Can we imagine America without empire? The conditions for an affirmative answer are staggering.

Can we imagine America without big business and multinational enterprise? Without oil-based transportation? Without a vast military, machine? Without scientific and educational communities dependent on that machine? Without a regressive tax system and fantastic disparities of wealth, ownership and power?

Can we conceive of this country functioning without a concentrated and utterly conformist national press? Without a labor movement populated with cold warriors and arms-enthusing bureaucrats? Without a popular culture organized around continuous consumption and the extermination of memory? Without pervasive racism? Without heroin and network TV?

Most Americans will follow their imaginations elsewhere. In 1980, those citizens not yet comatose with despair are more likely to be buying gold, practicing karate, flocking to disaster movies, or accepting Jesus as their personal savior.

But one should not lose faith in the American people. In at least one important respect their understanding of our political system is vastly superior to that of the scholars and media pundits who analyze it for a living. Save perhaps for the Holy Rollers, they realize that there is nothing in it for them.

They know, however imperfectly, that the elite core of both major parties is dominated by big business, and that the quadrennial charade of national elections has more to do with resolving conflicts within the business community than with the workings of mass democracy. They understand that the social bases of political parties, upon which scholars and journalists have lavished so much attention, are merely the detritus of a previous age, almost helpless to shape national politics in our own. And they will manifest this knowledge in the only way they can: by staying away from the polls in November.

Such massive disaffection cries out for sympathetic analysis and presents a momentous opportunity for those who hope to move American politics beyond the riddles of empire. But seizing that opportunity requires a preliminary effort of intellect and will.

Not least among the costs of empire are the dissociations of thought and action, opinion and performance, and language and reality that it codifies. There can be no mass renewal of America's democratic tradition until these dissociations are overcome—until we set aside the stale, misleading fictions of conventional liberalism and call things by their names. Whole worlds of captivating imagery must be lost along the way. There can be no more millionaire

Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers

Too Many Broken Promises!
NOW WE WILL BE HEARD!

The Democrats held their convention here in 1976. Now they're coming back to do it all over again.

We Demand:
- Funds to rebuild our cities, not for war, nuclear annihilation and support of dictatorships abroad.

- MORE affirmative action, not LESS, and an end to ALL forms of discrimination based on race, national origin, sex and sexual orientation.

AUGUST 10
Protest Outside Madison Square Garden

Return to Coalition for a People's Alternative in 1980 29 W 21st St, NY, NY 10010 212-242-3270

Name/Organization
Address
State
City
Zip
Phone

☐ I/We endorse the plans of the Coalition for a People's Alternative in 1980 and give permission for my/our name to be so listed.

☐ I/We would like to join the Coalition Contact us at the above number

☐ I/We understand the critical need for money Enclosed is $
"reformers." Tax cuts for the rich cannot be labeled "new populism" or "tax reform." The MX must die as a "defense" expenditure. And the ritual identification of Democrats with the "interests of labor" must cease.

We need to acquire a new and more discriminating vocabulary for describing the system of American politics as it really is: the business coalitions that drive it forward, the fragmentation of working people that has made it possible.

Such renovations of language and theory cannot guarantee the radical change Professor Williams calls for, but they are its necessary preconditions. Only when the structures of American politics are laid bare can thought be given to their transformation. Only upon naming something can we leave it.

If we forsake this effort, the perver-
sions of American political language will continue to hold us prisoner. They may even find confirmation in their own bizarre reality. One day soon we might hear President Reagan trumpet another "war to end all wars," and make the terrible discovery that even American politicians sometimes speak the truth.

The Nation.

Alan Wolfe

May be Eugene Debs asked the wrong question. It is not how we remain democratic without an empire but did we remain democratic with one. America, as Williams claims, received economic benefits from its expansion, but it paid a major political cost: Its government and party system were deprived of the ability to make choices.

Politics, like economics, deals with scarcity. Because no human community can obtain everything it wants at all times, people institute among themselves arrangements for establishing priorities (or have those arrangements established in their name). Given its imperial expansion, America never created those arrangements. Instead of making difficult choices, its policies were geared to convincing people that they could have everything they wanted. Americans were offered a deal difficult for most people to refuse: If they deprived themselves of their political character, they would be rewarded with economic abundance. The fantastic growth and vitality of the American economy was dependent upon a sick and emaciated polity. American democracy, understood as a vibrant system of discourse, collapsed, even as American capitalism triumphed.

In the face of extraordinary growth at home, passion and controversy were held to be ungrateful. In the face of imperial growth abroad, they were found to be illegal. Empire did indeed become a way of life—for the elite. For everyone else, the price paid for empire was the loss of citizenship.

There is one question now facing the American political system: Can the enormous gap between reality and what the American people think is reality be closed? As a result of decades, if not centuries, of empire, the world and the United States have moved in different directions. Everywhere outside of this country it is understood that politics involves the making of physical choices. Here the American people still are attracted to a political system that offers them everything, while living in an economic system that will not give it to them. The choice is fairly clear: They can live with their dreams and go down angrily or wake up and demand honesty from those who presume to govern in their name.

That honesty will not come from Ronald Reagan, a true imperial swashbuckler. The Republican Party has set itself on a collision course with reality, offering the American people dreams that simply cannot come true. Like the Democrats of the 1960s, the Republicans, if elected, will have no choice but to preside over a nightmare of their own creation.

This leaves the task to the Democratic Party, which at the moment is as busily engaged in denial as the Republican. Unlike Reagan, Jimmy Carter is aware of what must be done, which, in my view, makes his refusal to do so all the more reprehensible. To impose himself on us for another four years, Carter has become a demagogue who knows better, while Reagan is a demagogue who doesn't. Carter's nomination by the Democratic Party will subtract four years from the finite amount of time the United States has left in which to wake up.

There is only one thing worse than an empire: an empire that has lost its glory. As pathos replaces arrogance, the mood in America becomes increasingly ugly. We are, in Richard Nixon's metaphor, a crippled giant, too crippled to have our way anymore, yet gigantic enough to make the world pay for our loss. America was not a pleasant place when its empire was intact. Unless there is some change soon, it will be an even worse place as it learns that it is not as exempt from history as it had supposed.

Blair Clark

If "imperialism" were truly an evil arising directly from human sin, instead of a natural political phenomenon, however damag-
ing both to those who impose it and those who must endure it, then there might be a point to the Williams essay.

But since he treats it as the American curse, "born and bred" in us from the start, there can be for him only personal, psychological ways to exorcise it and to achieve salvation through a strange kind of evangelism, which he in-

vokes in inflated Whitmanese.

"Do you want to imagine a new America or do you want to preserve the empire?" he asks at the very end. To this question we must pose another: Could we and our "victims" imaginably be saved by such a crusade and be reborn in an innocence neither we nor any other people ever had? The answer is: Not in time.

The only solution to the problems Williams tries to raise is through democratic political action for change, as it always is. He seems to have given up on that. The moralistic answers he gives to the problems of "empire," with the most dubious historical evidence in support of his argument, are of no use at all.