

TEEN IDOLS

Amitai Etzioni

THE HEROES young Americans salute are, once again, heroes. This is not the way it was in the seventies or even in the late sixties. For a while, laid-back, self-deprecating, cool, disaffected anti-hero figures were in the lead. In politics, the disillusionment with public leaders among the young set in when they contrasted LBJ's bombastic and manipulative style with John Kennedy's charisma, and, to many, his idealism. As Johnson became ever more entangled in the Vietnam War, students burned draft cards and blacks their ghettos. Rebellious, iconoclastic, anti-establishmentarian Gene McCarthy became a popular anti-hero to the disaffected. In the movies, from which the young draw many of their role-models and heroes, an early impersonation of the disaffected "anti" mood was James Dean, the depressed, slumped shouldered, irreverent, hip rebel without *any* cause. And Woody Allen, a bit later, was much more darkly blue, even more fumbling and detached than the current director-star of *Hannah and Her Sisters*.

Now, in politics, an upbeat, affirmative champion of traditional values, Ronald Reagan, is very popular, not only among the public in general but also among the young. The latest ABC News/*Washington Post* poll found national approval of Reagan at 70 percent; among the youngest cohort, approval was 79 percent.

A 1985 poll conducted by the Roper Organization, in cooperation with *U.S. News & World Report*, asked a random sample of Americans aged eighteen to twenty-four to indicate who, among a list of forty-four living public figures, they found personally inspiring and hoped to be like in some way. The president ranked third on the list. The highest rank was achieved by can-

do, assertive, Rambo-predecessor Clint Eastwood. Cando, successful, endearing Eddie Murphy ranked second.

While we are living in an age of reconstruction and reaffirmation of traditional institutions and values, the reconstruction has just begun. It proceeds unevenly. Moreover, reconstruction is never simply a retracing, a full return to previous patterns. Societies tend to edit and modify their past even as they re-embrace it.

In the world of heroes, we are well along in the process of rebuilding our appreciation. Indeed, a common explanation for the Teflon shield that is said to protect President Reagan from criticism, is that Americans are sick and tired of denigrating their number one public leader and wish to hold him in high regard. At the same time, there has been no return to an imperial presidency, touches of which were evident in the Kennedy worship displayed by his followers. And the polite, formal respect accorded public leaders and other heroes in the fifties is nowhere in sight. Indeed, Reagan is more popular than he is respected. In contrast, it is somewhat difficult to picture Eisenhower telling self-deprecating jokes. These days, in our more informal society, even leading heroes come in smaller, more populist, less establishmentarian sizes.

A Sociological Aside on Heroes

In the weeks before the last State of the Union address, in which Reagan once again singled out some select Americans as heroes, reporters from the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and NBC News all called with the same question: Is the president using and abusing these outstanding Americans? Using, yes; abusing, no, was my response. The

president uses these model Americans properly, I explained. Heroes are a sociological device to humanize, make concrete, and communicate a society's values. They help to transmit values from generation to generation and reinforce them. Thus, in schools it is difficult to preach "Thou Shall Not Lie"; it works better to tell primary school pupils about George Washington's veracity. We do not have a national celebration of civil rights; we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday and through him relate to a nonviolent advancement of civil rights. Heroes are used to turn values into tales, into leading roles in history books, and to flesh out roles we are to play, models we are to emulate.

Psychologists of various stripes may add that heroes are extensions of father and mother images or other authority figures. We internalize values by identifying first with our parents and by making their voices integral parts of our inner selves. Heroes (and public leaders) extend this process beyond the immediate family to the society at large.

Heroes as a Sign of the Times

Who we celebrate tells us about the status of the ever-changing society. Anti-heroes were popular in the late sixties and in the seventies partly because those were years of divisiveness, disaffection, and disappointments abroad and at home. We entered the eighties with a fervent desire for the rehabilitation of our defenses, the economy, and our institutions (family, schools, community). The return to hero-heroes, to successful and assertive ones, both reflects and reinforces this reconstruction. From this viewpoint, particularly revealing is a survey conducted by Professor Frank Farley at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Unlike the Roper Organization, which provided respondents with a list of leading figures from which to choose (although they were invited to add names or indicate if they had no heroes), Farley left the naming entirely up to the young students. To everybody's surprise, the students frequently listed their own parents, especially their mothers. As the young grow more conservative and the family regains some of its lost strength, parents are perceived less as those persons youngsters must rebel against, and more as individuals who have succeeded in turbulent times, and who deserve emulation—at least among those young people living away from home.

