

Regarding Softness And Our Breakdown

Frank Crowther

Obviously, Messrs. Steinbeck and Davis, elsewhere in this page, have raised a series of pertinent questions even, if you will, fashionable. All one has to do these days is mention that something seems to have gone wrong in and with America and it is as if innumerable Alladins' lamps had been rubbed — sanctus Genii spontaneously manifest themselves and are all too willing to diagnose, prognosticate and, without batting an eye, prescribe the panacea medication. I would rather these self-styled pundits (myself included) admit at the outset that none of us knows exactly what is wrong. Something is wrong, agreed, but that something is elusive and too often, chimerical. Is there a specific or a general malady? Is it dyspeptic capitalism, crass materialism, mania for possessions, amorality or immorality, cynicism, spiritual bankruptcy, detachment, conformity, the tragic fallacy of technology-worship, the organized lonely crowd, lack of initiative and individuality — or any of a thousand other catchwords and phrases?

Father Davis' essay points up the problem. He has made several crucial observations. He is also guilty of being trapped within his own personal commitment. His aura of objectivity is subtly subjective. But, let us admit, we cannot possibly discuss this matter purely from an objective standpoint.

Let us examine, however, his assertion that "This moral miasma which afflicts us is well-nigh universal." For me, that is too gross a generalization, for there are yet many "moral" people in this world. It would seem stupendously ludicrous, for instance, to say that all of Africa is afflicted with a moral miasma. That would not be relatively applicable, or make much sense. But, to Father Davis' credit, he brings to our attention the "millions of hard-working and dedicated people" too often overlooked in any evaluation.

Again, Father Davis asserts: "Our problem is that we no longer know who or what we are." Does he mean this in a national or a metaphysical sense? If he means the former, I agree. If he means the latter, I say "We never did." Such an anagogic question seeks an impossible unity. We may only construct, as Camus suggests, a universal substitute. Metaphysical questions are intrinsically personal and it is wildly anachronous of any one to announce, "I have discovered the metaphysical unity we have all been seeking." I distrust group metaphysics as much as I do religion, group therapy and groupism in general (togetherness). Mutual cooperation, cultural interrelationships, organization through established laws — yes. This organizational problem may well be symptomatic of a major abyss into which we have rushed, eagerly. We do have this tendency to group, and any group, to function efficiently, needs a strong leader. Our horrible problem seems to be that we have not found (or developed) these necessary leaders in America. In their stead, we have politicians, and that, my friends, has become a dirty word.

This groupism has also led to our inability to form or reform anything which might resemble Walter Lippmann's "public philosophy." The reason for this is simple: no one group respects or trusts the other. Our philosophers remove them-

selves from the public to the extent that many of them forget that the public is still "out there," except in a theoretical sense. Academia itself is often characterized by a smug "Fa-Dism" with inter-departmental rivalry and jealousy prevailing (distrust again). The professors have no kind words for the politicians, but have their own instantaneous political theories upon which they will expound at the drop of a textbook.

Well, then, what about the poor old public? It is not amazing to discover that they really don't trust anybody — from their milkman to their politicians. And no matter what you hear to the contrary (the intellectuals' campaign to make the intellectuals respectable notwithstanding), Americans are an anti-intellectual.

If we examine the societal structure, we find that the lower class trusts baseball, but not the umpires; bartenders, but not the whisky served by the establishment; their fellow workers, but only as opposed to their blood-sucking employers (and once they're off work, they don't trust their fellow workers anymore). The middle class doesn't trust the middle class, but sits around with its peers wisecracking about its plight; its members join any number of a variety of clubs, organizations and leagues, professing mutual assistance and spouting humanitarian ideals, but they will stab their best friends in the back to get ahead and adulterate indiscriminately. And the upper class — well, when you get down to it (or up to them), who really knows anything about the upper class? I don't mean the parvenu wealthy product of the upper bourgeoisie (once a bourgeois, always a bourgeois), but the honest-to-God American aristocrat of wealth, rank and intellect. In my estimation they are a species unto themselves and not easily or conveniently categorized.

And what of the "Big Idea" Father Davis says we have lost, "the meaning and purpose of human life in relation to a real order of objective and transcendent being?" Here Father Davis is being true to his colors in referring to an "objective and transcendent being," but why doesn't he come right out and say what he means: God? Has that become a bad word, too? Even for the clergy? How vague and cautious can one be?

