

*American Rhetoric:
The Will and the World*

***The Image: Or What Happened to
the American Dream***, by Daniel J.
Boorstin. *New York: Atheneum, 1962.*
315 pp. \$5.00.

WRAPPED IN a red-white-and-blue, star-spangled dust-jacket bearing a photograph of the head of the Statue of Liberty, Daniel J. Boorstin's latest book asserts that Americans who came to the new world in the seventeenth century to construct models of Christian charity have built a society of narcissistic idolatry in the twentieth.

Criticized for having constructed a cult of consensus out of the American past, Mr. Boorstin will likely be castigated for his scathing remarks about the range of American society in *The Image*. Conservatives may be taken aback by his remarks about the late Senator McCarthy and President Eisenhower, while liberals will recoil from his discussions of Presidents Kennedy and Roosevelt. But it should be recognized by all that Mr. Boorstin accepts the historian's responsibility to understand the past, with the sympathy that is part of the process,

while he asserts the individual's right to criticize the present from the standpoint of the past. In *The Image* Mr. Boorstin assesses the reality of contemporary American rhetoric against the ideal of the American dream.

As put by John Winthrop, it was the American dream to construct a model of Christian charity. This dream expressed an attitude toward will and the world. The world could be changed through the exercise of a resolute will. Americans in Winthrop's time possessed well defined concepts of both will and world, but, in Mr. Boorstin's analysis, Americans have come to have extravagant expectations of their environment and themselves. Since the world is often dull, we enjoy the creation of pseudo-events. The news becomes the public drama in which the traditional hero is replaced by the celebrity who can be anyone known for his well-knownness. With the "graphic revolution" in the means of communication any one of us can become the star for a day in this public drama. And therefore we expect our celebrities, whether of screen or legislature, to be exactly as we are.

Expecting of our world and our will what is already our own, we expect of others what we possess. Therein lies our dilemma. If only we can project our image, others will gladly fit themselves into it. But the real world is still there, a world which for Mr. Boorstin is governed by God, where men seek the ideal and will to strive for it. In this real world the ideals of the Communists present standards, while American images arrogantly suggest only the American mold for all. "Of all nations in the world," Mr. Boorstin rightly reminds us, "the United States was built in nobody's image. It was the land of the unexpected, of unbounded hope, of ideals, of quest for an unknown perfection. . . . Perhaps, instead of announcing ourselves by our

shadows and our idols, we would do better to try to share with others the quest which has been American."

We can learn much of what we must do in America if we recognize that books like *The Image* are attempts to analyze the rhetoric that appeals to our time. Students of rhetoric are traditionally concerned with adaptation of argument to audience. In this investigation they discover more about the audience than the rhetorician. When an audience is fooled it is because it wants to be. Daniel Boorstin rightly emphasizes that our concern with pseudo-events and images is not the result of a plot by the advertising agencies but their response to our demands for idle amusement. This grave situation can only be corrected by right understanding of the world, the will, and the relationship between the two. The fault lies not in our public relations men but in ourselves.

Reviewed by WILLIAM RAYMOND SMITH