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No Easy Victories

The modern belief that man's institutions can accomplish just about anything he wants, when he wants it, leads to certain characteristic contemporary phenomena.

One is the bitterness and anger toward our institutions that well up when high hopes turn sour. No observer of the modern scene has failed to note the prevalent cynicism concerning all leaders, all officials, all social institutions. That cynicism is continually fed and renewed by the rage of people who expected too much in the first place and got too little in the end.

The aspirations are healthy. But soaring hope followed by rude disappointment is a formula for trouble. Leaders arise whose whole stock in trade is to exploit first the aspirations and then the disappointment. They profit on both the ups and downs of the market. . . .

All of this leaves us with some crucial and puzzling questions of public policy. How can we make sluggish institutions more responsive to human need and the requirements of change? How can we mobilize the resources to meet the grave crises ahead?

How can we preserve our aspirations (without which no social betterment is possible) and at the same time develop the toughness of mind and spirit to face the fact that there are no easy victories?

How can we make people understand that if they expect all good things instantly, they will destroy everything? How do we tell them that they must keep unrelenting pressure on their social institutions to accomplish beneficial change but must not, in a fit of rage, destroy those institutions? How can we caution them against exploitative leaders, leaders lustful for power or for the spotlight, leaders caught in their own vanity or emotional instability, leaders selling extremist ideologies?

How can we diminish the resort to violence? Violence cannot build a better society. No society can live in constant and destructive tumult. Either we will have a civil order in which discipline is internalized in the breast of each free and responsible citizen, or sooner or later we will have repressive measures designed to re-establish order. The anarchist plays into the hands of the authoritarian. Those of us who find authoritarianism repugnant have a duty to speak out against all who destroy civil order. The time has come when the full weight of community opinion should be felt by those who break the peace or coerce through mob action.

Dissent is an element of dynamism in our system. It is good that men should expect much of their institutions, good that their aspirations for improvement of this society should be ardent.

But those elements of dynamism must have their stabilizing counterparts. One is a tough-minded recognition that the fight for a better world is a long one, a recognition that retains high hopes but immunizes against childish collapse or destructive rage in the face of disappointment. The other is an unswerving commitment to keep the public peace.

And we need something else. An increasing number of bright and able people must become involved in the development of public policy. Ours is a difficult and exhilarating form of government—not for the faint of heart, not for the tidy-minded, and in these days of complexity not for the stupid. We need men and women who can bring to government the highest order of intellect, social motivations sturdy enough to pursue good purposes despite setbacks, and a resilience of spirit equal to the frustrations of public life.

We face the gravest difficulties in the days ahead. But if we could bring to bear on our toughest problems all the talent and resources of this nation, we could accomplish some things that would leave an indelible mark on the history books.—JOHN W. GARDNER [From the book *No Easy Victories*. Copyright © 1968 by John W. Gardner. Reprinted by special permission of Harper & Row]