angels. Several were enemies of truth, peace, justice, and democracy. They attained power because they were more rugged than the defenders of those virtues. This was symbolized in history by the meeting of Chamberlain with Hitler at Munich; it was the rugged individual who dominated. One man was ready to take risks; the other sought to avoid them, and at too great a cost. He thought he had bought "peace in our time," but the gaily wrapped package contained war, not peace.

We have observed this same phenomenon in America. Senator McCarthy was a rugged individual. For a time it seemed that there were not enough individuals rugged enough to stand up to him. His power seemed too great to challenge. It was said so often as to put calluses on our ears that people dared not speak their minds in the face of danger to job, to reputation, and to family. That was doubtless true of those to whom security was the central goal of life, and, of course, some weak men responded with silence.

Amid the craven outcry of men who dared not face the "terror," recruitment for government service continued. Many public officials performed their reasonable service, ready to take the consequences. The best of them went on—if not serenely, at least with fortitude. Some who did suffered for it. That was tragic, but it established no precedent, for it had happened again and again in history. Many more went through the period of stress and strain unscathed, even as some do in battle. I find it extra-
ordinary that we take battle heroes and heroes in public service in our stride, but we save our pity and our tears for civilian cowards.

If *Dr. Zhivago* could be written in the midst of Stalinism, it should give us some hint of the reservoirs of courage and integrity that can exist under circumstances that make McCarthyism pale by comparison. For every coward in the world, there is not only a hero, but a host of heroes. Recall what Pasternak said when he was offered the Nobel Prize: the award "will never occur, since my government will never permit such an award to be given to me. This and much else is hard and sad, but it is these fatalities that give life weight and depth and gravity and make it extraordinary—rapturous, magical, and real."

Yet we were told that certain people would have said great and significant things if they had not been silenced by the terror of McCarthyism. My observation is that when he died and the terror was allayed, they still had nothing to say. I believe that for many he was a shield instead of a spear. He alibied the lazy and the timid from being exposed for what they were. I never knew anyone who had something significant to say who failed to say it because of McCarthy.

Once he was confronted by a Yankee individualist like Joseph Welch, McCarthy had met his match. Welch was not terrified. It took only one fearless, rugged individual, strategically placed at the right time, to show the hollowness of the McCarthy bluster.

### III

The McCarthy episode was by no means the only instance where some quailed before an assault upon their security. It was merely a dramatic recent manifestation of a common phenomenon. Let us glance at some of the books which are supposed to reflect the current state of the public mind. One is *The Organization Man*—the man who suppresses his individuality or is so weak that others dominate it; he conforms to a pattern, as though he were made with a cookie cutter instead of being endowed with God-like attributes. Another book talks of "status seekers," people who have no individual standards of value or the courage to assert them. They seek to promote their interests by identifying themselves with a "superior" social level. They want the sense of security which comes from standing in a mass of people where one
is not conspicuous or cannot be identified except in relation to a chosen group.

This temptation to shed responsibility is not unique to our day or to this generation. In a brilliant passage in his famous book *Revolt of the Masses*, the great Spanish philosopher-historian Ortega y Gasset summed up the tendency and explained in a few words how the dictator rises to power not by his own strength so much as by the weakness of others. "Many men . . . homesick for the hard . . . devote themselves passionately to whatever is left in them of the sheep. They want to march through life together, along the collective path, shoulder to shoulder, wool rubbing wool, and the head down." It was this impulse to escape the harsh task of thought, to avoid responsibility, that made "He will decide" one of the great slogans of the Mussolini era in Italy.

This passion for security and anonymity has not passed America by; as a great jurist said, "They are the defenses against the intolerable agony of facing ourselves. . . . We are in deadly fear of life, as much of our own American scene betrays." To some extent because of eagerness to have others make the hard choices of life, there is loud complaint that "Washington does not give us leadership." But Washington is inhabited by individuals like the rest of the nation. If the goal of living is to hide in a social group, if we do not want to be rugged individuals, if we consistently decry individualism, why should we expect leadership? Whenever you sell individualism short, you lay the axe at the roots of democratic leadership, though you open the way for demagogues.

