

working on this for the rest of the century *at least*. But what I'm saying is *it's not going to be like it was!* And we'd better start thinking about what it's going to be. The best thing is to involve the whole nation in some kind of serious consideration of what the options are as we move into a different world.

Well, that's not what he said. He said, "You can have everything. You can have it all. Oh, you may have to turn off the lights a bit, but basically there's nothing to be scared of. We've had harder problems many times before." But we've never had harder problems! We've never had a crisis that requires a fundamental reorientation of our values like this. He just did not take the tough line.

... By trying to compromise everything, and not take a tough position on anything, I think it's all just cosmetic and it's not going to change the fundamental loss of confidence that the people have in him. ...

... The whole war analogy is basically false. The moral equivalent of war is a great idea, but to push it as hard as he did... what he was really trying to evoke was World War II. Much of the imagery was straight out of World War II. Well, I think that's very misleading as an analogy. World War II was probably the one time in our entire history when the moral issue was absolutely clear. We were faced with the worst social system that has ever been created by human beings, and it was outside; our basic problem was how to mobilize ourselves to oppose this external danger. This crisis is not outside. OPEC did not create it. We gave OPEC its power over us through our own decisions. This is a crisis... a profound crisis of the internal structures of American values in society. So the war image doesn't work. It's an evasion, and to use the war image and then to assume that the real answer to the problem is morale boosting—you know, "Let's have faith again" and "Let's have confidence again"—to me that's pathetic.

The last moment when genuine moral leadership was generated and was effective, at least partially effective, on the American scene was the Civil Rights Movement. And there the great leader was not a President, it was Martin Luther King. It was King who led a movement that involved millions of people and that finally led to the passage of the legislation that John Kennedy had never been able to push through. That legislation changed some fundamental things. I mean there's a lot that's still wrong, but if you are old enough to remember what it was like for blacks in this country before 1950, you know that there's been a dramatic change. Now that was a change that resulted from a mobilization of people, a change of consciousness that finally culminated in something that changed our basic institutions.

But it seems to me that [the] kind of situation we're now in is much more complicated than the Civil Rights Movement. It requires changing consciousness. It's not just a question of making the right technological decisions—it involves mobilizing people, it involves facing difficult issues that are going to arouse lots of hostility and hatred. The notion that we're going to get through all of this through just harmony and morale is nuts. Too many interests are going to have to be pinched if we're going to do it democratically. Now I don't know whether any President could lead that kind of movement. Probably if it's going to be successful, it will have to achieve a balance between movements that are not directly tied to presidential politics and some kind of political leadership that can respond to it. ...

... Carter came to the verge of telling us that [there's nobody in the White House who's going to solve all of our problems]. What he should have said is, "Don't look to the White House, the whole damn country is problematic. We've got to rethink a lot of things." Sure, there should be some direction and help from the leadership, but only through some kind of public process that involves everyone can we ever get through this. ...

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CHRISTOPHER LASCH

*Letter to Patrick Caddell**July 18, 1979*

*The author of The Culture of Narcissism (1979) wrote three letters to the White House—one to Jody Powell in June 1979 and two after the July 15 speech to Patrick Caddell. In the first letter to Caddell, which follows, Lasch applauded the way the president connected "moral and cultural issues" with economic ones even as he pressed Carter to adopt a more radical and populist approach.*

Christopher Lasch to Patrick Caddell, Letter, 18 July 1979, box 20, folder 6, Christopher Lasch Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Rochester Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y.

*Dear Pat:*

A number of reporters have asked me to comment on the President's speech, but I have turned down a request for an interview with CBS News and refrained from all but the most guarded comments elsewhere, fearing that any reservations I might express could all too easily be misinterpreted and misused. The tenor of the questions put to me suggests that, as usual, the media are less interested in a frank discussion of the issues raised by the speech than in the inside story of how it came to be written, in sampling "reactions" to the President's "performance," and in gearing up for the next presidential campaign. Under these circumstances I think they might for their own reasons welcome criticism of the President, or even anything that could be construed as criticism, from a left-wing author claiming that his ideas had been misused, bowdlerized,<sup>1</sup> or put to purposes he had not intended and could not now countenance. Though it would be easy to indulge their insatiable appetite for "critical commentary"—and in my own case to forestall charges from the Left that I've been seduced and coopted by too close proximity to power—it is increasingly clear that the real danger of cooptation, these days, comes from the media, which absorb and homogenize all points of view and turn them to the purpose of political entertainment. So I address these remarks to you instead of putting them out for general consumption—the word could not be more appropriate in this context.

The speech itself seemed to me courageous, powerful, and often moving—better in some ways than the policies it announced. It struck a note of moral earnestness that has made a strong impact on everyone I've talked to (barring reporters), even among people who haven't counted themselves among the President's supporters. It managed to speak realistically about the country's troubles without invoking a mood of panic or national emergency. Instead of pleading for broad executive power, it insisted on the limits of federal action—even while accepting responsibility for bold and expensive measures. Best of all, it sought to connect moral and cultural issues on the one hand with economic issues on the other. Such is the stupidity that prevails among the political commentators and pundits, that what was clearly intended as an analysis of the link between the "crisis of confidence" and the energy crisis has been widely misunderstood—and in some quarters dismissed—as a "sermon." Perhaps it is only the sophisti-

<sup>1</sup>Removing from a document material that is considered improper.

cated and overeducated (that is, half-educated and semiliterate) members of society who confuse sermons with empty moralizing and platitudinous exhortation, and who don't see (having lost touch with this country's Calvinist heritage) that a sermon can have great analytical depth and political force. It is only to the metropolitan mind—more provincial than the provincialisms it scorns—that a "sermon" presents itself as a term of dismissal and contempt.

