Prologue

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
(William Butler Yeats, 1920)

As the title of this book indicates, I believe that what passes for public debate in America is barren because of the failure of will and a poverty of ideals among American liberals. I am not a liberal but a Social Democrat. However, if there is to be any hope of a Social Democratic America there must first be a liberal America, so our fates are conjoined. The spokespeople for conservatism are articulate and spirited. But much of their success is due to the fact that liberals have been so feeble in criticizing their agenda and suggesting real alternatives. No one ever won a political debate by endless repetition of the refrain “but everything is going wrong.”

I believe that the entire center of American politics, both Republicans and Democrats, has lost touch with reality and the ideals on which the Republic was founded. Debate on race, class, foreign policy, how to safeguard Israel, how to live a good life, is obscured as if some great dark cloud of self-imposed censorship had descended on our minds. And yet, America has a great political tradition given definitive expression by our patron saint, Thomas Jefferson. Perhaps the first step toward clarity is to recall what America was supposed to be all about.

I will offer an account of the Jeffersonian tradition from the perspective of the Social Democratic left. When I propose alternatives to current American policies, the substance of these will reflect
Democratic Socialism. However, I hope that readers from any part of the political spectrum will find some profit herein. For example, most conservatives will reject my views on affirmative action, the welfare state, and even what I make of the Jeffersonian tradition. But I see no reason they should not resonate with my views about what is going on in black America, US foreign policy, and thinking about morality.

I will discuss four things as preeminent in terms of blighting what the American experiment was all about: race, particularly the fact that black Americans are handicapped by their skin color even in an era of declining prejudice; class, particularly the notion that it has become correlated with genes and that a large number of Americans are trapped in a marginalized underclass; military power driven by moral arrogance, so that America becomes a cause of despair (rather than hope) for the rest of the world; morality clouded by confusion, so that Americans lose sight of what it is to be fully human.

The list could be extended to include other things, environmental degradation, water scarcity, too much sugar in the tomato sauce, but I lack the expertise to say anything helpful about these. Surely, even in this age of prophets of doom, four disasters lurking on the horizon are enough for one book.

Given the centrality of America on the world scene, others have an interest in its fate. English readers in particular should identify with these themes. Their John Locke was the philosophical father of Jefferson and his ideals, they have a black minority, the development of an underclass is supposed to be their fate as well, their government seems obsessed with being an accessory to American foreign policy, and these are prey to similar moral confusions.

The Jeffersonian ideal constitutes the closest thing America has to a public philosophy, that is, a shared set of values that bind its people together. Part I consists of an introductory chapter in which I will describe what we are in danger of losing. It talks about Jefferson, the problems he foresaw, the problems he did not, and a
few of those who have walked in his moral and political footsteps, some of them sadly taking wrong turns. The remainder of the book is divided into three parts, dealing respectively with black America, trends in American society and foreign policy, and fundamental moral issues. That is a wider range of topics than convention dictates. But I have never cared much about convention because it makes you a slave of your time rather than its master.

To justify the topics that dominate various chapters:

1 Most whites and many blacks lack a clear vision of the greatest problem that confronts American society, at least in terms of social justice, that is, the state of black America;
2 No one can discuss this problem without a frank and open discussion of the contention that American blacks, on average, have inferior genes for intelligence;
3 The case for affirmative action has never been properly put;
4 We must acknowledge the debt owed to The Bell Curve for making us rethink how we can achieve the American dream;
5 Whether we can salvage something from the dangerous mess that is American foreign policy;
6 The absence of what should be the principal issue of American politics, namely, the shift of resources away from military spending toward social purposes;
7 Overcoming moral confusion, particularly notions such as that we can give no reasoned defense of certain ideals versus others, and that we are creatures of circumstance that cannot be judged for what we do.

I make no apology for including some moral philosophy. Poverty of thinking about ethics can do as much to distract us from good living as the material poverty that makes keeping our bodies alive an all-consuming task. When people think their ideals are mere preferences or no more worthy of regard than any other, it saps their moral idealism. When they lose sight of what it is to be a responsible moral agent, it weakens the judgments they pass on themselves and
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others. The warning by Yeats issued in 1920, the danger that the best will lack all conviction, has if anything greater relevance today than it did three generations ago. The chapters on morality are the foundation on which all else rests. I suspect that they will be particularly interesting to those who, like myself, were students of Leo Strauss.

