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# THEME

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**T**he city is the birthplace and home of politics in the western world. It has symbolized democracy in Athens, equality in Sparta, republicanism and empire in Rome. The city has symbolized faith, too, from Jerusalem to Rome, Mecca to Constantinople (called simply “the City” in Byzantium). John Winthrop’s vision of the “city upon a hill,” a vision of a place of love and charity to be established in America, captured both the political and spiritual heritages: his city would, through the example of its virtue, reform the corrupt England he left behind.

In accepting the Republican nomination as presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan invoked Winthrop’s image of the city upon a hill. It is fitting that he should have descended from his mountain ranch in California to do so. Not long after the nation’s founding the myth of the frontier rose to challenge the premises of Winthrop’s city. Winthrop would have assumed that while cities impose spatial and physical limits, they also provide the spaces for spiritual and cultural growth. Many early American preachers feared that the apparent abundance of the North American continent and the westward expansion would undermine those limits and result in profligacy and corruption. Reagan, whose very manner of occupation of the White House is representative of that profligacy, marks the point at which the rhetoric of Winthrop’s city—the language of public virtue and charity—is used to bury it.

In the United States, the city as the ideal of political association never fully took hold. “The citizen” was more likely to be envisioned as a yeoman farmer than as a city dweller. Here the city, elsewhere the symbol of permanence, became the symbol of rootlessness, while the rural landscape, though trampled by westward-moving feet, acquired the image of settled, traditional life.

Only our oldest cities give the appearance of having been intended for long-term occupancy. For the most part, our urban centers bear the imprint of the peculiarly American notion that cities, like almost everything else, can be used up and discarded. Only the rubble remains, as the original inhabitants move on to the next temporary stop, either to the suburbs or to another more prosperous city while the rubble is turned over to the jobless, the poor, the outcast. This prediction has become national policy. The Reagan administration came to power armed with a report, commissioned by the Carter administration, that advocated the abandonment of the older cities of the East and Midwest in favor of the new metropolises of the South and Southwest.

There is more underlying this kind of policy than the assumption that city people have no real roots, of course. The original westward movement was part of an expansion of the American economy in the same direction. Today’s admo-

dition to move to the sunbelt comes at the same time that one of the largest-selling newspapers in unemployment-ridden southeast Michigan is a Houston daily—the movement of capital dictates the movement of people. Cities vie with each other in offering tax breaks and other free benefits either to keep or lure free-moving corporations. Detroit beat out its sunbelt rivals for a new Cadillac plant by agreeing to level part of Poletown, one of the city's oldest and most self-conscious neighborhoods. The city council claimed it had no choice.

Whether in the ancient polis or the medieval commune, the city has historically been associated with democracy through the practice of self-governance. But in America, the dictates of the market find a hospitable ideology of movement that has undermined self-governance. To truly restore our cities will require their democratization, and the first step must be to loose the economy's grip on them. Federal programs, when available, can help take the sting out of corporate decisions, and a national economic policy to curtail capital movement may be necessary; but the real thrust must be from below. What is at stake is more than buildings: it is citizens, and the virtues of citizenship can only be learned through participation in and responsibility for governing. Gentrification and the restoration of tourist attractions can never compensate for what has been lost in Winthrop's vision. Walt Whitman got the stakes right when he wrote:

A great city is that which has the greatest men and women.  
If it be a few ragged huts it is still the greatest city in the whole world.

**T**he Presidential Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties suggested that cities have a life span, and that many American cities may have reached the end of theirs—after only 200 years. Thomas Bender takes up the disembodied logic behind this observation and others that frame discussions of the city today. Andrew J. Polsky looks to the urban theories of an earlier epoch—the period of Progressive reform in the late nineteenth century—to uncover the urban origins of the welfare state, and argues that a successful welfare policy must begin and end in the neighborhood. The flawed welfare policies of the past contributed to Ronald Reagan's election and his plan for a "New Federalism." Duane Lockard shows that proposals for decentralization that ignore the national dimension of many problems and the extent of corporate power are doomed to failure. And Glenn Yago looks closely at one particular area of urban concern, public transit, to show how concentrated corporate power can thwart local planning.

—N.X.