

On Samuel H. Beer's *To Make a Nation*

I have spoken elsewhere of "our political faith as Americans," meaning thereby "the faith evidently presupposed by our public institutions and normatively attested by our founding documents—above all, by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution." The great value of Beer's book for me is to have provided what I can only regard as an authoritative interpretation and formulation of this American "political faith."

To be sure, Beer's own purpose in writing his book is "to state as fully and accurately as possible that element of American political culture which [he calls] the national theory of federalism" (viii), or, as he also puts it, "to clarify and amplify the national theory of American federalism" (21). In carrying out this purpose, however, he offers, in his own words, an account of "the ideas which inspired the American Revolution and which informed the Constitution," having concluded that "you can find a single coherent viewpoint which makes sense of the federal arrangements of the Constitution" (vii, xi). And what I find of the greatest significance is his account of this viewpoint, which, to my mind, is precisely our "political faith."

Beer's account is all the more valuable, of course, because (1) he expounds this viewpoint against the background of the history of ideas, both sharply contrasting it with the old hierarchic viewpoint classically set forth by Thomas Aquinas and tracing its descent from the republican viewpoint originating in such Commonwealth writers as John Milton and James Harrington; and (2) he develops it throughout in counterpoint with "the old Southern heresy that the Union was nothing more than a compact among the separate states" (x). But what I find in his exposition of "the national idea" is precisely an adequate—which is to say, both appropriate and credible—formulation of my "political faith" as an American.

This is not to say that Beer anywhere recognizes the distinction I suggest we should consider drawing between this "political faith" as such and simply one more "explicit religious or philosophical faith." In fact, he says

nothing, so far as I can see, that would preclude interpreting him as expounding just such an explicit religious or philosophical faith. But he also says nothing that would preclude my very different way of taking his exposition. For all he says to the contrary, the explicitly theistic or deistic formulations of our founding documents as well as of the founders themselves in their other writings can and should be interpreted, as I say, "not as expressions of one kind of such explicit religious or philosophical faith to the exclusion of other kinds, but rather as expressing the basic faith in the ultimate meaning of life that all kinds of such explicit faith necessarily presuppose." At the same time, Beer leaves no doubt that, on his account, even as on mine, our founding documents very definitely intend to assert that the way of conducting political life that they serve to constitute—subject always to the fallibility of the people even in exercising their constituent sovereignty—cannot fail to belong to any true understanding of human existence, and thus to any authentic self-understanding. The constitutional law whose principles they set forth or which they themselves may be said to "make" is in reality simply their attempt to "declare" and "apply" the higher law by which each human being and all human beings are unconditionally bound. Thus they confess, in effect, that, whatever else that "higher law" may or may not require, it at least requires that any nation of people exercise their constituent sovereignty to ordain and establish just such a constitution, thereby declaring and applying that law's own requirements with respect to the conduct of political life.

So, in my view, Beer's explication of national "theory" is to "American scripture" as any good systematic theology is to the formally normative witness that it has the primary task of critically interpreting and reformulating.

October-November 2002