As always, any religious discussion treads on tenuous bog and, as I iterated above, in the final analysis, is and can be nothing but personal conviction. It certainly cannot be amalgamated into any new "public philosophy," for all one has to do is look around to see the product of our democratic ideal which has (or had) as its cornerstone, "in God we trust." I don't think we believe that anymore. We obviously don't practice it as a nation. We find ourselves in Housman's "world I never made," a world to which this "God" never speaks; possibly, on which He has turned His back. We ask, "Does God exist?" Any two may agree that they feel he does. But the coincidence of their belief cannot posit the unquestionable existence of something we know not. We make a grave mistake if we tend to confuse feelings with "reality," whatever that may be. Indeed, we would all be better off if we knew God does or does not exist. But none of us has died (that we know of), and death is the inexorable inevitability of life, no matter one's station or personal conviction. Until we pass that barrier, there is no assurance other than emotional—and how many of us honestly have that?

What do we have then? We have the greatest nation ever to exist in all history. Or should I say that we had the greatest opportunity of any nation? And what have we done with it: ravaged it, coveted it, and, as Dos Passos wrote in the Twenties, "... bought the laws and fenced off the meadows and cut down the woods for pulp and turned our pleasant cities into slums and sweated the wealth out of our people. . . ." This is not entirely true, I quickly add. We are not all scabious, parasitic, ruthless monsters. There are even now many good people in America who have the will and, hopefully, the strength to wrestle themselves out of the impasse, who refuse to believe that they are totally alienated or deracinated, who will fight the aggressive, greedy ideology which is characterized by the goof-off after the easy money, the fast buck, the sybaritic life of moral disengagement and irresponsibility.

Though the task be enormous, I hope it not Sisyphean. We are confronted with a strangely ineffective breed of politicians, many of whom, under the veneer, are no more than malignant glory-seekers. And Machiavelli's words might well apply to our present administration's policy, to wit: "Occasionally words must serve to veil the facts. But this must happen in such a way that no one becomes aware of it; or, if it should be noticed, excuses must be at hand, to be produced immediately." Is this not the essence of our present bureaucracy? Its modus operandi?

Our churches and our religions should be a uniting factor (whether their tenets are true or merely pragmatic), but they feud constantly, and instead of conjuring persist in their vain division, thus eviscerating their usefulness through squabbling. And if you delve deeply enough, you discover some among their ranks would sacrifice anything to obtain and maintain ecclesiastical order. For example, Dietrich Von Nieheim, Bishop of Verden in the 15th century, who wrote: "When the existence of the Church is threatened, she is released from the commandments of morality. With unity as the end, the use of every means is sanctified, even cunning, treachery, violence, simony, prison, death. For all order is for the sake of the community, and the individual must be sacrificed to the common good." Are there men of such belief extant in the Church today? The anathema of totalitarianism may lurk under any roof. Let us learn its disguises.

And let us look, now, to our sheep, for as the man said: "there is still time, Brother." Let us seek out the infidels, those who do not hold that man has the one thing left to which he may cling: individual human dignity. Let us ponder, with all seriousness, the lamentation of the Patrician Women, in St. John Perse's "Seamarks," who asked (as we now must): "Our books read, our dreams closed, was that all there was? Where then is the fortune, where the issue? Where did it come to fail us, and which is the threshold that we did not cross?"

Thurston N. Davis

"If I wanted to destroy a nation," John Steinbeck wrote his friend Adlai Stevenson in a letter published by the Long Island newspaper *Newsday*, "I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy and sick. . . ." To assess Mr. Steinbeck's judgement that "on all levels" our society is "rigged" and has been corrupted by "cynical immorality," THE NEW REPUBLIC invited comment by the Reverend Thurston N. Davis, editor of *America* magazine, and others. With the permission of THE NEW REPUBLIC, the *Daily Tar Heel* herewith reprints Father Davis' remarks as they appeared in that journal's edition on February 15, 1960. —The Editors.

HAVE WE GONE SOFT?

Like a strong and vigorous person suddenly stricken in middle life, we appear obsessed with a fatal diagnosis which tells us we are sick and will surely die unless we somehow change the habitual pattern of our lives. And, as diseased people often do, we talk at great length about the latest chance remark dropped by the doctor. The malady is variously described. Columbia President Grayson Kirk's verdict is "spiritual flabbiness." Alan Drury in *Advise and Consent*, writes of our time as the Age of the Shrug, and stresses the "dry rot" every perceptive American senses in the air around him. Professor Charles A. Siepmann, who heads the New York City branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, declared only the other day: "We're breeding a new type of human being — a guy with a full belly, and empty mind and a hollow heart. I see them walking about, and I don't like them one bit."