In the early sixties, leading idols of a cross-section of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds, according to *World Almanac* surveys examined by Denise Fortino in *Parents* magazine, included boxer Muhammad Ali, astronaut John Glenn, John F. Kennedy, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Today's list is dominated by pop culture and media figures, attesting to the growing significance of the mass media in our lives. It is important to remember that television reaches the young long before schools do. Sports and public figures have been eliminated or have moved down this list compared to earlier ones. Walter Cron-

Young People's Heroes

Today's

Michael Jackson
Alan Alda
Eddie Murphy
John Belushi
Kristy McNichol
George Burns
Henry Winkler
Pat Benatar
Judy Blume
Billy Joel
Kenny Rogers

Sandra Day O'Connor
Walter Cronkite
Clint Eastwood
Kareem Abdul Jabbar
Sugar Ray Leonard
Muhammad Ali
Goldie Hawn
Christopher Reeve
Robert Redford
Charles Schulz

Yesterday's

Muhammad Ali
The Rolling Stones
John Glenn
Paul Newman
John F. Kennedy
Dwight D. Eisenhower
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Jacqueline Kennedy
Marlon Brando
Doris Day
Elvis Presley

Rock Hudson
The Beatles
James Dean
Mickey Mantle
Ricky Nelson
Helen Keller
Roy Rogers
John Wayne
Willie Mays
Gary Cooper

Note: The list of current, most favored adults is based on four *World Almanac* surveys from 1981-1984 among a geographic and socioeconomic cross-section of thirteen- and fourteen-year-old students in the United States. Yesterday's list covered 1959-1964. These youngsters were asked to name the "famous or important living" person they admired most. The names of adults that were mentioned most frequently made the "top 30" list for a given year. The above names are among the individuals who scored consistently well over the four-year period.

Source: *World Almanac* surveys in "Why Kids Need Heroes," by Denise Fortino, *Parents* magazine, November 1984. By permission.

kite appears, but no astronauts were named among current heroes. Sandra Day O'Connor shows up for the first time; there were no women public officials on the sixties list.

Movie Stars, Celebrities, and Heroes

Many of the heroes the young emulate reach them via the media, or are themselves media stars. But is theirs real heroism or only ephemeral, celluloid, short-lived celebrity? The line between heroes and celebrities is hard to draw precisely. All heroes are celebrated, but many who are celebrated—for their power, money, or high visibility—are not heroes. The difference between the two categories is the difference between positive substance and sheer form; between the affirmation they bring to values and current social froth. Still, in our day and age, the distance between the two types of public worship and emulation has shrunk, largely because the media blur the distinction between heroes and celebrities: it's difficult to differentiate John Wayne from a Green Beret lieutenant, for example, or Clint Eastwood from a heroic police detective. In closer personal rela-

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tions, the genuine item may stand out, but most of us do not get to know our heroes personally.

Where Next?

While reconstruction has begun, it has quite a long way to go. Public opinion polls show that a surprisingly large number of young Americans are more patriotic, more conservative, and more positive about their society than youngsters were in the late sixties and seventies. To illustrate: In the 1950s young people were inclined to be more Independent than the average voter; in 1985 they were more Republican than average voters. In the eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-old group, 40 percent identified themselves as Republicans in 1985 compared to 34 percent of the national sample. At the same time, the young remain alienated. For instance, 54 percent of those eighteen to twenty-one in 1983 said they "felt left out of things around them," compared to 47 percent for all ages. On other alienation questions, the margin was

smaller, but on all indicators it pointed in the same direction.

The young are often still open to populist, anti-establishment (albeit not necessarily left) appeals. This is reflected in the high rank accorded on the Roper/*U.S. News* hero list to Sally Field (whose movie roles include that of an outspoken labor union organizer, in *Norma Rae*, and an anti-bank fighter in *Places of the Heart*) and Jane Fonda, the last darling of the left. (They ranked fourth and fifth.) Only when Mother Teresa and the Pope, who now rank seventh and eighth, replace such populist figures in the hearts of the young, will reconstruction have come of age. Or, maybe, conformity will have reached such a high level we should expect a new rebellious era.

Amitai Etzioni is University Professor at the George Washington University and director of the Center for Policy Research.

A Call to Professionalism



"American public schools will not attract the best and the brightest who are graduating today if teachers continue to be treated as they currently are, as workers in an old-fashioned factory who may not exercise judgment and discretion, who are supervised and directed by everyone from the state legislature down to the level of the school principal.

"The future of education depends very heavily on making teaching a true profession and giving teachers — like even the assembly line workers at Ford — a modicum of control over their environment. This is a challenge the AFT will rise to meet."

American Federation of Teachers
President
ALBERT SHANKER

