I The Good and the Great

Its military supremacy greater than that of the rest of the world combined, its economy the envy of even its enemies, its culture irresistible, the United States entered the twenty-first century as powerful as any nation in the history of the human race. Powerful did not mean invulnerable, as the world learned on September 11, 2001. But the willingness of George W. Bush to use military force in response to that horror evoked for some the era of Theodore Roosevelt, a president who, as William Kristol and Robert Kagan put it, "implored Americans to look beyond the immediate needs of their daily lives" and, in so doing, "aspired to greatness for America."[1]

Although Kristol and other "national greatness conservatives" originally hoped that Senator John McCain of Arizona would carry out their program of strengthening American power, President Bush's ambitious foreign policy objectives in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq quickly won their support. They were not the only ones who felt that way; former White House speechwriter David Frum and former chairman of the Defense Policy Review Board Richard Perle wrote a book urging Mr. Bush to apply his big stick in places other than Iraq, such as Syria, Leba-

non, and North Korea, making, along the way, explicit comparisons between TR and GWB.[2] The president, as it happened, liked the comparison; Mr. Bush keeps a copy of TR's speeches on the coffee table of his ranch in Texas and fills his remarks justifying his foreign policies with Rooseveltian words such as "resolve," "courage," and "sticking the course."[3] Little doubt exists over whom George W. Bush would like to be compared to when historians ultimately make their comparisons.

Theodore Roosevelt was not quite the hero that Americans often make him out to be; ever conscious of his image and his place in history, he stage-managed his claims to greatness as much as he actually accomplished them. Still there is enough achievement in his case—his recognition that regulation of business had become essential; his commitments to a form of meritocracy that, in the context of his time, enabled him to appreciate the contributions of immigrants; his understanding that divisions by class undermined American ideals; his appointment of Gifford Pinchot to manage the nation's forests; and his willingness to use American power on behalf of peace as well as war—that conservatives have reason to identify him in the camp of national greatness.

What is less clear is whether Mr. Bush should be viewed as following in his footsteps. At first glance the comparison seems to make sense: both men were children of the East Coast who discovered their true selves by moving to or spending considerable time in the western portions of the United States; became adults who never tired of demonstrating their masculinity to all and sundry; were not above heaping furious scorn on the enemies each of them all too easily made; showed little hesitation in convincing themselves of the inherent rightness of their views; once in office discovered that people in the countries to which they were so quick to bring the presumed benefits of American power were not, in the end, especially grateful for their actions; and, despite their political achievements, left divisions in the body politic be-

hind them that fueled the wrath of their opponents. As correspondences go in history, this appears to be a fairly close one.

Yet Roosevelt and Bush can be also distinguished in a number of crucially important ways. Appalled by the greed of the wealthy, Roosevelt became an avid reformer willing to use government to create conditions of fairness for all, turning his back on the Republican Party's inclination to reinforce the privileges and power of the already well off. Conservation—today we call it environmentalism—was, as TR once put it, "the great fundamental question of morality,"[4] not a question of increasing the profit incentives for drilling and logging. Roosevelt's vision of war, however imperialistic, included compulsory military service, which President Bush opposes, and the former president, unlike the latter one, put himself all too frequently in harm's way. Roosevelt's allegiance to the Republican Party was always a bit shaky and he bolted from it in the end, while George W. Bush has been among the most partisan Republicans in modern memory. From time to time in the course of his career, TR would look back with a skeptical eye toward some of the imperialistic ambitions he supported earlier in his life, while GWB has shown no propensity to question any of the decisions, but especially the foreign policy decisions, he made during his presidency. We know, in short, that Mr. Bush claimed the mantle of TR, but we have reason to doubt whether TR would be pleased to see his ideas appropriated by Mr. Bush. He would likely admire President Bush's firmness, just as he would be appalled by the fact that Karl Rove, Mr. Bush's closest political advisor, models himself on Mark Hanna, who played the same role for arch Republican William McKinley, hardly TR's favorite politician.

