The American people celebrated the nation’s Bicentennial this year in a more subdued fashion than some anticipated. For a small minority, the Bicentennial was an occasion for scorn and cynicism about American politics and institutions; for another small minority, the Bicentennial offered an opportunity to rekindle the patriotism of yesterday—a zealous love of country, right or wrong. But the vast majority of Americans seemed to greet the Bicentennial with gritted teeth, something to be endured, certainly not celebrated.

This attitude is scarcely surprising. During the past decade and a half, the nation has endured one of the most turbulent, wrenching periods in American history. In fifteen years, we have had four different Presidents, an average of less than one full term for each one. The first was assassinated. The second was driven from office by protest over what many considered an iniquitous and unnecessary war. The third was exposed as a scheming opportunist who would subvert the law to his own purposes. The fourth serves as a President who has never been elected.

During this same period, the American people were forced to begin confronting the legacy of its racist past, both in individual and institutional terms. Many Americans also caught a glimpse of that “other America” where poverty and malnutrition existed in the midst of unparalleled food supplies. Caught in a whipsaw of boom and bust economics, many found their dreams destroyed and their energies sapped by inflation. Virtually every day the nation is treated to further examples of abuses of power—corporations that bribe their way to wider markets, law enforcement officials who break the law, intelligence agencies that spy on American citizens. Decaying cities, energy shortages, world hunger—everyone has a favorite crisis.

The twin body blows of Watergate and Vietnam combined to produce the coup de grace. Here supposedly was the first war that the United States had lost. In historical terms, the assertion is ridiculous, especially in light of the dubious “victories” in the Korean War, World War I, or the War of 1812. But the fact that such a statement could be made is testimony to the deeply rooted faith in American power and our need to see the nation as invincible. What also died in Vietnam was the blind assumption of American uniqueness—our special moral responsibility, if not superiority, for bearing the banner of truth and justice in the world.

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