All this gives added point to John Steinbeck's letter to Governor Stevenson. To "dear Adlai," Steinbeck transmits his two first impressions of the USA of 1959-60: first, "a creeping, all pervading nerve gas of immorality"; second, "a nervous restlessness; a hunger, a thirst, a yearning for something unknown" — perhaps morality. Then as afterthoughts, two further impressions: "the violence, cruelty, and hypocrisy symptomatic of a people which has too much," and "the surly ill temper" that afflicts "humans when they are frightened." "Mainly, Adlai, I am troubled by the cynical immorality of my country. I don't think it can survive on this basis."

Where do we go to gather evidence on our alleged decadence, immorality and materialism? We might pick up the tassel supplement, in on Sunday *New York Times*, and glance at the mid-winter ads for hotels and motels along the neon-bright strip of Miami Beach. Here, in one concentrated spree of vulgarity, we move from star-studded offers of *Fun, Fun, Fun at Low Low Rates* with "authentic Polynesian Luau's" thrown in free at one address all the way to siren assurances that if we reserve *Now* (at \$16 daily per person) then *Paradise* ("double occupancy") is *So Near At Hand*.

This sort of thing, I suppose, is materialism, though it is somewhat too obvious to be named decadence. But it isn't merely the Miami of the world that are in issue. If Steinbeck, and all the other critics are to be credited, this moral miasma which afflicts us is well-nigh universal. It is the fly-now-pay-late urge. It is the itch for the fast buck, for the irresponsible pleasure, for the short cut to power or payola or prideful status. It's the clever dodge, the inside track, the deal, the gimmick, the angle, the guy we know who'll "fix" it. It is the "filter" mentality: have the fun, but avoid the lung cancer or the pregnancy. It is the omnipresent yen to push somebody else out of the way and become the fellow who's got everything. To quote Professor Siepmann again: "This amorality is endemic. Society is shot through with it. You'd be amazed at how many students said Charles Van Doren was right. Anything for No. 1."

How does one go about curbing the moral strength or weakness of an entire society? Crime and delinquency statistics, the divorce rate, the blight of pornography, the rising rate of illegiti-

mate births, the high incidence of broken homes, the surge of mental illness, the percentage of youth rejected by the armed services, phenomena like the current practice of cheating in college examinations—these and other data and studies give some sort of an index. What else is there?

Eugene Kincaid, an editor of *The New Yorker*, has written a book entitled *In Every War But One* (Norton). It attempts to analyze the hundreds of cubic yards of documents that the Department of the Army assembled in its deadly serious effort to find out what went wrong with American prisoners-of-war in Korea. Kincaid reveals, amid much other data, that the 229 Turks who were captured and interned in Korea all managed to survive their imprisonment, and not a single one became a collaborator. One-third of our boys, on the other hand, became collaborators; and 35% of them died. The Army found that GI's often abandoned fellow-Americans who were wounded; they cursed their officers; the strong took food from the weak; in certain cases Americans sick with dysentery were rolled out into the cold to die; and this was done, not by their Chinese captors, but by fellow GI's. Turks, however, kept a high morale, shared food, and nursed their sick back to health.

Heaven knows, the image of America that is refracted through these and other available statistics is enough to shake the most complacent of us. Nevertheless, the picture is incomplete. The big, bold headlines—ah, dear, freedom of the press—ells us about the mad bombers, arsonist, sex maniacs, kidnapers, juvenile murderers, junkies and extortionists among us. They rarely highlight the millions of hard-working and dedicated people still in the land: surgeons, nurses, nuns, civil servants, artists, social workers, public school teachers, clergymen, firemen, policemen, truck drivers, scholars—and plain, everyday, indispensable fathers and mothers of growing families.

Then, too, a certain aroma of phoniness creeps at times into these discussions, making it all the more difficult to assess our true moral stature. We could well have done without the tears and congratulatory salves that greeted young Van Doren's public confession, which to many, by the way, was the most meretricious incident in the entire quiz-show mess. John Cogley, in the *Commonweal*, said Van Doren "did his greatest mischief and was guilty of the most shameful abuse of public confidence, not when he accepted money under false pretenses, but when he made his belated confession," which, he went on, while "humble" in the approved TV and Madison Avenue manner, "reeked with pride."

