

*William Raspberry*

# Their Failure Doesn't Make Us a Success

Americans, watching the dissolution of the Soviet Union, may be reaching three erroneous conclusions about what they see:

- (1) Democracy is the "natural" way by which societies organize themselves.
- (2) Communism's fall is capitalism's deliverance.
- (3) It couldn't happen here.

It's tempting to look at the events of recent years—in Eastern Europe, southern Africa and elsewhere—and conclude that there is in the nature of men and societies some irrepressible urge to democracy.

Maybe there is. Maybe that is what is happening in the Soviet Union, Germany, Yugoslavia, China, South Africa and elsewhere. It's as though there is in all of us a democratic spark that, once fanned into even the tiniest flame, cannot be quenched; that societies tend ultimately toward democracy as surely as water tends downstream.

I doubt it. What seems far more reasonable to me is that while the wish to overthrow tyranny may be deeply imprinted in us, the urge toward democracy isn't. It is hardly surprising that most people want to be free, or that much of recorded history is the story of societies struggling to overthrow one despot or another.

But as often as not, the end of the noble struggle is not democracy but a new set of despots. The extraordinary events of the past few years notwithstanding, the only "natural" tendency I see is the tendency toward dominance and exploitation.

Because much of the history of this century has been written as an East-West struggle, a contest between the forces of communism and democracy (or, more accurately, capitalism), there is a tendency to see in communism's manifest decline a special vindication of American capitalism.

Again we ought to be careful. I don't think there's much question that any economic system is doomed that does not give most people the chance (or at the very least the *illusion* of a chance) to make a buck. The market really is a wonderful device for regulating commerce.

But it is not a perfect device. The market left alone can produce anything from miracle drugs to environment-threatening toxins, from labor unions to human slavery.

The market (in combination with misguided politics) has made America a place where the rich are getting richer while the middle-class struggle, where children despair and families lose their way, where growing numbers of men and women cannot find work, where our national future is seriously mortgaged. America may still be the country of choice for most of the world, but its economic system isn't as wonderful as it used to be, and it's getting worse.

Which leads to the third warning. Don't believe that what is happening in Europe couldn't happen here. Maybe it is true (as we unthinkingly assume) that if the East is down, the West must be up; if communism is losing, capitalism must, by definition, be winning.

I am suggesting the possibility that what we are witnessing is the decline of *both* economic systems, although clearly theirs is declining at a faster pace.

But it isn't just in an economic sense that we are in trouble. We look with some mixture of sadness and superiority at the breakup of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia into ethnic enclaves and fail to see how fragmented a society we in the United States are becoming.

There's hardly an identifiable group that does not see itself as somehow victimized, not by despotic rulers but by the general society. We want the world to see things through our eyes, to feel what we feel, to deliver to us our fair share of everything.

We justify our demands on two bases, one articulated, the other tacit. The first is simple fairness. Any fool can see that my group (black, Hispanic, gay, female, disabled, Native American, elderly, farm workers, whatever) has been discriminated against, and it is only reasonable to demand that things be set right. The second is the unspoken assumption that if each group presses its own claim, the result will be justice for all.

What is more likely—what, in fact, seems already underway—is an increase in disputes, claims and counterclaims across ethnic, geographical, gender, political and economic lines. What is happening in Europe could happen here.

We are blinded by the fact that America has always been a collection of groups, some, in Orwell's phrase, "more equal" than others. The "less" equal have always had to fight for their place in the sun.

What is different now, it seems to me, is that we are abandoning even the *myth* that we are all Americans. Today's fights seem aimed at the exaltation and privilege of specific groups, rather than their treatment and responsible participation as full-fledged Americans.

We are not yet as ethnically riven as, say, Yugoslavia. But don't ever imagine that it couldn't happen here.