



mined, from the popular Superman TV series (1951-57). Actually, the famous lead-in to the show refers to Superman fighting "the never-ending battle for Truth, Justice and the American Way" — a sentiment and phrasing that no doubt resonated differently for TV audiences of the McCarthy period than for audiences of post-Vietnam America.

In any case, loyalty to these same principles has been unremitting in the Superman comic books before and since. Superman's victories over criminals, foreign tyrants or extraterrestrial invaders are always testimony that the American Way is the true way, the just way. "When the mighty Man of Tomorrow discovers threats endangering the well-being of our great nation," begins one *Superman* tale from the 1940s, "he launches a battle against the saboteurs that will long be remembered."

America's champion never sleeps. Under his street clothes, and presumably his pajamas, this doughty knight is always dressed for combat. When Lois exclaims in the November-December 1943 issue of *Superman* comics that it "would be something to see Clark Kent in uniform!", the timid reporter shares a furtive aside with the reader: "You've seen me in uniform before, Lois... one with a red cape!" "Millions of *Superman* readers will recall," whispers an editor's note, "that Clark Kent tried to enlist, but was rejected for faulty vision (IMAGINE!) when his X-ray vision penetrated the eye-chart and read a different chart in the next room. Since then, he has learned that Superman could be of more value on the home front operating as a free agent." Indeed, a more dedicated superpatriot never leaped a tall building.

Yet the adventures of Superman also present a paradox rooted in the same collision of opposing values that perplexed the authors of the American Way, the framers of our Constitution. When Clark Kent de-

clares, "This is a job for Superman!", we have learned to expect one of two possible challenges for the immigrant from Krypton: Either Superman is being called upon to reinforce the powers of a legitimate government that is too weak or ineffectual to maintain law and order on its own. (This usually takes the form of coming to the aid of the police or, in some instances, the armed forces or agents of the federal government.) Or his mission is to prevent the abuses of power — whether by a government or by an individual, often some evil genius or supervillain, who has usurped the powers properly accorded a legitimate government. Lex Luthor and Brainiac claim the right, without benefit of the political process or the rule of law, to curb the liberties of America's citizens and to dispose of the country's assets as they please. They are, in effect, self-appointed political dictators who must be deposed.

Thus Superman's life's work parallels a problem — one might even say the fundamental dilemma — that confronted the Constitution's framers: how to establish a government that is sufficiently strong to control evil (Hamilton's concern), but not so strong that it becomes a greater evil that controls us (Jefferson's worry). The framers responded to that challenge by adopting a federal system of government in which the powers of the individual states are countered by the authority of a central power) and then setting up an arrangement of "checks and balances" between the executive, legislative and judicial functions of that government.

This initial formula for limited government has worked fairly well across the decades, but not without occasional strain. Maintaining a governmental system that is neither too weak to sustain law and order nor so strong as to inhibit liberty remains the constant challenge of American politics, just as it does in the adventures of Superman. "The



## I don't think that anyone who has chosen a life in public service hasn't wished they could call in Superman to help in a time of national emergency. President Kennedy certainly would have enjoyed having him handy during the Cuban missile crisis.

Edward M. Kennedy, U.S. senator

Wizard with the Golden Eye" (March 1974), described as "a tale of power and how it is used... and abused," has the Man of Steel struggling to subdue a retired scientist whose misguided attempts to solve all of civilization's problems, such as overpopulated cities, by the use of the magical powers he has harnessed, lead to one disaster after another.

Indeed, Superman himself must guard against the inadvertent misuse of his own extraordinary powers. "When I think how close Superman came to becoming a destructive force," Lois reflects at the conclusion of one hair-raising adventure. "It's a lucky thing he's on the side of law and order."

Of course, this entire preoccupation with good government is based on a presumption that pervades the American political tradition, a presumption from which the *Superman* series seldom if ever strays. This is the notion that the primary, if not exclusive, purpose of government is to maintain law and order, to police, to regulate behavior, to "keep us off the grass." In short, the essential function of government is seen as a remedial one — rooted in the necessity to control human behavior that is selfish or ignorant. The Frankster's dangerous stunts

are an example of the former, Bizarro's clumsy destructiveness, of the latter. But they in themselves are never the occasion for the dash to the nearest phone booth. Superman's extraordinary powers are called upon because, and only when, government is failing to deliver on its primary mission.

This view of government — as the keeper of law and order — has been challenged as impoverished and even untenable in the modern world. It makes no allowance for any positive or creative governmental activity such as supportive involvement in the arts, education, science (other than for military purposes) and health. Nonetheless, the prevailing view of government in the American political tradition is this remedial one. And the chroniclers of Superman's adventures, on the comic page or on the screen, tenaciously follow the conventional view of government as existing primarily to save us from ourselves. This is the very role, of course, that Superman aspires to. And fans of the Man of Steel will find few, if any, examples of their hero exercising his powers to bring about the real and lasting improvement of the human condition; rather, they will find (as Umberto Eco notes in his essay, "The Myth of Superman") an obsession with preserving the status quo.

remedial role of govt.