Despite the gulf that separates Theodore Roosevelt from George W. Bush, neoconservative intellectuals were correct to insist that the time had come to take ideas of American greatness seriously; September 11 made clear to the world how central the United States is to its hopes and fears, and after September 11,

whether or not one agrees with the decision to go to war in Iraq, the United States has no choice but to engage directly, using military force if need be, enemies prepared to fight a war against it. Like other transformative events in our history such as the American revolution, the firing on Fort Sumter, the 1929 stock market crash, and the attack on Pearl Harbor, September 11 will be remembered as having stimulated a wide-ranging inquiry into the question of whether America's traditional ways of carrying out its public affairs are sufficient for dealing with the new realities imposed upon it. We live in Shakespearian times, in which evil stalks the globe, matters of statecraft, high and low, take center stage, and all too many people die.

Before we can evoke ideas of American greatness, however, we need to ask some questions about it. What exactly is national greatness? Should the United States aspire to it? What are the costs of doing so? Does the fact that George W. Bush's decision to go it alone in Iraq backfired so spectacularly mean that all dreams of a Rooseveltian foreign policy should be discouraged? Can the United States develop an ambitious agenda for reconstructing the world, as at least some contemporary conservatives insist it should, while retreating, as many contemporary conservatives also advocate, from ambition in its domestic life? Conversely, can liberals, generally fearful of war and suspicious of foreign entanglements, be true to their commitments to freedom and equality of opportunity at home if they refrain from fighting for them abroad? If American greatness is so important, why have so many presidents stood for what the decidedly un-Rooseveltian Warren G. Harding called "normalcy"?

Something valuable will have been lost if, having begun to discuss whether America should aspire to greatness, we stopped the discussion because a president who claimed the mantle of Theodore Roosevelt did such an imperfect job of bringing into contem-

porary politics some of the ideals for which Roosevelt, as well as many other politicians and thinkers in American history, stood. In their fantastically evil way, America's enemies perceive a greatness in America that Americans themselves had somehow overlooked; denouncing us, as the Ayatollah Khomeini so frequently did, as the "great Satan" gets at least half of the equation right. Because of September 11, we now know that we are larger than life to nearly everyone in the world. We have not put the question of American greatness back on the table; it has been put there for us. It is up to us whether we take our country and its potential as seriously as everyone else in the world does.

If by the phrase American greatness we include patriotic sentiments fashioned for ceremonial events, then all presidents aspire to it. Willing greatness into existence, however, is a far more difficult proposition. It is not the invasion of a small and defenseless country—Ronald Reagan's intervention in Grenada offers perhaps the best example—that contributes to a sense of greatness, for victories achieved in such one-sided fashion seem tawdry in retrospect, even to those who celebrate them at the time they occur. Nor, shifting to domestic concerns, can greatness be given pride of place when a president decides, as Bill Clinton did after the 1994 elections, to substitute for ambitious reforms such small-scale steps as encouraging school uniforms or discouraging teenage smoking, however important each of them may be. Both Reagan's actions and Clinton's were popular, but popular does not mean great. Greatness is made of sterner stuff than successfully facing the exigencies of the electoral cycle. It takes leadership of a particu-

larly tenacious sort to overcome the inclination of entrenched institutions to place self-interest before the common good, the desires of ordinary people not to be disturbed for purposes larger than those of family and friends, the need, on occasion, to disappoint one's closest allies, and the tendency of public officials to find enemies among their immediate competitors rather than among distant threats.

Achieving national greatness involves three tasks: articulating a meaningful vision of the American purpose; assembling the political capacity to transform that vision into reality; and demonstrating a willingness to use force if necessary to protect that vision and that reality from international enemies and, on occasion, to spread it around the world. Oddly enough for a society that so frequently proclaims itself great, all of these requirements have proven difficult to realize throughout the American experience.

When Americans reflect on what their vision of national purpose may be, the two most frequently cited qualities are liberty and equality. Yet there has never been widespread agreement in the United States on what those terms are supposed to mean. Whatever the founders meant by liberty, it obviously did not extend to those held in bondage; if anything, liberty in the first half-century of our existence became the rallying cry of Southern politicians determined to protect their distinct way of life against those who would extend freedom to all. By finally ridding the country of slavery, the Reconstruction amendments opened the door to a recommitment to liberty, but—again this is well-trod territory—American courts were more likely to apply those amendments to freedom of contract than to effective freedom for former slaves and their descend-

ents. So confused remains our understanding of liberty that to this day we are unsure whether, in its name, we are powerless to regulate the influence over politicians sought by wealthy campaign contributors or able to protect children from the handguns easily obtainable by their parents.