IV

This recent denigration of the individual runs very deep and appears in unexpected and seemingly innocuous ways. For example, we demand guidance counsellors in schools. There is nothing wrong with seeking advice or in having it available. Most of us can profit by good counsel from a wise and disinterested person. But what kind of guidance have they been giving? All kinds, of course; but it is writ large upon the record that counselling since the great depression has been predominantly defensive. This defensive character of counsel is one more evidence, among many, that though we have recovered from the economic and financial disasters of the thirties, the psychological damage has not yet been fully repaired.
For this reason, counselling has not been a summons to students to be themselves or to take the risks that go with rugged individualism. The slogan implicit in too much advice has been "safety first"; security is put before all else. Students are told to aim for certain jobs because there are plenty of vacancies and therefore not much danger of unemployment. They are advised to train for certain vocations because the pay is good, rather than because such employment of one's talents and energies brings intellectual, spiritual, and emotional satisfactions. This kind of defensive counsel will never help to produce leadership.

The Soviets are candid about their central doctrine. Whatever else they keep secret, this is no secret at all. Economic determinism is the professed key to their philosophy and to their policy. They say explicitly that "the material life of society . . . is primary, and its spiritual life secondary, derivative"; "one must look for the source of social ideas, social theories, political views, and political institutions . . . in the conditions of the material life of society." Communists are relentless in their logical defense of that concept, unswerving in their devotion to that idea. Such a doctrine is the complete denial of the historic American dream. It is the precise opposite of the great ideals which shaped American history, proclaimed with such eloquence by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence.

Few Americans, therefore, would explicitly avow such a philosophical foundation for their way of life. Yet many, implicitly and in action, exemplify this grossly materialistic premise. Much of the recent advice to young men and women has been cast in the tone, the mood, and the framework of economic determinism. Amidst all the noisy chatter about resistance to Communism, there has been a silent surrender to one of its central ideas, namely the assumption that economic interest is primary, while other phases of life are secondary, derivative. Ironically, some of those who have shouted loudest about un-Americanism and Communist infiltration have swallowed this doctrine—and never felt it in the gullet as they gulped down this most un-American of all political and economic dogmas. They clasp Stalin's doctrine to their bosoms while with their voices they denounce him and all his works.

If we have been blind to this fact, others have not. It accounts for the feeling often expressed in the new nations of Asia and Africa that there is little to choose between the avowed material-
ism of the Soviets and the unconscious materialism that they observe in the United States.

It is still true that life is more than meat and the body more than raiment. We can gain some insight into the proper choice of a life work by considering the word "vocation." Catholics use the word in a particular sense, as a "call," or "summons," usually to the religious life. That is its root meaning and Catholics have no monopoly of it, nor do they claim to have. In customary use, however, the word has been emasculated. It usually means merely a regular job that will draw steady pay. It carries no sense of mission, no overtone of dedication; it is only a manner of making a living. As long as vocations are selected defensively, or because they are safe, or just because they carry material rewards, as long as their deeper non-material satisfactions are sold short, the whole concept of leadership will continue to be sacrificed.

Ortega said: "You are able to be whatever you want. . . That is to say, among his various possible beings each man always finds one which is his genuine and authentic being. The voice which calls him to that authentic being is what we call 'vocation.' But the majority of men devote themselves to silencing that voice of the vocation and refusing to hear it. They manage to make a noise within themselves, to deafen themselves, to distract their own attention in order not to hear it; and they defraud themselves by substituting for their genuine selves a false course of life. On the other hand, the only man who lives his own self, who truly lives, is the man who lives his vocation, whose life is in agreement with his own true self."