And, frankly, are we doing any better at genuinely unburdening our consciences than Van Doren did? We feel clean and noble when we exorcise the materialism around us. We manage to pin the blame on some scapegoat—working wives, or the New Deal, or high taxes, or John Dewey and the teachers colleges — leaving very little responsibility at our doorsteps. Our exorcisions would be far more convincing if we were readier with tax dollars for defense and for economic aid to less materialistic peoples; if we fought harder for the Negro; if our consciences were a bit more troubled over irrationalities in our immigration laws; if we worried a little

more about the lot of Puerto Ricans in our cities; if, having done our exorcising, we were prepared to sacrifice a slice of our time or a touch of our comfort to the common good of the free world and the righting of injustices and inequities here at home.

A false note is sounded, too, by the realization that in large part our concern originates in fear that we may soon be overtaken, economically, by the purposeful Soviet Union. Can we honestly say our fear in the rejection of God-fearing men—fear for ourselves and our souls and our fate, for the harvest of our sins and our wretched confusions? Or is it nothing but a camouflaged lust to cling on to the very possessions we protest are our undoing? There is reason to suspect that it may be the latter, that we are really worried about is that the whole kit and caboodle of our American way of life—missiles to credit cards, Cadillacs and pop-up toasters, our freedom, fun, filters and foolishness—is about to go down the drain. If so, then we do have reason to be concerned for ourselves and our future.

Our trouble is not simply that some Americans have air conditioners in their cars, or that an increasing number of our citizens are making down-payments on cabin cruisers. There number is and will remain limited; even in our affluent society there is still plenty of personal poverty. The obligation of transcending and mastering material possessions presses harder on the few than on the many. The crasser brand of materialism, therefore, can be discounted as a real problem for the majority.

There is, however, a subtler problem which does touch us all. It goes by various names and is all the following things at once: a loss of faith, an obtuseness of reason, a failure of nerve, a loss of confidence, an intellectual and moral vacuum, a failure to maintain on grip on the Big Idea about ourselves and the world we inhabit.

What is really wrong, it seems to me, has to do with our loss of this Big Idea, by which I mean our loosening grasp on the meaning and purpose of human life in relation to a real order of objective and transcendent being. Our problem is that we no longer know who or what we are. We no longer collectively see ourselves as a people bound together by common affirmations, common assumptions, common shared universals of values. For years we have viewed this American pluralism as a product of our freedom and as a source of immense strength. Now it is slowly dawning upon us that it can become a debilitating disease. This malady, which is now epidemic, affects rich and poor, young and old. It is as though all at once we had lost our identification papers. To make matters worse, we have not only let the Big Idea slip away, but it is no longer polite or even permissible to raise any of the Big Questions which have always asked about the Big Ideas.

What are these Big Questions which, in the contemporary atmosphere of our official agnosticism, may be asked and answered only behind the doors of the "home, church and synagogue"? To paraphrase a list of such questions prepared by Father John Courtney Murray, S. J., for Re-

ligion and the State University (University of Michigan Press, 1953): Where does man rank in the order of being, if there is an order of being? What is the nature of man? Is it of a piece with the nature of the cosmic universe? Is it to be understood in terms of the laws of the universe, whatever they may be? Or is there a difference between man and the rest of nature? Is the nature of man spiritual in a unique sense? What is man's destiny? Is it to be found and fulfilled beyond time in "another world"? What is the "sense" of history? Does history have some kind of finality? Or is the notion of "finality" meaningless? What can a man know? What do you mean when you say, "I know"? Are there varying degrees of knowledge and certitude? Can man's knowledge and love reach realities that are transcendent to the world of matter, space and time? Is there a God? What is God? Does God have a care for man? Has God entered the world of human history to accomplish a "redemption"? What is meant by "salvation"? What is meant by freedom, justice, order, law, authority, power, peace, virtue, sin, morality, religion?

Just now, in the United States and throughout the West, the e is obviously no consensus, as to how these and similar questions are to be answered. There is not even a shared language of words and concepts with which the separate components of our society might begin to be able to discuss them. Yet, as recently as 75 years ago, in the academic world as well as in the realm of public affairs, the ancient heritage of such words and concepts, products of the scholastic tradition, was still in uneasy but de facto possession. Today, except in some of our colleges, the lines that once bound us to that heritage have been broken.