Still, there can be no doubt of the importance of liberty to greatness. One can argue, as Americans have throughout the course of their history, whether an unregulated free market best achieves liberty by allowing for an entrepreneurial spirit to flourish or stands in liberty's way by denying to individuals the capacities needed for self-development. Along the same lines, debates have taken place in the United States for longer than a century over whether such liberties as free speech or the right to privacy come at the cost of insufficient appreciation of the needs of national security or of insufficient recognition of one's obligations to others. There are no easy answers to these questions, and we will no doubt continue to be preoccupied with them indefinitely.

The great challenge to liberty in the twentieth century, however, was posed, not by the welfare state, the sexual revolution, or the demands of national security, but from the powerful, if thankfully short-lived, experience of totalitarianism. And that experience teaches that while Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill were correct to insist on the importance of free markets and free speech, Immanuel Kant was even more right to remind us that individuals—their needs, desires, decisions, and actions—cannot serve as means to someone else's ends. Liberty today, much as the American founders suggested in rhetoric if not, alas, always in deed, consists of the idea that human beings come attached with inalienable rights to personhood; to the

greatest extent possible, they themselves, and not a coercive force speaking on their behalf, should be in command of their fate. Other societies might be able to achieve greatness without committing themselves to the protection and extension of a concept of human autonomy, both at home and abroad, but the United States cannot. Liberty is too much part of its tradition to be sacrificed for any other objective, and if such personal autonomy is so sacrificed, whatever is achieved as a result cannot be considered great.

At least we talk frequently about liberty, which we do not always do about equality; to take one striking example, the words "all men are created equal" have been cited only twenty-three times by the U.S. Supreme Court in its history, mostly in dissent.[5] Forced to face the issue of equality because of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln attempted through his magnificent prose to flesh out the promise of equality at which the Declaration of Independence hinted. But as Robert Penn Warren realized when he said that the Confederacy was born on the day Lee handed his sword to Grant at Appomattox,[6] the less attractive meaning of American purpose over which the war was fought—the decidedly inegalitarian one that held that the value of some human lives, based solely on race, was worth less than others—while losing the war, won the peace, and its victory has contributed to a society unwilling to apply the most elementary principals of equality until a century after the fighting stopped. In the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we speak more, as well as more favorably, about equality than we did a century ago, but our confusion about what it means persists; we cannot decide whether the equality promised by those landmark events

mandates that we practice affirmative action or prohibits us from so doing.

Although Americans have disagreed about the meaning of equality, however, they have nonetheless consistently expanded the reach of equality with each passing generation. Individuals denied the most basic of human rights because of their race eventually won their freedom, then their formal right to vote, followed by their actual right to vote, and finally a national commitment to their inclusion in all institutions of importance in American life. Women once denied the suffrage now decide elections. No matter how divided Americans may be over gay marriage, the fact that the discussion is even taking place is remarkable given the fear and loathing not that long ago associated with sex between people of the same gender. American greatness can be neutral with respect to contentious ways of pursuing equality, such as affirmative action or gay marriage; making support for or opposition to such policies a precondition of greatness leads nowhere. But no vision of what the United States should be can be considered great if it carries with it a demand to return to a time when unearned status determined that some would be rewarded more than others. As liberty at its core means protecting an autonomous sphere of private life, equality above all else means denying to no one the capacity to realize their self-chosen goals for reasons so arbitrary that they cannot stand public scrutiny.

Whatever Americans mean by liberty and equality, realizing those ideals in practice has required far more political will than American leaders, hobbled by a habitual fear of concentrated political power, have usually been able to muster. Liberty and equality must exist within the framework of the nation before

they can be expanded to the world, but in the United States, the creation of a nation did not come easily. Consider the case of James Madison, the greatest mind among our early nationalists. Madison will always be remembered as one of the two key authors of the *Federalist Papers*, a classic text in the development of the American nation. Yet he also saw fit to author the Virginia Resolution challenging national sovereignty on behalf of the states, and while Madison understood far better than his friend Jefferson the dangers of allowing the states too much room to challenge federal authority, his ambivalence about national sovereignty set the tone for the decades, if not centuries, to follow.

