

American success worth celebrating

WASHINGTON — The officials who arranged the display of the Magna Charta in the rotunda of the Capitol as part of the nation's Bicentennial celebration have unwittingly provided a splendid guide to the character of the government and society whose birthday we mark.



David S. Broder

As one stands beneath the great dome, looking at the Latin script in which the British sovereign was limited in his exercise of absolute power (the pale letters somehow seeming more fragile when surrounded by all the burnished gold of their case), one notices the reflections of two statues across the way. Looking up from this charter of rights, one sees, across the rotunda, the statues of two Presidents — Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant.

What a fine reminder, in this time of national back-patting, that just as our people and our politics are fully capable of producing men of sublime genius and saintly character, so also they produce men of surpassing mediocrity and moral obtuseness. And both kinds become President.

It recalled the line of H. L. Mencken's, quoted in a recent book: "For all I know," he wrote, "democracy is a self-limiting disease. . . There are thumping paradoxes in its philosophy, and some of them have a suicidal smack."

That quotation opens a book by William Lee Miller of Indiana University that is fine reading for a Bicentennial summer. Its title, in

fact, sums up my own feelings about America this day: "Of Thee, Nevertheless, I Sing."

There is, to be honest, a bit of embarrassment about composing a hymn of praise while walking through a Capitol where the two main objects of tourist curiosity are first, the Magna Charta and, second, the office where Elizabeth Ray did or did not do whatever it was she was doing for Wayne Hays.

Fortunately, the Founding Fathers framed the government on the principle that there are more Grants and Hayses in any generation than there are Lincolns. Jimmy Carter may think that all we need is a government "as good as our people," but the men who wrote the Constitution knew better.

They knew that rather than relying on the virtue of mankind to produce a virtuous government, they had better design a system of self-government where the interests of each citizen were served by the preservation of liberty for all.

"It is of great importance in a Republic," the Federalist papers re-

mind us, "not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part. Different interests necessarily exist in different classes of citizens. . . In a society under the forms of which the stronger can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may. . . truly be said to reign. . . (But) in the extended republic of the United States, and among the great variety of interests, parties and sects which it embraces, a coalition of a majority of the whole society could seldom take place on any other principles than those of justice and the general good."

That last sentence was an extraordinarily bold assertion to make in 1788, when Hamilton or Madison submitted that essay to The New York Packet. But it has not turned out to be such an idle boast.

True, the people and government of the United States defended the unjust institution of slavery for almost a hundred years. And today, a century after its abolition, we are still rebelling at righting the consequences of that ancient wrong. True, in both domestic and foreign policy, on issues from Teapot Dome to Vietnam, "justice and the common good" have not always been recognized.

But we have corrected most of our errors and we have learned from our experiences. And we have not — for all the ways we have changed — lost our grip on the fundamentals.

Just two years ago, we saw demonstrated again that the idea of the rule of law — the fundamental idea of the Constitution — exerts as strong a hold on the minds and hearts of Americans of this generation as it did 200 years ago. The American people showed that once they had the facts, they were prepared to render a judgment against a Chief Executive who had overstepped the bounds on his power and force him to yield the office which they had but recently and by large majority entrusted to him.

That says something. It says Mr. Jefferson was not wrong when he wrote, "Every government degener-

ates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves are its only safe depositories."

We have not forgotten that. We have operated on that principle and, for 200 years, we have made it work.

Faith in government has been severely tested in this generation. Both men and institutions have failed us. But nothing I have seen as a journalist has made me doubt either the capacity or the desire of this generation of Americans to sustain the burden this great experiment in self-government imposes. And that is worth celebrating.

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Editorial Death penalty barbaric

Premeditated murder is once again legal in Texas.

The state now has 43 men on its blacklist who are scheduled to die.

The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the constitutionality of Texas' death sentence, and our state officials say they are pleased.

The assumptions about human nature made by those who support the death penalty must be laid bare.

They would argue that a man who has taken a wrong step is evil and can never be rehabilitated.

Their assumption is that man is inherently evil, and the only way to keep him from committing a crime is to threaten him with death.

A society that grants a license to anyone, especially the state, to

commit premeditated murder will have a hard time convincing the society's violent elements that murder and violent crime is not acceptable.

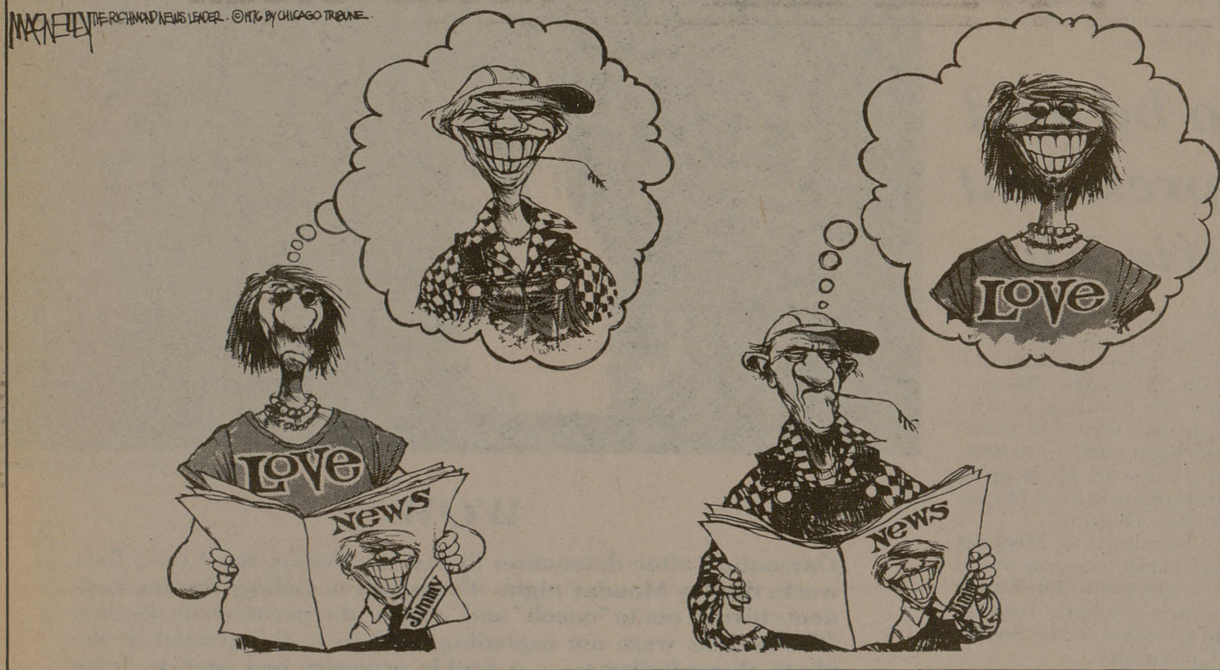
Such barbaric behavior would not be tolerated by a truly great civilization.

Those who argue that the death penalty is a strong deterrent to premeditated violent crime have no proof.

An alternative to the death penalty is a life prison sentence without parole.

The real possibility of a lifetime of confinement would also serve as a strong deterrent without undermining the moral character of a whole society.

— Jerry Needham



The Battalion

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