That brings me to the main point of this letter: the need to confront more openly, though not in any spirit of demagoguery or anti-intellectualism, the social divisions in this country, and to address more directly the groups that have a real stake in change—poor people, working-class people, and any others whose minds have not been wholly paralyzed by the culture of "self-expression" and self-gratification. I don't think there is much to be gained from appeals for national unity. Nor do I see much point in denouncing the selfishness of special interests. It's true that Congress is too responsive to special interest groups, but the reasons for this have more to do with underlying changes in the political system than with the undeniable rapacity and greed of special interests. A more serious problem, it seems to me, is the ascendancy of corporate interests *as a whole*, and more broadly of the managerial and professional elite that gets most of the social and economic advantages from the existing distribution of power. What I have called the culture of narcissism is above all the culture of this class. These people have sold the rest of us on their way of life, but it is their way of life first and foremost, and it reflects their values, their rootless existence, their craving for novelty and contempt for the past, their confusion of reality with electronically mediated images of reality, their essentially gossipy approach to politics, their "other-directed"<sup>2</sup> round of life and the bureaucratic setting (corporate or governmental) in which it unfolds.

Appeals for hard work, discipline, and sacrifice are likely to fall on deaf ears when addressed, not to those who most need to hear them, but to people who already work hard and undergo sacrifices every day through no choice of their own. Such appeals will only reinforce the prevailing cynicism unless coupled with an attack—more than a rhetorical attack—on the power and privileges of elites. A few years ago, many Americans patriotically turned down their thermostats in the winter only to be socked with higher fuel prices, justified on the

<sup>2</sup>In *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), David Riesman used the phrase "other-directed" to refer to people who were acutely sensitive to the opinions of others.

grounds that demand was off. This is not the kind of experience that restores people's faith in industry or government. I think it has to be made clear, in short, that sacrifices are going to be apportioned according to the capacity to bear them, in accordance with elementary principles of justice.

Beyond that, a serious discussion has to take place—has to begin—about the kind of energy policy, and the kind of economic institutions—that would best serve the needs of rudimentary fairness. What kind of energy policies would be most likely to preserve the gross inequalities in the present distribution of wealth and power? What kind of policies would contribute, on the other hand, to a more democratic distribution of wealth and power? I'm not advocating a centrally imposed equality of condition, but its opposite: the kind of decentralization that would break up existing concentrations of power and approximate the general diffusion of property regarded by the Founding Fathers as the indispensable underpinning of republican institutions.

In his Sunday night speech, the President rightly said that we stand at a turning point in our history. But I think the choices confronting us could be formulated more pointedly. He spoke of a choice between self-aggrandizement (a "mistaken idea of freedom") and the "restoration of American values." I would be more specific. The choice is between centralization and concentration of power on the one hand, localism and "participatory democracy" on the other—and participatory democracy remains a good idea, no matter how outrageously the New Left<sup>3</sup> may have perverted it. I suspect that policies which don't demonstrably contribute to the second kind of solution will not arouse much enthusiasm over the long run—except among groups that stand to gain from more centralization, more consumerism, more self-defeating technology.

I can't claim to speak with authority about the energy problem as such, but it doesn't take much wit to see that the only feasible policy in the long run is one based on renewable resources and minimal damage to the environment. This kind of policy commends itself for two reasons: because it best serves the interests of localism and democracy, and because it best serves the interests of future generations, who will have to live with the consequences of decisions made today even though they had no hand in making them. A centralized policy

<sup>3</sup>Student radicals in the 1960s, most notably members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

relying heavily on nuclear power and other synthetic fuels is objectionable not only because it perpetuates the morally indefensible concentration of power and wealth (benefitting the very companies that have already brought us to the current critical pass) but because it mortgages the future to the immediate interests of the present generation.

This is the ultimate indictment of the "culture of narcissism"—not that it is self-indulgent and self-absorbed but because it is criminally indifferent to the welfare of the next generation and the generation after that. In my book, I tried to show that this irresponsibility turns up in many forms (especially among the professional and managerial elite): in the criminally negligent way we educate our children, in the refusal of parents to discipline or make any moral demands on the young, in the way we exalt immediate sexual pleasure over reproduction, etc. But this disregard of the future also shows itself, most clearly of all, in the way we squander precious resources without any regard for those who will inherit our over-fond self-regard. Looked at from this point of view, the notion of "renewable resources"—whatever the merely faddish environmentalism with which it is sometimes associated—has a lot to tell us about the choice confronting us and the new direction our society ought to take.

Yours,

*Kit*

Christopher Lasch

## POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Even though Ted Kennedy and Ronald Reagan came from opposite ends of the political spectrum, these two challengers to the president played on Carter's weaknesses, which many found so clear in the "crisis of confidence" speech.

Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1962 at age thirty and heir to the presidential ambitions of two older brothers who were assassinated, Senator Edward M. Kennedy had considered running for the presidency in 1968, 1972, and 1976. In November 1979, he announced that he would oppose Carter in the 1980 Democratic primaries. Kennedy thus took on the role of the spoiler who might prevent and would certainly complicate the reelection of a sitting president of his own party. He contested the renomination of Carter for a number of reasons, including the president's problematic leadership and his own commitment to more progressive positions on labor, consumer protection, health care,