In terms of consistency of nationalist endeavor, Madison must take second place to his fellow Virginian John Marshall, whose audacious U.S. Supreme Court decisions seemed to settle where ultimate authority lay in a society still given to the worship of the local and the immediate. "Marshall," writes the political theorist Robert Faulkner, "was in the long modern tradition of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and their followers in the way he believed one supreme government, state above church, with a superior or sovereign power to command all within its jurisdiction, the primary condition for a proper nation."[7] Even more than in *Marbury v. Madison* and *Gibbons v. Odgen*, Marshall expressed his sweeping view of national sovereignty in *Cohens v. Virginia* (1821). Rejecting a claim by Virginia that its courts were the proper tribunal to hear a case involving the sale of a lottery ticket in the District of Columbia, Marshall held that "the United States form . . . a single nation." "[We] are one people," he continued, whose national existence is defined by a constitution that "is framed for ages

to come." State governments have no independent sovereignty; they are instead "constituent parts of the United States" and "members of one great empire—for some purposes sovereign, for some purposes subordinate." When states rights advocates challenged his opinion, Marshall responded in an anonymous pamphlet by asking, "Have we no national existence?" "We were charged by the late emperor of France with having no national character, or actual existence as a nation," he pointed out. "But not even he denied our theoretical or constitutional existence."[8]

Ever the political realist, Marshall understood that local elites, threatened by a distant power they could not control, would use authority close at hand to protect their privileges, even at the cost of weakening the nation, and he would interpret the Constitution in ways that would seriously encumber their ability to do so. Yet Marshall, who lived into the era of Jacksonian democracy, would witness before his death the resurrection of a states' rights philosophy that owed more to the Kentucky and Virginia resolutions than it did to his own majority opinions. A great son of the South, Marshall worried, with considerable justification, that his own region would be the biggest stumbling block to the nation he did so much to bring into existence; as he wrote to Joseph Story in 1831, "I had supposed that north of the Potowmack a firm and solid government competent to the security of rational liberty might be preserved. Even that now seems doubtful. The case of the south seems to me to be desperate. Our opinions are incompatible with a united government even among ourselves. The union has been prolonged thus far by miracles. I fear they cannot continue."[9]

Marshall's insistence that Americans were one people did not imply that those people had the right to choose who governed them; like the other Federalists of his era, Marshall was no democrat. But having put the idea of the nation into play, Marshall introduced, even if against his own instincts, a political dynamic that would lead to the ideal of national citizenship. Federalists were fond of speaking of the need for "energy" in government, but in a democratic rather than aristocratic age that energy could only be furnished by the people themselves in the exercise of their rights, including their right to vote and to participate in the affairs that shaped their common destiny; when the idea of equality meets the drive for national sovereignty, citizenship for all is the inevitable outcome.

Thus it was that Abraham Lincoln took the ideals of American greatness associated with the more high-minded Federalists—as their support for the Alien and Sedition Acts and their threatened attempts at secession suggest, Federalists were quite capable of low-mindedness—and transformed them into a language compatible with democratic realities. No longer were we "the people" of the preamble to the Constitution or even the "union" so eloquently evoked by Daniel Webster; we were now a nation, even, as Lincoln put it, a "new" nation, a word that appears four times in the first four sentences of the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln's vision of American greatness was not without its flaws; if Marshall was no democrat, Lincoln was no civil libertarian. But it is to Lincoln that we owe the idea that a great nation is dependent upon a great people, its greatness lying in its capacity to look beyond recrimination and to redeem itself through ties of mutual obligation. Only after the Civil War did the United States begin to develop the holidays,

monuments, rituals, pledges, and anthems that today symbolize for so many Americans their special sense of themselves as a united people with a common purpose. Indeed, according to one study of the language by which Americans describe themselves, it was not until the very end of the nineteenth century that talk of union faded, to be replaced by an idea of the American nation.[10]

In time, Lincoln's understanding of American greatness would become as contested as Marshall's, and it would eventually lose out to those as threatened by the idea of national citizenship as John C. Calhoun and other apologists for slavery. "This is no nation," said Kentucky Senator James B. Beck in 1875,[11] the same year Congress passed its thus far most extensive Civil Rights Act (which would be declared unconstitutional by a very un-Marshall-like Supreme Court that used the word" nation" only once in its decision, and then in reference to France).[12] If a nation is defined by the equal right of all its citizens to vote for those who lead it, surely a minimal definition that implies no commitment to the social rights that twentieth-century societies would later try to implement, Beck was right; the United States did not achieve formal national citizenship until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 gave the federal government the authority to overrule the determined refusal of mostly Southern states to allow African Americans to vote.

