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Chairman's Comment

Claes G. Ryn

Thoughts After September 11

Recently our nation solemnly observed the first anniversary of the most devastating attack ever perpetrated by foreigners against American citizens on American soil. The following excerpts of a speech

by NHI Chairman Claes Ryn before the Philadelphia Society, of which he was then the president, at its meeting in New Orleans just ten days after the atrocities of September 11, 2001, seem as appropriate now as when first given.

In a time of national crisis, it is proper and necessary that a country should recall its most cherished and enduring symbols and traditions. In the uncertainty, confusion, and passion of the moment it needs to take its bearings, repair to the deepest sources of its national identity. It is natural in a situation like the present to ask, what are the country's defining and unifying allegiances and purposes. At its best, what does it really aspire to be? Without an historically rooted sense of self, a country and its leaders are adrift, potential victims of surges of emotion or of the machinations of demagogues and opportunists. For a country truly to know itself and to find its way, it needs to remind itself of the convictions that have guided it and given it strength in the past and remind itself of the historical efforts that gave the country its life, its unity and distinguishing attributes.

The Philadelphia Society exists to articulate beliefs that are at the very core of the traditional American self-understanding, as expressed and implied in the work of the Framers of the Constitution. Among these is the belief that restraint, moral and constitutional, is indispensable to civilized freedom and is a necessary counter to the abuse of power.

Your officers in the Society started planning this year's programs about five months ago. We decided early on that the theme for the national meeting in April was going to be "Sources of American Renewal." The traditional American identity has long been under attack. Some have attacked it openly, *See September 11, page 2*

Urgent Appeal

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Books by NHI Scholars Receive Much Acclaim

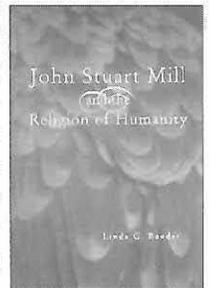
Several National Humanities Institute scholars have released much heralded new books.

Just out from the University of Missouri Press is *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (402 pp., \$49.95), by Linda C. Raeder, associate editor of NHI's interdisciplinary academic journal *Humanitas*.

Calling Raeder's book "a tour de force," George Carey, professor of government at Georgetown University, notes in a forthcoming review that, "through her study of

Mill, Raeder is able to convey some sense of the depth of modern liberalism's hostility towards Christianity that is so evident in our culture today. 'Mill,' she insists, 'was very far from' being merely a convinced secularist,

or, as other commentators have pictured him, as 'more or less indifferent to spiritual matters and preoccupied with mundane considerations.' On the contrary, he was a 'true believer,' one who looked upon his Religion of Humanity as 'a new and full bodied religion.'"



Secular Humanism a Religion Defined In Its Origin by Animus toward Christianity

"Raeder's analysis," Carey continues, "leads her to conclude that 'the modern secular humanism that stems from Mill is, as both its proponents and opponents have recognized, itself akin to a religion. Moreover, it is a religion defined in its origin by its animus toward Christianity and, more generally, toward the notion of a transcendent source of order and obligation.'"

Recently released by ISI Books is *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (250 pp., \$24.95), an introduction to Voegelin's thought written by Michael P. Federici, co-director of NHI's Center for Constitutional Studies. Writing in *National*

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making no attempt to hide their hostility to the view of human nature and society that shaped the thinking of the Framers. Some claim to defend "American principles" but give them a new, ahistorical definition that makes them look much like the principles of the French Jacobins. The effect has been to loosen the restraints on power, to invest government with an ideological mission to remake society and perhaps even the world.

The Philadelphia Society is about the business, here and now, of contributing to a renewed sense of national unity and purpose. This regional meeting on "The Taming of Leviathan" forms part of the intended inventory of sources of renewal. We are not here to bemoan yet again the expansion of the Central State and the erosion of federalism and local government, and to bemoan the continuing destruction of the old American understanding of life. We are here to reflect on how destructive trends might actually be reversed, to assist in charting a course for the revitalization of liberty.

Horrendous Deeds Call for Strong Response

The horrendous deeds of September 11 call for action. They call for a strong response. The specifics of that response are being considered at this moment. We all hope that the actions of the United States will be firm, but also that they be bounded by foresight, discernment, and a well-founded sense of direction and limits. We in the Society are, for the most part, intellectuals. Indignant and grief-stricken though we are, we have the high responsibility of trying to maintain some critical distance from the emotions of the moment. We are in a position to provide an historically informed perspective on the events of the day. This is a time when rashness, superficiality, ignorance, and opportunism could do terrible and long-lasting damage, not only abroad but in the United States, where inherited liberties are already in danger.

