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Taking Stock

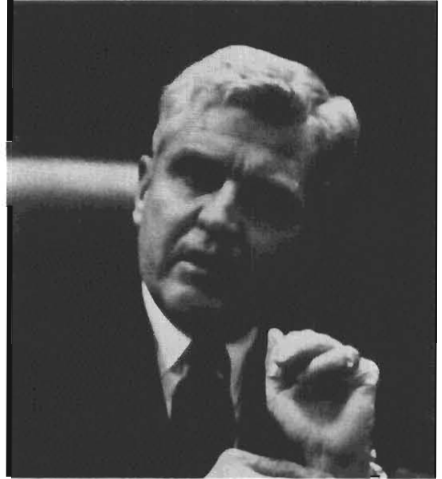
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TAKING STOCK

A few months ago, *The New York Times* carried an article entitled "The Leveling of America." It was written by William Manchester, a faculty member of Wesleyan University and author of the recent biography of Douglas MacArthur, *The American Caesar*. In this article Manchester lamented America's preoccupation with idolizing equality and shunning any recognition of human excellence. He said we had all joined a gigantic cult of American egalitarianism, a cult that is a sort of secular religion, a religion worshiping human mediocrity, a religion that had become just as powerful and intolerant as 17th-century New England Puritanism. Manchester refers not to that social equality of access recognized as an American's right, but rather to that equality that results when our humanness—our goals, achievements, personal standards, rewards—is reduced to the lowest common denominator. I share his view; the "Leveling of America" type of equality is evil and flies in the face of our national and even our Western heritage.

The American idolatry of self-depreciation, this reverence of a mediocre base has been with us for about two generations. (Manchester found its beginnings in the immediate post-World War II period.) In our lifetimes the trends grew into a national fetish that confused equality with blurred distinctions between generations, sexes,

classes, and achievements. The term "elitism" became a commonplace epithet used to scorn or berate any program advocating competitive excellence or even providing recognition for those who exceeded the norms of the group. In our schools it led to the sanctification of "relevance" (to be defined by the consumer, of course), and that became a capitulation to the shallow, to a new sophism in which the traditional academic pursuit of human knowledge was all but lost; credits were given for casual studies that didn't qualify as disciplines; academic offerings resembled a smorgasbord menu instead of an ordered coherent pattern of learning; academic rigor was trampled by the haste and barbarism of specialization. Equality manifested itself even in epistemology, in an "egalitarianism of ideas"; this led to an ideology of relativism that tolerated—even honored a lack of discrimination in thought that opened the door to an undisciplined cant and to a political opportunism that horrified those of sober reflection as much as it would have horrified the classical Greeks.

In recent months, we have begun to see a turning away from all this, at least in the field of higher education. This is not to say that our society has not been blighted by the equality binge, but I rejoice in the fact that that blight is beginning to be stripped away by a

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regenerative, stronger force. As Hegel would say, we are at that point of synthesis in the dialectical process; we are at the point of a pivotal swing in the trends of education. Harvard introduces its "core curriculum" this fall, abandoning the broad, general introductory courses and substituting a list of highly specific subjects that set tougher standards for graduation. Moreover, recent articles from the West Coast pacesetter, Stanford, have highlighted campus enthusiasm for a return to the classics and to a reconsideration of those timeless documents that really said it all—those guideposts that were sadly ignored by those seeking new solutions to new problems. In my view, new problems (if any problem really is new) should be candled against the light and wisdom of the classical thinkers who conceived the disciplines that mankind, over the centuries, has used profitably to solve them.

In Will and Ariel Durant's *The Lessons of History* we read that freedom and equality are sworn and everlasting enemies and that when one prevails the other dies. That is a strong and unambiguous statement that will make some uneasy but I believe it and see no way around it. Anything less would be like getting something for nothing, a violation of the second law of thermodynamics. It is true that in good times we seem to be able to get by with liberal doses of mediocrity born of equality but in adversity we crave that excellence born of unfettered human freedom.

Freedom is necessary for excellence and discipline is necessary for freedom. Dedication to excellence through the

entire range of behavior pays significant dividends in the good times and the bad, for the things we practice until they become habit form the foundations of character. Goethe once wrote that you limit a man's potential by appealing to what he is; you must appeal to what he might be. Mediocrity should describe the lower limit of our behavior, not the norm. There are too few people in uniform today who are willing to apply themselves to the demands that a commitment to excellence entails; excellence is as necessary to the military man as armament, for without it you're losing the battle before you've engaged the enemy.

The leveling of America had no biological roots; rather it was a self-inflicted wound. Similarly, the drive for excellence is born of the human will. The Durants noted that civilization is but a thin veneer on society, that we are but one generation removed from barbarism. In times ahead people will look to excellence, look to those who actively and faithfully preserve this precious thin veneer. They will hug to their breasts the kind of inspired excellence needed to hold order, coherence, and culture together. Many of those with that excellence will be in uniform. Complacency does not compliment that uniform, nor does satisfaction with egalitarianism.



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