Divided over the principles America is expected to embody, and unwilling to establish the instruments of American national government that would enable great leaders to realize those principles, is it any wonder that the third idea associated with American greatness—the need to sustain and use sufficient force to defend and extend liberty and equality—has also

been more noteworthy by its absence than by its presence? On occasion, such force will be required at home, as President Eisenhower realized when he dispatched troops to enforce the law upon a reluctant South. But greatness implies as well a willingness to use force in defense of American ideals abroad, and this too has been the exception more than the rule. In the insightful typology developed by Walter Russell Mead, most of our foreign policy actions have been Jeffersonian and Jacksonian in nature, not Hamiltonian or Wilsonian.[13] Rather than viewing the world as ripe for imposition of American principles, we have traditionally suspected the world of wanting to impose its alien principles on us. Our leaders did best when they kept America pure, not when they engaged its power in places we could barely understand. Our isolationists, if that is what they ought to be called, had no problem with the idea of America as a divine nation. But they stopped well short of accepting the idea of America as a great nation, especially if greatness meant, as it nearly always did, higher taxes, compulsory military service, and government-led reform.

There have been exceptions to this distaste for worldwide greatness, none more pronounced than what political scientist Samuel P. Huntington calls the "neo-Hamiltonian compromise" of the late nineteenth century.[14] Men like Alfred Thayer Mahan, Elihu Root, and John Hay believed that they had the opportunity to apply Alexander Hamilton's pro-British, pro-banking, pro-military, pro-interventionist ideals in a way denied to the political theorist who first formulated them. "I am frankly an imperialist, in the sense that I believe that no nation, certainly no great nation, should henceforth maintain the policy of isolation which fitted our early history; above all, should

not on that outlived plea refuse to intervene in events obviously thrust upon its conscience," wrote Mahan in 1885.[15] The ideas of the neo-Hamiltonians, like those of Marshall and Lincoln, had their unattractive side; they flirted with racism, expressed contempt for Lincolnesque magnanimity, and, in their zeal to unify the nation, proved themselves intolerant of dissent. Still just as Marshall's national sovereignty led to Lincoln's national citizenship, the latter pointed in the direction of Teddy Roosevelt's great-power diplomacy.

The firmest link between Marshall, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, however, was not their common success but their shared failure. Seemingly entrenched after the quick victory against Spain in 1898, imperialism would be challenged by a resurgence of isolationism in ways strikingly similar to the states' rights revival against Marshall's nationalism and Jim Crow resistance to the Fourteenth Amendment. Empire proved a mixed blessing at best, as Filipino opposition to American troops began a process that would be repeated in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. And when, less than twenty years after the Spanish American War, the United States became involved in Europe's affairs, even staunch imperialists like Henry Cabot Lodge found themselves branded isolationists, even if they should be more correctly described, in today's political vocabulary, as unilateralists.

So thoroughly did Americans reject the military preparedness, active government, global consciousness, and high taxes associated with the imperialists that in the single decade after World War I concluded, as historian David Kennedy describes it, "Americans said no to Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations, no to the French security treaty, no to freer trade policies, no to pleas from France and Britain to forgive their wartime

loans from the U.S. Treasury, and no to further unlimited immigration from Europe, when Congress passed the highly restrictive immigration quota laws of 1921 and 1924."[16] Due to this reflexlike inclination to say no, Franklin Roosevelt had to take on a struggle against American opposition to foreign entanglements before he could address the struggle in Europe that we now call World War II. Measured against the foreign policy recommendations of George Washington's Farewell Address, Americans, in the wake of two world wars, the Cold War and now the war on terrorism, are more committed to globalism than they have been throughout most of their history. But measured against the even more ambitious plans of the neo-Hamiltonian enthusiasts for American greatness, they have combined their involvement in world affairs with a distinctly American preference for minimalism.

