

Our Magical President



“Mr. President, Please Make Us Proud.” That was the cover story in the January 28 issue of *Parade*, the nation’s most widely circulated magazine with 37 million copies distributed inside Sunday newspapers. The magazine had asked “teens across America” what they would “ask our new President to do for them [and] their families, schools and communities.”

And boy, did the teens have ideas. They seemed to regard the new president as a combination of Superman, Santa

Claus, and Mother Teresa. “Help save our planet,” they implored. “Everybody, no matter how much money they have, should be able to go to college. . . . The government could help us all.” “Please care about homeless people.” “How come our burnt-up houses and our school can’t get remodeled?”

No task is too small for the president—“Can you make a national hotline where teens can get advice when they’re sad or angry?”—or too large—“Will you help to mend my broken heart?”

A few weeks earlier *Washington Post* columnist Courtland Milloy reported on letters written by District of Columbia elementary school students in an essay contest sponsored by Xerox Corp. What did the youngsters have to say to the president-elect? You should give everyone health care, Mr. President. You should give us new school materials, computers, and so on. You should end homelessness and

provide homes and medical treatment for drug addicts. None of the children, of course, addressed who would pay for all those goodies, or what one might give up to get those programs, or whether the programs themselves would work. After all—homes, schoolbooks, health care—who could be against that?

The last letter Milloy highlighted demonstrated an even more expansive view of the president’s powers: “Hopefully, now that you are President, you can stop all of this madness, this violence, and ignorance. I am depending on you.”

Fourth-graders believe the president can do anything, and only a *bad* president would fail to do good.

Many of us grow up. We come to realize that homes and computers have to be produced, that wishes and results are not the same things. And we learn that the president doesn’t have magical powers; he can’t cure cancer, or hate, or poverty, or economic fluctuations.

Unfortunately, a lot of people don’t grow up. They retain a magical view of the power of the president, or of government generally. In magical societies people believe that speaking words gives power over things and persons. Many of our policymakers believe that to write and vote for a bill called the Social Security Act is to give people “social security.” To name a bill the

Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2001 will actually reform campaigns. But of course adults know from bitter experience that legislative actions often fail, or backfire, or have unintended consequences, or disappear into bureaucratic sinkholes.

Still, we are told, if we just pass more laws about health care, education, homelessness, equality, and so on, we will at the very least affirm our own goodness—if one magical spell doesn’t work, you need another.

Liberals are not the only people who have this magical view of government, of course. Many conservatives believe that a law banning the use and abuse of drugs will actually eliminate the use and abuse of drugs. Some even believe that a White House Office of Marriage Initiatives will cause more Americans to get and stay married.

Throughout history humans have attributed supernatural powers to their leaders. King Canute had to go down to the sea and command the tide to stop in order to show his advisers that his powers were limited. Most rulers, however, preferred to enjoy the presumption of magical powers. We have largely discarded our belief in the divine right of kings, and we have come to understand that no man is God, that even a powerful man is just a man, without supernatural powers. Now we are so advanced that we attribute magical powers only to men who are chosen in elections.

One of the tasks of believers in liberty and limited government is to persuade the public that governments—hereditary or elective—do not have magical powers. Benefits from government must be paid for. Government can no more “stop all this madness, this violence, and ignorance” than it can

guarantee bounteous supplies of electricity at controlled prices. When voters come to understand those realities, politics and public policy will make more sense.

In the end, we should take note of one teen who actually has some sense of the tradeoffs in the real world and some understanding of what a president can do, perhaps because he has some experience in the real world. “I worked every day last summer,” he told *Parade*, “repairing and setting up cattle fences, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. in very hot weather. I got a good tan, but other than that it wasn’t worth it—just to have the government take a third of my money and have it go to someone I don’t even know who didn’t earn it in the first place. Do something about taxes.” Now there’s something a president could actually do. America has at least one adult: Lucas Harris, 16, of Spanish Fork, Utah.

—David Boaz