A guidance counsellor who has made a fetish of security, or who has unwittingly surrendered his thinking to economic determinism, may steer a youth away from his dream of becoming a poet, an artist, a musician, or any other of thousands of things, because it offers no security, it does not pay well, there are no vacancies, it has no "future." If we are to have guidance, it must not be the blind leading the blindfolded, but men with vision respecting not only the stars in the heavens but also the stars in the eyes of the young.

Among all the tragic consequences of depression and war, this suppression of personal self-expression through one's life work is among the most poignant. If you wish to speak in social terms, rather than in terms of individual self-expression, that suppression, when effective, is fatal to the concept of leadership. For leadership
requires courage, boldness, and the willingness to accept risks. To use the most dreadful word permitted to be uttered in public, leadership inevitably, inescapably, involves insecurity. Men who have no fear of damnation still tremble at that word—inequality. I suppose we should call it the modern substitute for the classic concept of Hell.

V

The retreat from the effort to stimulate leadership arises in part, also, from a profound misinterpretation of democracy. No political thinker of any stature in all history ever interpreted democracy as equality in all things. If you read the Scriptures, you will discover the parable of the talents—one had ten, one had five, a third had but a single talent. Read Plato and Aristotle and their successors; you can follow the idea down through the ages to Alfred North Whitehead. For example, Thomas Jefferson wrote: “There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents.” Nowhere among the great thinkers will you find anywhere an assumption that people are equal physically, mentally, or in terms of character. What you will find set forth as an ideal is that every individual, however broken his body or limited his mind, shall have equality before the law and equality of opportunity to fulfill his own highest potential. That is the American ideal.

In the reaction against rugged individualism; however, this historical and rational concept of democracy gave way to a sentimental and superficial idea that people should somehow be made equal. We can observe this effort all too clearly in education. During the last generation there has been a strong tendency to level requirements down, in order that the slowest, in the words of the sentimentalists, should not have their tender personalities “damaged by failure”—as though failure were not a normal experience of every human being.

The worst error which has bedeviled education during this generation has been a tragic underestimation of the educability of individuals. Because of that error emphasis was too often transferred from learning to “adjustment”—a term more appropriate to a nut than to a person. In his book Charlie Is My Darling, Joyce Cary made this profound statement: “Knowledge, in short the experience of the mind, is just as important to a child’s
happiness and 'goodness' as affection, adventure; above all, knowledge of his own moral position. And the last is often most difficult to come by, not because he could not grasp a complex situation ('this is a grand deed but a bad one') but because grown-ups do not trust the power of his imagination to form a picture in more than one dimension."

This doubt, this lack of trust in the individual, applies to all, but it is revealed most tragically in the treatment of the gifted. For, combined with the levelling process and interpreting egalitarianism as allowing no one an advantage, it tended strongly to suppress talents. Again, as in so many other ways, the whole concept of leadership was assaulted.

Realization that this was a cardinal error has, of late, been dawning upon many people. Now they seek hurriedly for some sovereign remedy for its dire consequences. Strangely enough, the beginning of wisdom in this respect is very simple. What the American student in high school and college needs more than any other single thing is, as I have already hinted, stars in his eyes. We have encouraged him not only to keep his feet on the ground, but also to fix his eyes on the ground. "Realities," so-called, rather than aspirations, have been offered him. But hopes, dreams, ideals—call them what you will—are prime essentials.

The second step in freeing talent for leadership is easy to state but will require heroic effort to bring to pass. It is to stimulate the student to summon the courage to follow his star and accept the consequences, joyous or otherwise, as events and his own will, energy, and skill may determine. Some will fail; some do even now amid this false concept of egalitarian adjustment. All will get hurt. That price—that price precisely—is paid by everyone who plays football. Is the realization of one's own being, or the fate of the nation, less worth the risk? In any event, no available cushion will avoid pain or death, for both are implicit in the human tragedy. On the other hand, many will find the happiness the Declaration of Independence said it was their right to pursue, and some will become leaders.