The experiences of thinkers and politicians from Marshall to FDR are by no means irrelevant to early twenty-first century America. A contemporary program designed to ensure greatness for the United States would commit itself to rethinking the meaning of each of the idea's three prongs under contemporary conditions. It would require serious consideration of whether liberty can be maintained and equality advanced at a time of domestic polarization and global instability, along the way uniting Americans around their common hopes rather than dividing them by their economic and cultural fears. Some recognition of the role that institutions, up to and including government, would have to play in strengthening citizenship so that America's collective energy could be rendered as impres-

sive as its individual energies would have to be acknowledged. And any such program would have to be willing to engage the world, using both hard and soft power to fashion an international system in which American values could become a sought-after objective rather than a target for attack. (I will have more to say about these objectives in the final chapter.)

Yet merely to specify what national greatness would require immediately suggests why it would be as difficult to achieve now as it has been throughout America's past. The moment greatness begins to cut deep—when it makes demands on people to change their ways of life, or it asks them to question their rock-ribbed political assumptions, or it requires that they pay the necessary taxes—the number of those who stand for the principle begins to shrink.

To demonstrate that shrinkage, let me be generous and include within the term "American greatness" politicians, visionaries, jurists, and moral leaders willing to subscribe to at least two of its three defining dimensions. Even by this relatively capacious standard, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, John C. Calhoun, Stephen A. Douglas, Henry David Thoreau, William Graham Sumner, William Jennings Bryan, Mark Twain, William James, Herbert Hoover, Robert A. Taft, Hugo Black, and, to cite a few contemporary examples, Newt Gingrich, Antonin Scalia, Gore Vidal, Patrick Buchanan, and Ralph Nader would *not* be on a list of those who made greatness for America their major priority. Patriotic most of them have been. Thoughtful, sometimes to the point of brilliance, a number of them were. Good citizens, in their own ways, they tried to be. Most of them were more committed to liberty than to equality, even if some of the more contemporary ones

reverse the priorities, but very few of them believed in establishing a government with sufficient authority to transform those ideas into reality, and even fewer held that the United States ought to go about reforming the world outside its borders. Uniting them is the fact that each of them valued other goods as much as, if not more than, greatness, whether those goods involved republican ideals of civic virtue, sectional loyalty, unspoiled nature, the voice of the people, economic freedom, effective competition, states' rights, American isolation, civil liberty, the defense of a homogeneous American culture, or world peace. One can be a great American without having stood for the principle of American greatness.

In the other camp, let me include among those who did make greatness their priority Americans who articulated a sense of how nationhood would serve the cause of either liberty or equality (preferably both); who insisted on the national means to achieve it; and who, even if in more isolationist times they blanched at the idea of extending it around the world, at least were cosmopolitan in their recognition that the United States would inevitably become a continental, and after that, a global power. On this list, I would cite as representative examples Alexander Hamilton, James Madison (at least in his more nationalistic moments), John Marshall, Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, Charles Sumner, Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglass, Herbert Croly, Jane Addams, Albert Beveridge, John Marshall Harlan, the two Roosevelts, Walter Reuther, Earl Warren, Lyndon Johnson, Henry "Scoop" Jackson, and, again to mention some living people, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., John McCain, Wesley Clark, Richard Luger, Joseph Biden, Michael Ignatieff, Michael Walzer, and Diane

Ravitch. In lumping them together, I am by no means implying that all of them were great themselves; even the greatest among them, as I have tried to show, possessed serious blind spots. But they shared the belief that however important virtue or region or free enterprise might be, none of them could be realized outside the framework of a national society strong enough to achieve its objectives.

Greatness, as this exercise in selection is meant to show, cuts across partisan lines: Federalists, Democrats, and Republicans, Northerners as well as Southerners, literary icons, and even fathers and sons can be found on both sides of the greatness divide. Greatness also corresponds with none of the usual political ideologies used to describe American politics; conservatives such as Hamilton and Marshall were for it, while others of a similar persuasion, such as Calhoun, were, at least at crucial moments, against, and much the same is true among liberals, as the differences between, say, a Hubert Humphrey and a Eugene McCarthy (or a Joseph Lieberman and Howard Dean) testify. Indeed, it is not even necessary to be an American to advocate ideas of American greatness; Michael Ignatieff is Canadian. The line dividing those who put greatness first and those who do not suggests a different cleavage than the ones usually advanced to characterize American opinion.