We of the Philadelphia Society have long pointed to and warned about the appetite for power and privilege in Washington. We have criticized the kind of voracious, grasping personality that tends to dominate the institutions of government. Not very many of the politicians and intellectuals who profess to want limited and decentralized government can be counted on actually to try to adhere to the Constitution and to turn

down new power for themselves or for the government of which they are a part. A dynamic of empire-building operates in Washington. Domestically, the Tenth Amendment is virtually a dead letter. How ironical that the Constitution almost was not adopted because of fears that the proposed new central power would swallow up State sovereignty and local independence. Only "iron guarantees" against such a possibility got the Constitution accepted. Still, today, there is no aspect of American life that is not touched by Federal power, not even the sphere called "private." In foreign policy, the most respected leaders in America's founding period warned, not against trade and relations with other countries, but against involvement in causes which are, in the words of George Washington's Farewell Address, "essentially foreign to our concerns." Today, many American politicians and intellectuals are prone to making almost anything "our concern." Some harbor a seemingly limitless ambition, a desire even for uncontested American global hegemony.

We all hope that extreme views will not prevail in the counsels of government. Unfortunately, times of crisis often give people of extremes an influence in inverse proportion to the quality of their judgment. Worrying about and trying to head off arrogant, immoderate power-seeking is nothing new for members of this Society, but now the stakes are very high.

The gradual transformation of the American people and their leaders since the days of the writing of the Constitution and the sometimes drastic consequences of that transformation raise the question why and how the American national character has changed. More and more people in our circles are coming to realize that the disturbing economic and political developments in the United States and the rest of the Western world are not autonomous forces, but are a particular manifestation of deeper, more pervasive changes that have already taken place in the moral and cultural life of the nation. Before we got the politics of unlimited ambition, we got the unleashing of the spoilt, grasping, partisan, aggressive self.

Some might say that it is too late now to try to reawaken in America's leaders and opinion molders some of America's old self and thereby to affect the shaping of America's reaction to September 11. Perhaps so, but many of our members can make

a difference even in the present, partly because our kind of thinking is often a part, if only a part, of the inner make-up of many of those who are making the all-important decisions. That part can be articulated and boosted. We must not underestimate the danger that intense emotion and aggressive pressures will overpower restraint and balance and sweep everything before them. We of the Society can help temper determination with wisdom and humility.

Political Renewal Requires Cultural Renewal

For the longer run, our mission must be to proceed with the work of renewal. The defenders of liberty have expended a great deal of effort and a great deal of money in recent decades. They have had at their disposal many a think tank, but they have not been very successful in reversing the trends towards bigger government and growing government commitments abroad. The grasping personality has found ever new outlets for the desire to control others. Defenders of liberty have avoided too much the root causes of these destructive trends. They have been too preoccupied with politics and economics narrowly construed. Political and economic developments, good or bad, are not self-generating. They are outflows of the moral and cultural life of a people, are in a sense aftereffects. If you want to change political and economic trends, you must first change society's moral and cultural orientation.

We are told repeatedly that various economic, political, and military measures will create a better society and a better world. What is much more seldom discussed is that wellbeing at home and peace abroad have moral and cultural preconditions. These issues are more subtle and difficult, but they are, in the long run, even more important.

Let me try to summarize the unmet need about which I am speaking. I hope you will not be too offended if I quote from something I just published. The passage in question connects the need for new thinking with the present crisis and its larger context. I will quote the very first paragraph of a brand new book.* Paradoxically it was published not in the United States but in China, in Chinese translation. The book is based on a lecture series I gave at Beijing University. In a case of grim coincidence, the

book appeared in print just a few days before the Horror of September 11. I quote:

Probably the greatest challenge facing mankind in the twenty-first century is the danger of conflict between peoples and cultures. There is an urgent need to explore in depth possibilities for minimizing tensions and to undertake efforts to reduce them. Horrendous consequences can result from superficiality, carelessness and naivete in defining the dangers and from delay in trying to lessen them. Yet the all too human desire to avoid painful self-scrutiny and reorientation of action makes human beings indulge a seemingly unlimited capacity for wishful thinking. Many in the West and elsewhere trust in scientific progress and general enlightenment to reduce the danger of conflict, but we need only look to the century preceding this one—the most murderous and inhumane in the history of mankind—to recognize that the spread of science and allegedly sophisticated modern ideas does not reduce the self-absorption or belligerence of human beings. It only provides them with new means of asserting their will. Others in the West trust in political and economic schemes to alleviate tensions, “democracy” and “free markets” being the two most popular at the moment. These prescriptions for how to promote good relations between peoples give short shrift to a subject that may in fact be far more important, one that requires greater depth and subtlety of mind and that is also not fashionable: the moral and cultural preconditions of peace. Whatever the importance of other factors, attempts to avoid conflict among peoples and individuals are not likely to be successful without a certain quality of human will and imagination. That this subject is receiving so much less attention than proposals for introducing technology and manipulating political and economic institutions is a sign that our societies are not now well-equipped to deal with the most pressing problem of the new century.

The moral and cultural condition of a society is what ultimately shapes the political and economic direction of that society, for good or ill. For that reason we must not shy away from dealing with these matters in depth. If we do not confront the moral and cultural prerequisites of liberty, of constitutional government, and of peace, we will never get to the heart of the matter, and we shall never effect the deeper change in American society that is necessary for a new birth of freedom.