It was for such courage that William Faulkner made his eloquent appeal when he accepted the Nobel Prize. In a recent book Leon Howard spoke of that speech as a "declaration of independence from the fears of the atomic age, designed to encourage young writers to cast off the bondage of fear." In the course of his response to the award Faulkner said: "I believe that man will
not merely endure, he will prevail. He is immortal . . . because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's and writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.” That is sound gospel, not only for poets and writers but also for men of every vocation.

VI

For a long time the Communists used a slogan: “Religion is the opiate of the people.” Like most slogans it would never have gained currency, nor could it have been effective as propaganda, if there had been no shred of truth in it. But there was some truth. The Russian Orthodox Church had been corrupt; it had served the Czar, often slavishly. It had tended to make people accept, rather than resist, a tyrannous regime. In that important sense it had indeed become an opiate.

With somewhat the same degree of validity it could be said that “security has become the opiate of the people” in America. This is not an assault upon all aspects of social insurance any more than the comment about one phase of the activity of the Russian Church is an attack on religion. No one in his right mind would wish to restore the ruthlessness of many phases of the Industrial Revolution. No one sensitive to humanity would yearn for some of the forms of capitalism which were common as late as the turn of the century. No one with any feelings would want the burden of unemployment to be borne by a man who found himself without a job through no lack of industry, character, or skill—that is, through no fault of his own. The system which laid upon individuals responsibilities without adequate resources to discharge them was wrong and had to be corrected.

It became essential for industry to recognize certain social obligations such as provision for retirement, sick leave, vacations, lay-offs, and severance pay. It became essential also for the State—society in its political form—to accept many responsibilities for social insurance, to participate in discharging obligations

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which could not properly be assigned to either the individual worker or his employer. The changes by which this alteration of emphasis was wrought proved to be a vast, though silent, revolution. It transformed the capitalism which Karl Marx observed; not only did it make many of his conclusions wrong, but—even worse—it also made them irrelevant. Failure to take this great revolution into account is what makes the Soviet view of American enterprise and American society so severely distorted.

Like so many essential reforms, the reaction against old evils sent the pendulum toward the opposite extreme. Reform went too far. "Security" became more than a proper and necessary buffer against misfortune. It was made an end in itself. There was a strong tendency to substitute too much public responsibility and promote too little private responsibility. When thus overdone, security became an opiate. Like other opiates, it tends to become an addiction.

Down on Cape Cod, where I live part of the year, we have people who work in the summer just long enough to make themselves eligible for unemployment payments. Then in the winter season they go on relief. Thus they avoid exposure to the elements and calm their consciences by saying that since they are paid X dollars for not working and since they would get only X plus Y dollars if they worked, their wages really amount only to Y dollars, which is obviously "inadequate." That situation is not unique. In my own state of Rhode Island, it was discovered that public assistance checks were being sent to people who went to Florida for the winter season.

Some laws and some administrators have promoted this kind of abuse of sound protection. Let us pass over the needless cost to the taxpayer; let us not dwell upon the economic waste when there is so insistent a demand for more rapid growth of the economy. Instead let us concentrate upon one question: What is the effect of such habits upon the development of leadership? It can be summed up in one word: disastrous. You do not get boldness, or dedication to public service, or even responsible citizenship from those who choose as much idleness as possible as a way of life. They cease to be masters of the state, as the democratic thesis demands; they become its wards. When the citizen accepts the government as his guardian, democracy is in decay. A great Russian social philosopher pointed out that as "the state grew strong, the people grew weak." It will always be so.
In the American tradition poverty is regarded as an unmitigated evil. It is partly because this concept is so deeply embedded in our thought that we have made a fetish of security. Thus it has been said times without number that the poor cannot be interested in freedom, that democracy can flourish only among the relatively well-to-do.

