

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Hardly anyone recalls the momentous military and political events of the reign of Louis XIV, but everyone remembers that the Sun King lived in staggering splendor at Versailles. Will future generations similarly recollect the prince of the Sun Belt, Ronald Reagan, mainly for his life style?

The significance of the Reagans' opulence extends far beyond society pages. The couple wordlessly but eloquently articulates a social ethic, a definition of collective values. Such nonlegislated moral codes make possible the community that underlies a political system: They are more fundamental to collective life than government itself.

The social ethic expressed is that of elitist individualism. Unlike traditional European aristocracies, the American elite justifies its privileges through the rationalization that money, unlike noble birth, is theoretically available to anyone. If the superior individual has earned money through talent and hard work, he has the right to spend it as he wishes. Material display further benefits the community by providing jobs and by motivating others to produce so they too may enjoy "the American dream" of material success.

In many quarters the Reagans are admired, not denounced, for their profligacy because they embody this dream. By living out a collective fantasy, they restore faith in its viability. During the Depression, Hollywood movies revived faltering belief in the American dream; now, in another era of economic distress, the Hollywood "dream factory" again provides reassurance, but with even more authority because the actor plays the role in real life.

But there has persisted another social ethic in American life, a democratic and egalitarian one. If some of our forebears came in hopes of getting rich, others came to dwell in a land of liberty, equality, and justice. Simplicity of manners constitutes a fundamental element of this other tradition, for material modesty reinforces and affirms political democracy. As President, Thomas Jefferson once shocked the British ambassador by receiving him in a frayed coat, corduroy pants, and run-down slippers. Jefferson was convinced that disdain for aristocratic

High Life In the Opal Office

By Rosalind H. Williams

luxury was a necessary bulwark against aristocratic government.

As individuals, and as a society, Americans are torn between these two sets of values. We discern dangers to individualism in the leveling process, but we appreciate the social injustices of elitist luxury. Accordingly, we oscillate between the two ideals. That is why in 1976 we witnessed a Presidential inauguration of shoe leather, business suits, and off-the-rack dresses, and four years later, a spectacle of limousines, morning coats, and hand-embroidered gowns. The contrast is far more significant than one of personal taste. It points to a fundamental conflict of social values.

President Reagan's inaugural address suggests one way we try to reconcile this conflict. The true heroes of America, he tells us, are the little people who work in factories, stores, and small businesses, struggling to make ends meet. As patriotic Americans, Mr. Reagan further exhorted us, our most urgent task is to cut back on spending. The contrast between this spoken message of democracy and frugality and what Mr. Reagan says in the silent language of life style is startling, even ludicrous. But in a confused way his political philosophy attempts to reconcile the elitism he lives and the democratic sentiments he believes. Equality before the law is the guiding principle of the political system, but in the economic system individualism reigns. Only governments must live frugally: Mink coats are permitted for individuals, but food stamps waste money. Government spending should be disciplined because lower taxes will increase private prosperity as the benefits of free enterprise trickle down through the economy. The little people are heroic because they wait patiently for that trickle, and because they keep strug-

gling to better their circumstances under increasingly unfavorable odds.

This reconciliation of incompatible social moralities, although widespread, has always been uneasy. It is now untenable, not because of its immorality but because of its unreality. In fact, economic success is far less due to talent and hard work than to birth and luck. In fact, there are social limits to enjoyment of luxuries (a traffic jam of Cadillacs is still a traffic jam). In fact, there are material limits to the resources we consume so voraciously. And, finally, there is in fact a world outside America laden with people living in famine, misery, and ignorance, who are not going to wait patiently for material comforts to trickle down.

In the face of these realities, we must redefine the American dream so that it is compatible with them. We must create a society of social justice that is not equivalent to mediocre uniformity; only then may we achieve a genuine, stable reconciliation of the ideals of individualism and equality.

By appealing to our fantasies, the life style of the Reagans tempts us to evade these facts and responsibilities. Louis XIV's splendid life style was part of a deliberate policy to direct his nobles away from meaningful government by entangling them in petty quarrels over social status. The opulence of the court encouraged them to retreat from reality to a dream world. Today, we wonder how the pre-revolutionary nobility could have been so heedless of the plight of the ragged peasants they glimpsed from gilded carriages. Our descendants may wonder how our politicians could ride in chauffeured limousines in the midst of a suffering world. Let us hope history remembers Ronald Reagan not for acting out fantasies, but for dealing with realities.

Rosalind H. Williams, author of the forthcoming "Dream Worlds of the Consumer," is a research fellow in the program in science, technology, and society at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.