That cleavage can best be characterized as a choice between goodness and greatness. However much they may have differed, and continue to differ today, on what might make America good, members of the goodness camp were (and in the cases of the living ones are) united in their conviction that too strong a government, too ambitious a domestic agenda, and too overreaching a foreign policy will corrupt values that

America has always held dear and that have made Americans exceptional. For believers in American goodness, power is not an end in itself but a means to accomplish an ideal. As a means, moreover, political power is nearly always second best, to be used only when the people fail to achieve the good by their own efforts. Given a choice between being good and being great, America is better off striving for the good. The enemy of the good is not some external force against which it is necessary to mobilize force, moreover, but temptations within the body politic itself, such as the all-too-human tendency to accommodate to the realities of the world as it actually is. To commit to goodness is to strive for perfection and to accept the inevitable disappointment when it cannot be realized. Success is therefore measured, not by such quantifiable outcomes as military power, gross national product, or indicators of equality, but by the intensity and purity of the efforts designed to achieve them. To be good, America, and Americans, must strive to be virtuous; they must cleanse themselves of sin before going out into the world to spread the word—the good news, as evangelicals would put it—of their message. Believers in a good America typically feel that they are on the wrong side of history, but it is precisely their alienation from the way things are going that gives clarity to their principles and determination to their convictions. They need not necessarily be religious—some of them are, in fact, atheists—but they share sincerity and authenticity as qualities for which people and nations ought to stand.

It is not that adherents to the idea of a great America prefer badness to goodness. But they do assign a lower priority to the good just as advocates of a good America assign a lower priority

to the great. The great America school believes that no idea, however noble in theory, means much unless sufficient political power is accumulated to realize it in practice, even if the process of making it happen results in compromises that leave the idea less than complete. Yes, power corrupts, adherents to this way of thinking agree, but impotence cripples. Impatient, results-oriented, practical sometimes to the point of cold bloodedness, advocates of American greatness bend principle, and sometimes law and custom, to achieve their goals, anticipating that the relative lack of attention they pay to means will be forgotten when the benefits of their victories are recognized. Corruption is the enemy of goodness, while complacency is the enemy of greatness. Maturity, not perfection, is the achievement advocates for greatness seek. The United States must overcome its sense of itself as special in order to join the real world of nation states responding to pressures within and challenges without. While always threatened from other nation-states that aspire to greatness in their own way, the biggest stumbling block to greatness lies at home in the American passion for goodness.

Not everyone fits within either of these two categories, some because they belong to neither and others because they belong to both. Given the corruption associated with his presidency as well as his manifest lack of political skills, Ulysses S. Grant might be viewed as standing neither for goodness nor for greatness. Progressives such as Louis D. Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter, reformers never quite comfortable with the bigness in government and industry that reform usually implied, understood their task as arguing on behalf of goodness and greatness simultaneously. Perhaps the most interesting Americans never to fit easily into either the goodness or the greatness camps

were Woodrow Wilson and Reinhold Niebuhr. Southern, Presbyterian, scholarly, Wilson seems an apt candidate for the camp of goodness, but in both his domestic economic reforms and his leadership during World War I he advanced an ideal of American greatness; indeed, in an 1894 essay published while he was still a professor at Princeton, Wilson offered his own list of candidates for American greatness, including Benjamin Franklin, Robert E. Lee, and Abraham Lincoln, but not Thomas Jefferson.[17] Widely admired as a realist who advocated the use of national power for moral ends, Niebuhr, whose political instincts pushed him toward greatness, like the religious figures with whom he identified, was well aware theologically that too celebratory an attitude toward any one country's power, including his own, bordered on sinfulness, giving him much in common with those who assign priority to the good. Categories such as goodness and greatness can hopefully shed a new and different kind of light on American politics and culture, even if such categories, like all categories, do not illuminate everything.

Of these two visions for America, it is the school of goodness, and not the school of greatness, that has traditionally held the upper hand. Our legacy of republicanism, our distrust of executive power, our fascination with federalism, our fear of standing armies, our commitments to individual freedom, our populistic attraction to direct democracy, our reluctance to involve ourselves in world affairs, our delayed welfare state, and even our inability to abolish first slavery and then segregation (both of which were defended by their sympathizers as not only good, but as the best of human arrangements)—all of these aspects of our history and culture have put those who made

greatness first on their political agenda on the defensive. Americans choose goodness over greatness for the same reasons that they prefer to be innocents abroad, to opt for religions that emphasize the purity of the heart, and to insist and to talk so much about virtue and morality. The closer we stick to what we know best, the more likely we will be to resist the temptations put in our path.