Once the ancient words and ideas had been widely discredited, a new lexicon of discourse took their place. It was a tongue which had been coming into more and more common usage since the 18th Century, the language of Modernity—of science, experimentalism and positivism. Until almost yesterday, who would have dreamed of disputing Modernity? And yet, though it was so firmly in control just a little while back, today, in Father Murray's phrase, Modernity is "dissolving in disenchantment." The disenthronement has created a strange new situation, a sort of ideological interregnum. The seals of legitimacy, so to speak, have disappeared from its head and tongue. Though it still exercises a kind of caretaker government in our universities and elsewhere, the modern idiom of positivism is reenacting the old story of the emperor's clothes.

It is this sudden turn of events in the world of ideas, this breakdown of the flimsy consensus of Modernity, that has brought us to that condition of moral vacuum which John Steinbeck and others perceive and deplore. More or less clearly we today realize that a post-modern era has commenced and that we are entering it in a state of intellectual nakedness. The pressing need for some sort of revival of the "public philosophy" of the West has come home to us. This, it would seem, is what these gathering storms of protest and criticism are all about.

Half a dozen years ago, in his essay on *The Public Philosophy*, Walter Lippmann insisted that in our "pluralized and fragmenting society a public philosophy with common and binding principles" must be salvaged and reinstated. If we fail to revive and restore the consensus we once possessed, Lippmann warned, "then the free and democratic nations face the totalitarian challenge without a public philosophy which free men believe in and cherish, with no public faith beyond a mere official agnosticism, neutrality and indifference. There is not much doubt how the struggle is likely to end if it lies between those who, believing, care very much—and those who, lacking belief, cannot care very much."

We know from the chapter he contributed to *Walter Lippmann and His Times* (Harcourt, Brace), a volume published last year to honor Mr. Lippmann on his seventieth birthday, that Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., was more than a little scandalized by the stress the veteran columnist placed on the necessity of shoring up the "public philosophy" as a condition of the survival of our society. Mr. Lippmann had written: "I do not contend, though I hope, that the decline of Western society will be arrested if the teachers in our schools and universities come back to the great tradition of the public philosophy." But I do contend that the decline, which is already far advanced, cannot be arrested if the prevailing philosophers opposed this restoration and revival. . . .

However, as Schlesinger's reaction demonstrates—and he is not alone in his appraisal of Lippmann's thesis—the academic world is not as yet in the mood to accept the responsibility for the difficult but still feasible task of reorienting what Lippmann calls "a common conception of law and order which possesses a universal validity."

Meantime, each fresh week and month of our now lengthening post-modern experience serves to sharpen the issue and drive home its urgency. If we are really determined to fill the present void, we shall rediscover the words and begin to conceive the ideas with which to ask once again the Big Questions that every generation must answer. Thus, conceivably, if time is given us, we may even reclaim the Big Idea. If war is too important to be left to the generals, this present dilemma of ours is too terrible to be entrusted to the professors.

What About This?

1. The nation is at war.
2. The nation is losing the war, badly.
3. The nation must exert a vastly greater effort.
4. There is still time . . . brother.

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HAVE YOU REMEMBERED?



National Society for Crippled Children and Adults
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PEANUTS

BOY ITS TOUGH TO BE A DOG WHEN IT RAINS!

OF COURSE I'M LUCKIER THAN A LOT OF DOGS... AT LEAST I HAVE A DOG HOUSE TO GO HOME TO...

POGO

WE'VE GOT TO LIGHT A FIRE UNDER THIS CAMPAIGN OF FREEMOUNT FOR THE PRESIDENCY.

IF WE ONLY HAD A MATCH.

THE BOY HAS GOTTA HAVE A PROGRAM... WE GOTTA COME OUT FOR SOMETHING... BE AGAINST SOMETHING... PUT SOME TEETH IN THE CAMPAIGN... WE COULD COME OUT AGAINST THE BENGAL TIGER.

THAT'S OLD HAT... WE NEED A NEW TWIST.

SPOSE HE COMES OUT FOR THE BENGAL TIGER?

YOU'RE SO SQUARE YOU'RE CUBED.

WELL, IT'S ONE WAY TO GET TEETH INTO THE CAMPAIGN. FREEMOUNT AIN'T GOT NONE.

by SCHULZ

by KELLY