The Framers at Philadelphia understood human nature pretty well. They knew that we have every reason to fear ourselves. Original sin always threatens to infect human behavior. The impulse of the moment

needs to be checked, for all too often it gives vent to the least admirable human traits: egotism, ignorance, recklessness, arbitrariness, etc. Just as, in the individual sphere, virtue should temper the inclination of the person, so, in the public arena, the Constitution should check the popular passions of the moment and the weaknesses of political leaders. Though constitutional checks-and-balances may restrain the worst excesses of partisan self-indulgence even in bad times, those checks cannot operate as intended without leaders and people of character. Where are such people to come from? The Framers of the Constitution thought they would be bred by the moral and cultural traditions by which they had been nourished. People like themselves would continue to sustain the Constitution and American liberty.

We all know that the traditions in which the Framers trusted have been terribly weakened. The checks on the lower potentialities of human nature have weakened correspondingly. The effects are everywhere to be seen, and we can only hope that those now making decisions for the American people and, indeed, for the rest of the world have in them still some of that older American personality.

Peace Assumes Peaceful Individuals

In the international arena a civilized leader ultimately seeks peace. But genuine peace and mutual respect are not possible without leaders who are able to rise above narrow partisanship and the perspectives of the moment. Peace assumes peaceful individuals. It is forever threatened by individuals of voracious appetites, perpetually pushing their own advantage. In the end, the prerequisites of peace in the international arena are the same as the prerequisites of social harmony at home. Both require leaders who are peaceful at the center, even when they are forced to take drastic action.

The spirit of American liberty and constitutionalism is moderation rooted in humility regarding human nature. A purpose of the Constitution written in 1787 was to check ruthless ambition and give America's better self a chance to prevail. The Philadelphia Society can best serve the cause of liberty today by helping to revive and renew the moral and cultural heritage that made liberty and constitutional government possible in the first place.

*Claes G. Ryn, *Unity Through Diversity* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2001).



Ryn Addresses Chinese Scholars

NHI Chairman Claes Ryn addressed a plenary session of the Seventh Triennial Congress of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association, held in August in Nanjing.

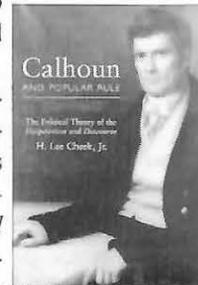
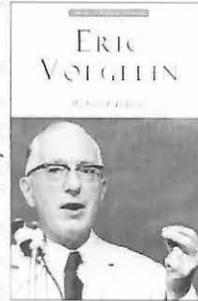
In his lecture, "The Power of Imagination, For Good or Ill: Irving Babbitt and Art as a Unifying or Disruptive Force," Ryn argued that works of imagination can have a profound effect on human life and can be either conducive to or destructive of the realization of life's higher potential.

Noting that the imagination has a stronger effect on the direction of society than the actions of politicians, Ryn observed, "Governments are in a sense the slaves of how people view their own lives. Even a totalitarian regime acts at its own peril if it deeply offends a people's most cherished beliefs. This type of regime, too, must find acceptance, or at least grudging tolerance, in the preponderant imaginative life of the society. When statesmen appear to be leading societies in a new and unexpected direction, they are mobilizing resources of imagination that are already available within the society."

Books by NHI Scholars / From page 1 Review, Austin W. Bramwell, articles editor of the *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, notes that, to explicate his belief that the crisis of the West is at root spiritual rather than political, as well as other difficult ideas, Voegelin developed a theoretical system that is beyond the grasp of most professors, let alone laymen.

Federici comes to the rescue, says Bramwell, with a book that is "a small miracle of clarity and concision." In it, he "introduces the major phases of Voegelin's thought, explains key concepts, and even provides thoughtful responses to some of Voegelin's critics." At the same time, Federici does not hesitate to point out weaknesses in Voegelin's position, e.g., "Voegelin tends to conceive of transcendence in a way that makes its application to politics rather awkward and hesitant."

Also recently published by the University of Missouri Press is *Calhoun and Popular Rule: The Political Theory of the Disquisition and Discourse* (202 pp., \$29.95), by former *Humanitas* editor H. Lee Cheek. In a significant re-examination of Calhoun's major theoretic-



cal works, Cheek notes that their central purpose was to "reconcile the need for popular rule with the ethical preconditions for its survival."

Recognizing the propensity of both the people and their rulers towards arbitrariness in their own favor, Calhoun advocated "concurrent majorities" and states' rights as ways to enjoy the benefits of democratic governance while avoiding majority tyranny.

Calling Cheek's book "provocative and cogently argued," Christopher M. Duncan of the University of Dayton writes in the *American Political Science Review* that it not only "forces its thoughtful readers into a serious reconsideration" of Calhoun's political theories, "but, at its best, forces them to reconsider the nature, purpose, and future prospects of the American regime."

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