One of the most important questions we face as a nation is whether this preference for the good over the great is our best guide to the world revealed to us by the events of September 11. If it is true that the events of that day put the question of greatness on the American table again, whether or not Americans want it put there, the discussion that follows is likely to be greeted with a mixed reception. For some the idea of greatness for America will provoke a feeling of dread, as if this thankfully discredited form of patronizing hubris ought never to be resurrected. For others it will engender a feeling of lost pride, as if the United States needs once again to develop a sense of purpose and the confidence to see it through. Yet neither dread, which would prevent America from using its power, nor pride, which would lead it to use its power unwisely, seem the appropriate ways to think about what this country should be doing. Americans alive today are the beneficiaries of a more than two-century-old struggle between goodness and greatness. At the very least, they need to carry the conversation between them into their own era.

In this book I want to make an argument for American greatness. I recognize that goodness and greatness both have

their strengths as well as their weaknesses, and that in the ideal polity, the wisdom of the former will check the excess of the latter. I am also aware that the question of greatness is by no means unique to the United States; Germans once debated the issue of whether their society should be greater or smaller, and in the European Union at the moment, there is an ongoing struggle between those who want to widen it and those who want to deepen it. One falls victim to the seductions of American exceptionalism if one believes that only Americans need concern themselves about how great their society should be.

Still I also believe, and will so argue in what follows, that the United States in recent years has moved too much in the direction of goodness and too far from the idea of greatness. My suggestion that we suffer from a surfeit of goodness should not be taken to mean that we have somehow done too much to make the world a better place; on the contrary, as Graham Greene reminds us in *The Quiet American*, and as our misadventures in Iraq reaffirm, our innocence abroad, once let loose, can be disastrous in its consequences. I am concerned here instead with the price we pay for our conviction that because we know we are good, we need not pay too much attention to how we actually act. When President Bush responded to the abuse carried out by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq by saying that Americans do not engage in torture, despite the fact that they so obviously did, he displayed the pathos of America's belief in its own goodness for all the world to see. No doubt the president was convinced of the purity of his, and our, intentions. But a society that prefers an ideal of what it is supposed to be to the reality of what it has become is not a society the rest of the world can trust.

We would be better served by greatness than by goodness because the former is a political and social condition, not, like goodness, a religious or motivational one. In politics, results matter more than intentions. A society in which people have real dignity and respect is better than a society in which people only think they do. A country that is powerful and willing to acknowledge its power is more likely to use its power wisely than one that assumes that what serves its ideals best serves everyone else's ideals. What makes a society great is not proclamations to that effect but a willingness to engage in all the hard work—if not blood, sweat, and tears, then at least the willingness to be taxed and to serve the public interest—a great society entails. Instead of simply asserting its values, a great society tries both to specify what they are and to achieve them. Rather than denigrating the government that serves the nation, it strengthens the one to embody the other. Americans, if the best-seller lists are any indication, want to lead purpose-driven lives, but society as a whole requires a sense of purpose as much as the individuals who compose it. There is something refreshing in the fact that Americans refuse to see themselves as an empire, but also something amiss when they act is if the world around them is barely worthy of their consideration. Putting greatness first does not mean America will become great, but it would better enable us to accomplish our goals as a society—and to be able to face the world with considerably less hypocrisy.

The political work required to make greatness happen is not taking place, at least not in sufficient amounts, in the United States. Neither of our dominant political ideologies, conservatism or liberalism, is comfortable speaking in the language of

greatness, although, as I will argue throughout this book, liberals inherited the mantle of greatness from conservatives in the first few decades of the twentieth century and are, at the moment, closer to being in touch with what greatness requires than their ideological antagonists. Were we to commit ourselves to greatness once more, we have an opportunity to get greatness right this time around, if for no other reason than we have not always gotten it right in the past. There will be disagreement, as in a democracy there should be, over which policies ought to be followed if greatness is to be brought more sharply into focus. But our current response to September 11, dominated as it has been by often ugly partisanship and charges of blame, is getting us nowhere; it is, in fact, an insult to those who have lost their lives on that day. If indeed the United States is at war with something called terror, it is time to stop what we almost instinctively seem to do and pause for a big collective breath, stepping back for a moment to remind ourselves of those times in our history when we looked beyond our suspicions and fears to focus with confidence on our hopes and our potential.