References to The Bell Curve will be conspicuous because it is the most impressive work to present a picture of America that contrasts with my own. I will criticize the “meritocracy thesis” (in chapter 5), which, to my mind, is the most troubling of its contents. I know of no one else who has done so. The Bell Curve was not about race, but since it was about America it could not ignore race. I think some readers will appreciate the alternative view I offer.

This book is particularly for the young. I suspect that most of them want something better than a foreign and military policy that provokes disgust, a domestic politics with neither the vision nor the resources to provide for the common good, and a foolish moral relativism that reduces all ideals to the lowest common denominator. My message is this: your idealism will fade unless a life of political activism is accompanied by a life of the mind. The problems herein are those I could not get out of my mind during sixty-two years of political activism. Perhaps an old agitator can keep those whose youthfully ardent desire for social justice has flared into existence from having to reinvent the wheel.

Well, then, we begin a journey that tries to answer a question that dominates everything else: does American idealism have a future? Particularly the kind of idealism that has characterized the American left. Can men and women enlist in its ranks bathed in the bright light of everything reason has to say about the contemporary world?
PART I

St. Thomas Jefferson
1 Something beautiful is vanished

But when the dream departs
It takes something from our hearts
Something beautiful is vanished
And it never comes again

(Richard Henry Stoddard, 1825–1903)

At the end of The Bell Curve, Herrnstein and Murray attempt to square their view of America with that of Thomas Jefferson. Their endeavors come as no surprise. In 1776, Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence and penned these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” In doing so, he struck a chord that has reverberated throughout American history. Virtually every major political actor on the American scene has quoted Jefferson’s words and claimed to be a Jeffersonian, no matter how vigorously they disputed what his legacy entails.

But words can be mere words. If Americans have taken Jefferson seriously, we would expect to find some at least who have risked much to stand by his ideals. We would also expect periodic warnings about policies and developments that might prevent their realization in practice. Jefferson and his successors compiled a list of threats with imperialism, class, intolerance, and race most prominent. I have selected four giants to develop these themes. Their lives and thoughts are worth recounting for another reason: faced with a
dismal present, it is good to call to mind just what wonderful people the American political tradition has produced (see Box 1).

Only Jefferson himself invites us to examine the philosophical foundation of egalitarian ideals and to underline the fact that fervor is often a function of why we believe in something. However, William Graham Sumner will prove useful on imperialism, Eugene Victor Debs on class, and Carey Estes Kefauver on civil liberties. Kefauver also exemplifies how a principled man of great courage can be blind about the gulf between black and white.

Jefferson and God

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) said that his ethical premises were self-evident. He did not mean to imply that no justifying argument lay behind them, but rather that the argument was so obviously valid that no rational person would reject it. The question of whether he was more influenced by Locke or Lord Kames (who was himself a
Lockean) is irrelevant in that the liberal thinkers of the time all shared much the same notions.

They appealed to the concept of man as he came unsullied from nature. At that point, convention (what man does to himself) had not distorted nature’s handiwork. People were obviously equal at birth, helpless needy creatures, and dependent on their parents whom nature had endowed with a parental instinct as a sign that they were obliged to care for their children. None was born with a visible title to preferment, no child was born with a scepter in his hand, and all had free will, signs that the divine right of kings was bankrupt and that men were meant to freely consent to whatever government they chose.

All men have an instinct for self-preservation, a sign that the lives of all were precious and that murder and suicide were wrong. No one can contract to be a slave because that gives to another a power you do not yourself possess, namely, the right to take your life when you wish. Nature did not present the earth divided up by property boundaries, so property was to be acquired by mixing one’s labor with it. All of these arguments are in Locke’s early unpublished work on the *Laws of Nature*, circa 1660, and Kant repeated many of them in Jefferson’s own day (Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, AK, 420–468; Locke, 1954).

