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# ONCE AGAIN, AN ERA OF RECONSTRUCTION BEGINS

BY AMITAI ETZIONI

**N**ineteen eighty-four will be known as the year the last doubts were removed that the U.S. was on the way to rebuild its society, moral fiber, and institutions, from the family to colleges, from auto makers to the military. After declining in the 1960s and 1970s, SAT scores are beginning to rise. After 20 years of rapidly rising divorce rates, the dismembering of the American nuclear family leveled off in the early 1980s. Both major political parties dedicated their 1984 conventions to the family, values, and country. Patriotism is in; crime is down. Participation is up in all religious groups.

Experts disagree if the defense buildup is excessive or ample, but there is no denying that it is hefty. The economy did better in 1983 and 1984 than in the preceding years, although it is still unclear if the basic conditions for making America competitive again are being met.

## CONFIDENCE AND SPIRIT

In Washington, the Presidency gained in confidence as compared to both the Watergate and the Ford-Carter years. But Congress is still deeply beholden to special interest groups, which often provide Members with much of the money they need to campaign for re-election.

The most interesting change is that of spirit. It goes beyond a significant restoration of self-confidence and optimism. The incessant self-flagellation stopped. The press dropped its Japan-can-do-all-we-can't theme. Most important: America is moving away from me-ism and denial of the commons. In the '60s and '70s, Americans turned very much to themselves, away from duties, commitments to the community they all share, even their families, to celebration of the self. Studies show



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that as many as two thirds of all Americans felt guilty not about neglecting their moral obligations but about not doing enough for themselves. Books such as *How To Be Your Own Best Friend* and *Looking Out for No. 1* became very popular.

In the social sciences, cynicism was fostered through theories which argued that "rational" people take a free ride (i.e., benefit from the public but do not contribute) whenever they can get away with it, and that politicians are motivated only by their hope for re-election.

## KEY COMMITMENTS

No society can survive in the longer run such a withdrawal from civility—the commitment to the community we all share, from defense to the environment. Nor can a society survive a withdrawal from mutuality—positive emotional bonds that two or more people share, in families, friendships, and neighborhoods, and which lie at the root of people's mental

health. Fortunately, the psychic vacuum and sense of loneliness generated by the moral withdrawal of the '60s and '70s is bringing Americans in the '80s back to commit themselves to the values of caring and community. This recommitment is reflected both in the beginning of the reconstruction of the family and in the new waves of community-oriented volunteerism.

While the nation firmly launched the drive for reconstruction, there is a long way to go. Two decades of economic erosion, of underdevelopment, left the country with many obsolescent industries, especially steel. They left a crumbling infrastructure, from collapsing bridges to antiquated ports, and relatively weak institutions. Students in most modern societies, from Japan to Israel, outperform ours on most comparable tests. In sum, the country stopped the decay from extending, has begun to restore its strength, but has not yet fully recovered.

## PERIODS OF RENEWAL

The most important point to remember is that countries, unlike people, can have a second youth, a third youth, and more they can reverse aging and decline. When Queen Victoria was crowned in 1837, the *London Times* editorialized that she was likely to be Britain's last monarch. The country had lost patience with the monarchy after a sequence of inept kings. Yet as Victoria was laid to rest in 1901 after a glorious reign which restored confidence in the monarchy, the *London Times* said the monarchy would live forever.

Similarly, the U.S. had a period of rejuvenation under Jackson, a reconstruction after the Civil War, and a major reform wave during the Progressive era (1900-1917). We are well on the way into another such period.