

Handout

[From Robert Reich, Tales of a New America, pp. 3 - 5]

"You've heard the story a hundred times, with different names, different details. George was a good man, the son of immigrants who had made their way to Marysville. They came with no money, with nothing but grim determination and hard-won freedom. Dad worked all his life in the mill; he was union, hard, and proud. George was quick by nature, dogged by necessity. He studied hard at school, and after school worked long and well at anything that would bring in a few dollars. George was good at sports, but he had little time for games. He had few close friends, and yet he was fair and decent with everyone, and quietly kind to anybody in real trouble. He never picked a fight in his life. But in eighth grade, when the town bully Albert Wade was slapping around the smallest kid in the class, George stepped between them without saying a word. He let Wade throw the first punch, then put him away with one straight left, turned around, and walked away.

George finished high school in 1943, and joined the army the day he graduated. Four months later he was in Europe. On the sixth day of the Normandy invasion his squad was on patrol, passing through a French orchard when a German machine-gun nest opened up from behind a stone wall, picking off the squad one by one. George broke from cover and, dodging from tree to tree, raced toward the Nazis as bullets chewed the bark and ground around him. He took out the nest with a grenade and his rifle, and he saved his buddies, but he never wore the medals they gave him and he never talked about it much. After the war he came back to Marysville and married Kate, his childhood sweetheart. He raised three kids, and he started a little construction business, which his hard work and integrity gradually made into a big construction business. But his family continued to live modestly, and he gave generously to the local boys' club and an orphanage he founded. He was generous with his time, too, and headed the community chest. Still he kept pretty much to himself until Albert Wade inherited his father's bank, the only bank in town. Wade risked his depositors' money on shaky loans to his cronies, bought and bullied his way into power with Marysville's political leaders. When he was elected mayor the election smelled bad to everyone, but only George openly accused Wade of corruption. For six months Wade's bank refused every

mortgage on houses built by George's company, and George risked everything in the showdown. But in that tense town meeting, one of the city councilmen Wade had paid off could no longer hide his shame under George's steady gaze and simple question from the back of the room. He spilled how Wade had rigged the election. Albert Wade went from city hall to county jail, and George went back to his family, his work, and his quiet service to Marysville. . . ."

George's story is an American morality tale. It is a national parable, retold time and again in many different versions, about how we should live our lives in this country.

George is the American Everyman. He's Gary Cooper in **High Noon**. He's Jimmy Stewart in **It's a Wonderful Life**. He's the American private eye, the frontier hero, the kid who makes good. He's George Washington and Abe Lincoln. He appears in countless political speeches, in newspaper stories, on the evening news, in American ballads, and sermons . . .

The American morality tale defines our understanding of who we are, and of what we want for ourselves and one another. It is the tacit subtext of our daily conversations about American life. . . ."