

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Visions of Vice and Virtue Rule a Nation's Heart

By DAVID J. GARROW

Inauspicious indeed is a factual error in literally the very first word of a book. But unfortunately such is the case with James A. Morone's "Hellfire Nation," which begins by stating that "Ten thousand people filled the Holt Street Baptist Church and spilled out into the Montgomery evening."

Wait a minute. Ten thousand people at the Dec. 5, 1955; kickoff rally for the famous Montgomery, Ala., bus-boycott? No, not at all: three African-American participants who were there that night and wrote about it soon after said there were 4,500 to 5,500 (L. D. Reddick), "about 5,000" (Norman Walton) and "three or four thousand" (the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.).

But perhaps factual precision is superfluous here, for Mr. Morone, a political scientist at Brown University, says "Hellfire Nation" is less a work of history than an interpretive analysis of some "common themes" from America's past that most accounts overlook. His goal is to illuminate what he calls America's recurring vulnerability to "moral fevers" that have swayed our politics since the 17th century.

Seven years ago, in "The Corrosive Politics of Virtue" an article in *The American Prospect*, Mr. Morone outlined the interpretation that he presents at far greater length here. Decrying how "moralizing divides Americans into a righteous us and a malevolent them," he argued that a politics of morality leads to "moral panics" that erode liberalism and undercut inclusive policy proposals. The United States, he warned, could not attain "a more generous, universalist public spirit until we put aside the images of an immoral, unvirtuous them."

In "Hellfire Nation" he quotes the conservative social critic William J. Bennett's observation that "morality is central to our politics and attitudes in a way that is not the case in Europe." Mr. Morone fervently agrees, but he does not concur at all with Mr. Bennett's further assertion that "our moral streak is what is best about us."

In Mr. Morone's view, that moral streak has been America's Achilles' heel ever since the Puritans first "founded American moral politics" by going after religious dissidents, American Indians and scores of supposed witches with sometimes deadly opprobrium during the 17th century. Americans' eagerness to draw distinctions between "worthy and unworthy, between devout and degenerate," Mr. Morone says, reflects two "vital urges — redeeming 'us' and reforming 'them.'" But our insatiable appetite for a "politics of us and them" also reveals how the identification of a dangerous, morally inferior enemy provides "a shared identity" and "a renewed mission" for the devoutly worthy us.

The "main Puritan theme" of "controlling the immoral other" offers an interpretive motif that Mr. Morone applies to everything from the Salem witch trials to the recent creation of the new federal Department of Homeland Security. Each successive American "moral fever," he says, "involves widespread fear, uncertain (often invisible) enemies, lapses in due process and a frightening sexuality running just under the official text."

Mr. Morone follows his multi-chapter consideration of the Puritans with long discussions of pre-Civil War abolitionists, Victorian-era anti-vice crusaders and early-20th-century prohibitionists. His interpretive template is applied in a less than rigorous and sometimes garbled manner, and his recurring core themes — particularly how "they" always embody "violence, intoxication, laziness and sexual depravity" — seem persuasive in some contexts and inapposite in others.

Mr. Morone also contends that each successive "enemy" produces an institutional response — for instance, the F.B.I. during the 1910's — that endures long after the precipitating threat has faded away. But again his conclusion is cogent in some circumstances but not in all.

"Hellfire Nation" is a book in which the author obviously has invested years of labor, but Mr. Morone's narrative often leaves a reader grasping for explicit guideposts. Only when his account reaches the 1930's does it become clear that the book's extended critique of "neo-Puritan" politics is intended to promote an alternative American moral tradition. That tradition, the Social Gospel, "shifts the focus from individual conduct" and questions of morality to "communal responsibility."

Mr. Morone sees Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal as an exemplar of this alternative tradition, and he contends that the tone of Roosevelt's presidency "submerged the familiar discourse about them and us, about vice and virtue." Hailing how "progressives turn sins into illness and moral problems into medical ones," he states that during the New Deal "a lot less political energy went into finding an immoral underclass

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HELLFIRE NATION

The Politics of Sin
in American History

By James A. Morone

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at the root of America's troubles."

But since World War II, America has fallen back into a damaging succession of "moral alarms" that have led government institutions to "crack down on the least powerful." By pursuing a war on drugs, for example, Mr. Morone says "we have transformed disease into crime," produced hundreds of thousands of nonviolent criminals and imposed a divisive, neo-Puritan mindset that treats offenders as "a dangerous them" rather than "one of us."

"Hellfire Nation" ends with a somewhat plaintive call for Americans to jettison our Puritan heritage so that we can "renew our faded sense of collective responsibility." Asking "what would it take to make the leap into a resurgent Social Gospel era?" Mr. Morone dismisses traditional liberalism as incapable of fostering "big dreams about a better society." Instead, he surprisingly calls for a "moral politics" in which the American left would manifest a "moral fervor that fights to rally the country" on behalf of "a new social justice rooted in moral conviction."

Coming at the end of so lengthy a depiction of all the damage America has suffered from "moral politics," Mr. Morone's recommended cure seems fundamentally inconsistent with the disease he has explored so extensively. "Hellfire Nation" is a rich yet frustrating and in the end disappointing book.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.