

Return to Reality

Return to Greatness: How America Lost its Sense of Purpose and What it Needs to Do to Recover It by Alan Wolfe. Princeton University Press, 2005.

It has been said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe that there are two kinds of people in the world, and those who know better. Believing in the truth of this statement, I clearly fall into the former category. Alan Wolfe's latest book, *Return to Greatness*, however, tempts me to join the latter group—for with this work, Wolfe surely gives reductionist taxonomy a bad name.

The thesis of *Return to Greatness* is that there are two kinds of people in America: people who believe in America's "goodness," and people who believe in its "greatness." Those who believe in America's goodness seek its moral perfection, even at the cost of avoiding greatness. They tend to be pessimistic, conservative, religious or proponents of "virtue," suspicious of government power, and resistant to global or internationalist commitments. Those who believe in America's greatness, on the other hand, seek the realization of liberty and equality everywhere, both in America and throughout the world. They tend to be optimistic, liberal, secular, and internationalist. They believe in a strong national government and in efforts by that government to effect the beliefs underlying American greatness at home and abroad. They

are willing to change when the times demand it, and to pay (or at least levy) more taxes. They are not averse to the idea of empire, so long as that empire is built in the image of America's greatness.

Return to Greatness has some insurmountable problems. Wolfe seeks to demonstrate the validity of his thesis through a series of very brief mentions of literally dozens of figures in the American political tradition. Until this book, Wolfe's work has taken the form of summarizing the results of qualitative surveys of ordinary Americans about their views on such subjects as race, values, and religion. Evidently Wolfe believed the same methodology could be applied to the corpus of often extremely complex thinkers ranging from Madison to Lincoln to Niebuhr. Wolfe breezily summarizes the views of such figures, sometimes in a paragraph or less. There is some question whether he even read, or read with care, the work of many of the thinkers in question, given that he often mischaracterizes or even outright mis-

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quotes their words (e.g., Lincoln's "mystic chords of memory" becomes "mystic chains": maybe Wolfe was thinking "cords"). This book may well give Wolfe the reputation of being a drive-by intellectual.

Then there is the howler that the party of "goodness," and not the party of "greatness," has run the show in America for most of our history: "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," Wolfe writes. So America has typically been ruled by the likes of the chief figures in this party of goodness, including (according to Wolfe) the Antifederalists, John C. Calhoun, Willmoore Kendall, Richard Weaver, M. E. Bradford, Robert Taft, Christopher Lasch, Wendell Berry, Robert Bork, and Lani Guanier. On the other hand, there is the losing side—the party of greatness—consisting of such apparently ineffectual figures as Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Marshall, Daniel Webster, Abraham Lincoln, Walt Whitman, Herbert Croly, Earl Warren, and Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt. If this is true, then far too many national monuments have been built to the losers of American history, and not nearly enough to the purported winners.

While Wolfe's superficial treatment of both major and minor figures in the American tradition and his estimate of their relative standing already indicate the problems of this ill-conceived book, it should be acknowledged that there is surely some truth in his discernment of two sides in our tradition: there have indeed been two contending worldviews throughout American history that lean, respectively, in conservative and liberal directions. However, to label these sides "good" and "great" is to mangle their identities considerably. "Greatness," Wolfe contends, is "a political and social condition," whereas "goodness" is a "reli-

gious or motivational one." By "religious," Wolfe seems to mean a belief "that human beings are inherently flawed," which trumps or cancels "our hope that they are capable of great acts." Nevertheless, Wolfe contends, the "darker view of human nature" that lies behind "goodness" translates politically into an effort to pursue social "perfection." Greatness on the other hand, he contends, is satisfied with political "maturity."

If this thesis seems nonsensical, that is likely because it is. Quite simply, Wolfe is blind to the ways that *realism* about human imperfection, whether religious or otherwise, may be the necessary starting point for political maturity—including a realistic embrace of "greatness." Alternatively, Wolfe seems utterly oblivious to the ways in which the "optimism" among members of his party of greatness has been the source of dislocating efforts toward the pursuit of "perfection" in politics, and especially have inspired efforts behind domestic and international social planning, ideology in the name of democracy, manifest destiny, and the pursuit of empire.

Consider, for example, Herbert Croly, a prominent member in Wolfe's party of greatness (the party, recall, that eschews "perfection" for political "maturity"). In his classic work *The Promise of American Life*, Croly wrote that, "For better or worse, democracy cannot be disentangled from an aspiration toward human perfectibility." Envisioning democracy as the culmination of mankind's moral progress, Croly believed that by overcoming the limiting features of the Constitution that prevented the creation of a national system an ever more perfected humanity would be the result. He wrote that the American promise, at that point a seemingly distant hope, "will be partly the creation of some democratic evangelist—some imitator of Jesus who will reveal to men the path whereby they may

enter into spiritual possession of their individual and social achievements....” By overcoming dour views about human nature, America was on the path to becoming the true Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Now, a figure like Croly, Wolfe contends, is concerned with “political outcomes,” not “religious motivations.” Such a figure furthermore represents a view oriented to political “maturity,” not human “perfection.” Only by altogether ignoring Croly’s theologically inflected and millennialist political thought can one arrive at such wildly erroneous conclusions.