Lying behind this view of nature was the hand of God. In his old age, Jefferson wrote a treatise on Christianity designed to extract the true teachings of Christ from the rubbish in which they were buried (Matthews, 1984). All of Christ’s teachings tend towards the happiness of man and they are summarized in the Sermon on the Mount. True Christianity involves only three propositions:

1. that there is only one God, and he all perfect
2. that there is a future state of rewards and punishments
3. that to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself is the sum of religion.

The aging Jefferson took great satisfaction that his fellow Americans shared his reverence for the ethical foundations of the Republic’s political ideals. In 1824, two years before his death, he
St. Thomas Jefferson wrote: “Nothing then is unchangeable but the inherent and inalienable rights of man” (Hofstadter, 1962, p. 43).

An ideal in search of a foundation

But when belief in God departs, the foundations collapse. As early as the 1850s, Mill composed his brilliant essay on *Nature*, published posthumously in 1874. Although his target is Locke what he says applies equally to Jefferson. Jefferson rejected the divinity of Christ but never doubted that Christ was God’s exemplar as to how to live. He knew what he was expected to find in nature: benevolence and that the meek were as precious as the most high. His ethical ideals served as a sieve that filtered out the cruel face of nature and left a benevolent residue.

Mill was an atheist and looked at nature with an unprejudiced eye. As he says, only someone with a pre-existing humane ethic could overlook its brutality with whole cities buried by earthquakes and people stricken by meaningless diseases. An ethics truly derived from nature would make us worse than the Borgias. He goes on to ask, what do we mean by nature anyway? If we mean the whole of nature as governed by laws, every human act is good: the laws of biology are just as much obeyed when you poison someone as when you feed the needy. If you mean nature as untouched by human beings, every human act is bad: every time I exhale I alter the composition of the atmosphere in my immediate vicinity. Both conclusions are equally absurd (Mill, 1958).

With the original foundation of our ideals swept away, what is left? It has taken a long time for the rootlessness of ethics to dominate the popular consciousness but, except for the believers, the process is now complete. Allan Bloom’s (1987) account of his students applies to my own: The self-evidence of humane moral principles has been replaced by a lazy set of “self-evident” notions clustering around the concept of cultural relativism. No one can defend his or her ideals as more rational than any others, so all ideals
and the people who hold them are equal and all should be allowed to live as they please without censure. Bloom asks them about Hitler’s ideals and female circumcision. I prod them on an equally sensitive point. Most liberal-minded students in New Zealand believe that the indigenous Polynesians (the Maori) have been badly treated. I ask them whether it is legitimate for us to cross cultural lines and accuse Maori of sexism (most tribes do not allow women to speak at public meetings). And if that is not legitimate, is it not wrong for Maori to accuse white New Zealanders of injustice.

It may be said that as long as there is a popular ideology that supports a belief in equality and liberty, that is enough, no matter how muddled it may be. But the current ideology suffers from two defects. First, it is so contradictory that no intelligent person, certainly no one like Jefferson, can take it seriously. It winnows out the best, namely, those with any critical intelligence, and when they see through it, they have nothing. Second, it destroys passionate dedication to ideals. Passion requires believing that certain ideals are better than all others, not that all ideals are equally arbitrary. The tolerance that arises from a muddled cultural relativism is not a passionate attachment to civil liberties and a willingness to die in a ditch for them. It is a tepid thing, based on the reduction of all ideals to mere preferences in lifestyle, culminating in the absurd admonition of “don’t be judgmental.”

Nietzsche accuses modern intellectuals of “soul superstition.” He ridicules those who do not believe in God but cling to a morality that makes sense only for believers. Love for mankind in general makes some sort of sense if everyone has a soul dear to God, but love of mankind without this is simply stupidity and brutishness. How could anyone love ordinary people, with their pettiness, ignorance, dearth of anything interesting to say or do, without some concept to sanctify them? Nietzsche tells us that we should ask ourselves whether we would really be committed to egalitarian ideals were our minds not infected by a disreputable metaphysical residue. It is a fair question.