All the evidence, when fairly examined, is against that shallow view. Our forefathers, who set our democratic pattern, were not leaders of a wealthy nation; far from it. And if wealth meant happiness, we, incomparably the wealthiest people in the world, should be correspondingly the happiest. But the weight of the evidence is to the contrary; if we are to believe our thought leaders—the columnists—we are not happy. Denmark, where the average income is a fraction of that of the United States, is sturdily democratic. There the pursuit of happiness is almost palpable; one is struck not only at Tivoli but everywhere by the gift of laughter possessed by that people. Even in the midst of the German occupation they reacted more with mockery than with terror.

Ireland is almost a synonym of poverty; yet its dances and songs have a rhythm and a lilt that reflect innate gaiety. Their history is one of patriotism, of political passions that blaze into intensity. Nevertheless, their daily life, hard and often drab, is enlightened with a merry spirit. There, as elsewhere, democracy has flourished amid poverty.

If wealth and comfort and security are really the preconditions of the democratic process, we might as well write off Latin America, Asia, and Africa as ineligible to participate in democracy, and we shall soon be an island in the midst of a hostile sea of anti-democratic ideologies.

Even those who insist that the wealth and security we possess are the preconditions of democracy complain that the public is inert to its responsibilities. We are deluged with figures showing that a smaller proportion of the public vote in elections here than in countries where poverty is rife and security has not been made a fetish. We are told that Americans do not want to take the risk of running for office. More particularly, business leaders shy away from expressing opinions on public issues. Yet the same people who pronounce these strictures upon our citizenship,
energy, and purpose still talk as though our major political objec-
tive should be more and more security. They do not see that
the opiate has taken hold. Their only proposed cure for the ad-
diction is larger doses.

Again and again you can hear news analysts on radio and tele-
vision and often can read the commentators and columnists in
newspapers discuss some topic. Then, in a rather awestruck
voice, they say that this policy or that action "involves risks." They speak of some statement or some person as "controversial." These comments are made in a tone that implies that risk is folly
and that being controversial is equivalent to being wrong. Every
time such a comment is uttered it is manifest evidence that secur-
ity has indeed become an opiate. The democratic process requires
controversy; and without risk there is no progress. The idle, the
contented, the slothful do not crusade for advance.

VIII

There is nothing in the Bill of Rights that promises that the
freedom there guaranteed can be enjoyed in comfort or in a
serene atmosphere. In the long history of freedom, discomfort
has always accompanied speaking on controversial matters. There
never has been a time when there were not social sanctions against
candor. But if freedom is to amount to anything, one must be
ready to pay the price. When a man speaks out, he must be ready
to receive, if not to absorb, criticism. Dostoievski lived in a land
of tyranny; he knew its corrosive effect. With the wisdom that
comes from lack of liberty, he asserted that "tragic freedom"
is better than "compulsory happiness." It is a lesson we need to
ponder.

Every aspect of life is touched with hazard; nor will all the
political nostrums ever offered alter that fact. There is a deep
insincerity in pretending otherwise. In his play The Skin of
Our Teeth, Thornton Wilder wrote, "Every good thing in life
stands on the razor-edge of danger." Never was a profound ob-
servation stated with more simplicity and clarity. Even as we
endlessly mouth "safety first" as our verbal motto, we build cars
that go faster and faster. We undertake engineering feats that
inevitably involve danger. If no risks are involved, the profits
of capitalism are vicious; they are nothing but usury or exploita-

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I am asserting that those who misrepresent the normal experiences of life, who decry being controversial, who shun risk, are enemies of the American way of life, whatever the piety of their vocal professions and the patriotic flavor of their platitudes.

IX

All I have said can be summarized in a sentence. Life is an individual, as well as a social, experience; in the modern age there is no danger that you will escape social contacts and social pressure, but there is grave danger that you will lose the flavor and the joys which are inherent in the pursuit of happiness, one of your fundamental rights. The wisdom of the ancients was inscribed above the Door of the Temple of the Delphic Oracle: "Know Thyself." Any wisdom that I have can be summed up with equal brevity: "Be Yourself."