Wolfe is deeply confused, and religion seems to be a major source of his confusion. His first reaction is to assume that anyone using religious language must be in the party of “goodness”—except when he comes across members of the party of greatness using religious language, in which case he ignores it. It should also be noticed that various other members of Wolfe’s so-called party of greatness believed that humanity was flawed and imperfectible. James Madison, to take but one example, wrote in the *Federalist Papers* that “if all men were angels no government would be necessary.” Realizing that this statement might mean that Madison’s relatively dim, even Calvinist view of humanity would suggest he does not comfortably fit in the party of “greatness” as Wolfe has conceived it, Wolfe interjects: “But not being angels, it did not follow that they were devils.” In one breath, then, the party of “goodness” is purported to believe in the plausibility of perfection in politics, and in another breath, that humans are nothing more than devils. Is there really *anyone* who belongs to this nonsensical “party” other than various figments of Wolfe’s imagination?

Wolfe admits to his deep confusion when acknowledging his inability to categorize Reinhold Niebuhr, a “realist” who held a “pessimistic view of human nature” but was

nevertheless “a theorist of hope” who firmly believed in a forceful national vision. The example of Niebuhr—if not also of Madison and Lincoln, who fit this model as well—should have suggested to Wolfe that it is possible to combine a chastened sense of human fallibility with a belief in the inextinguishable need for nations. In this sense, there is a close connection between a “religious motivation” that acknowledges original sin and a firm belief in properly chastened national greatness—one that makes it possible for Lincoln to declare America to be “an *almost* chosen nation.” Similarly, as the case of Croly should have suggested, there is an alternative “religious” belief in human perfectibility that generates a sense of national mission with more of a crusading form, one that lacks the cautious introspection and sense of humility that accompanies the former view. It may well be that there are two “parties” or worldviews in America, but those two have almost *nothing* to do with Wolfe’s understanding of their differences.

Wolfe confuses these theological distinctions with party platforms, assuming that people with more pessimistic views of human potential are necessarily political conservatives, and vice-versa. It is true that a belief in human imperfectability lends itself to a more cautious or “conservative” form of politics, but there have been many liberals who have pursued a course of national greatness without succumbing to Croly-like or Whitmanesque beliefs in human perfectibility. Were one to engage in an informed study of the actual American political tradition, one might conclude that it could indeed be divided into two parties: the party of human frailty (e.g., Madison, Lincoln, Niebuhr, Lasch) and the party of human perfectibility (e.g., Jefferson, Paine, Emerson, Whitman, Croly, Dewey, Woodrow Wilson). One thing we would notice is that prominent figures in both

parties believe in national greatness. However, in the case of the party of human frailty, the aspiration to such greatness results as a necessary feature of the belief in human imperfection, a consequence of the unavoidability of domestic and international disagreement, conflict, and even war—and is informed, as well, by a hope for the amelioration of the human condition that always and necessarily falls short of its perfection. In the case of the party of human perfectibility, however, national greatness is understood as a prelude to the overcoming of nations themselves, aspiring to an ascent beyond politics, to a perfected religion of humanity. Such a worldview finds itself easily justifying the rule of an enlightened elite over ignorant provincials, whether they live in the fly-over country of America's interior or are the natives of other lands. Leading lights of this latter party have tended to endorse various forms of imperialism, whether in the form of crusading internationalism or domestic hostility toward local customs and folkways.

This latter belief, prominent in the nineteenth century but alive today, especially in the academy, continues to represent what is surely the most dangerous of combina-

tions: certainty about *both* America's "goodness" and "greatness." Contra Wolfe, the good and the great are not opposites, but eager partners in the formation of *ideology*, that pernicious belief that because something can be imagined, it can be realized. "Democracy" is as subject to transformation into an ideology as any other set of political beliefs. As an ideology, democracy comes to be understood as the pre-condition of perfected individuals, transformed through the efforts of an enlightened elite operating ever more centralized structures of national power. Wolfe's major oversight is to ignore the evidence that the temptation of ideology can never be overcome, since humanity will continue to long precisely for the fusion of the good and the great—that is, that human frailty and imperfection can be overcome finally by a vanguard in society.

If there is an appropriate form of political "greatness," it must be accompanied by a rejection of the belief that human "goodness" is our manifest destiny. The last thing we need is a "return to greatness" in Wolfe's sense. Rather, what is most needed—at this moment and at all times—is a return to reality, and to realism.