Americans and the Future

I find I have been avoiding or at least putting off one of the most serious problems, if not the most serious one, that Americans are faced with, both as a people and as individuals. In very many people this problem is a gray and leaden weight heavy to all and unbearable to some. We discuss it constantly and yet there is not even a name for it. Many, not able to face the universal spread and danger of the cancerous growth, split off a fragment of the whole to worry about or to try to cure. But it seems to me that we must inspect the disease as a whole because if we cannot root it out we have little chance of survival.

First, let us try to find something to call this subtle and deadly illness. Immorality does not describe it, nor does lack of integrity, nor does dishonesty. We might coin the word "anethics," but that would be too scholarly an approach to a subject that is far more dangerous than anything that has happened to us. It is a creeping, evil thing that is invading every cranny of our political, our economic, our spiritual, and our psychic life. I begin to think that the evil is one thing, not many, that racial unrest, the emotional crazy quilt that drives our people in panic to the couches of the psychoanalysts, the fallout, dropout, copout insurgency of our children and young people, the rush to stimulant as well as hypnotic drugs, the rise of narrow, ugly, and vengeful cults of all kinds, the distrust and revolt against all authority, political, religious, or military, the awful and universal sense of apprehension and even terror, and this in a time of plenty such as has never been known—I think all these are manifestations of one single cause.

Perhaps we will have to inspect mankind as a species, not with our usual awe at how wonderful we are but with the cool and neutral attitude we reserve for all things save ourselves. Man is indeed wonderful, and perhaps his gaudiest achievement has been to survive his paradoxes. He is not a herd animal, nor has he any of the built-in rules which permit the ruminants to graze and mate and survive together, reserving their fear and their ferocity for protection against foreign species. Mankind seems more nearly related to the predators, possessive, acquisitive, fearful, and aggressive. He is omnivorous, can and will eat anything living or dead, two endowments shared by the cockroach and the common rat. He is aggressively individual and yet he swarms and goes to hive in the noise and discomfort of his tenements and close-packed cities. Once, when enemies roamed the open, there was a reason for thronging in caves and castle courtyards, but with these dangers removed he is drawn to packed subways, crowded streets, howling traffic, and penal quarters in apartment houses. And in America this human tendency seems to be increasing. The small towns grow smaller so that men and women can breathe poisoned air and walk fearfully through streets where violence does not even wait for darkness. We are afraid to be alone and afraid to be together. What has happened to us? Something deep and controlling and necessary.

I'm not going to preach about any good old days. By our standards of comfort they were pretty awful. What did they have then that we are losing or have lost? Well, for one thing they had rules—rules concerning life, limb, and property, rules governing deportment, manners, conduct, and rules defining dishonesty, dishonor, misconduct, and crime. The rules were not always obeyed but they were believed in, and breaking them was savagely punished.

Because of our predatory nature, the hive or the herd were always beyond us but the pack and the crowd were open to us. When two humans get together rules are required to keep them from stripping or killing each other. These rules are simply pragmatic brakes on our less than fraternal instincts. Early on to make the rules effective they were put out as the commands of a God and therefore not open to question. By this means, it was simple for obedience to the rules to be equated with virtue or good, and disobedience with bad or evil. Since so many of our instincts lead to rape, rapine, mayhem, and plunder, it was necessary not only to punish the bad, or natural, but to reward the good people who lived by the rules in peace and safety. Since it was impractical to make
these rewards in physical form, more and more of the payments were put over into a future life.

In many of our activities, opposites in the world of rules are placed in juxtaposition one to another. It is said that the convict and the keeper are more alike than they are different; that cop and robber are skin brothers. All armies, regardless of their missions, carry death and destruction in their hands, and this is so frightening to us that the rules we make for armies are rigid beyond all others, while punishment for infringement is immediate and savage. In this way we show our awareness of the dark danger lurking in us always. Over the millennia most of us have learned to obey the rules or suffer punishment for breaking them. But, most important, even the rule-breaker knew he was wrong and the other right; the rules were understood and accepted by everyone. At intervals in our history, through unperceived changes usually economic, the rules and the enforcing agents have come a cropper. Inevitably the result has been a wild and terrible self-destructive binge, a drunken horror of the spirit giving rise to the unspeakable antics of crazy children. And this dark maze-mania has continued until rules were reapplied, rewritten, or re-enforced.

Once Adlai Stevenson, speaking of a politician of particularly rancid practices, said, "If he were a bad man, I wouldn't be so afraid of him. But this man has no principles. He doesn't know the difference." Could this be our difficulty, that gradually we are losing our ability to tell the difference? The rules fall away in chunks and in the vacant place we have a generality: "It's all right because everybody does it." This is balanced with another cry of cowardice. In the face of inequity, dishonesty in government, or downright plundering the word is "Go fight City Hall!" The implication is, of course, that you can't win. And yet in other times we did fight City Hall and often we won.

The American has never been a perfect instrument, but at one time he had a reputation for gallantry, which, to my mind, is a sweet and priceless quality. It must still exist, but it is blotted out by the dust cloud of self-pity. The last clear statement of gallantry in my experience I heard in a recidivist state prison, a place of two-time losers, all lifers. In the yard an old and hopeless convict spoke as follows: "The kids come up and they bawl how they wasn't guilty or how they was framed or how it was their mothers' fault or their father was a drunk. Us old boys try to tell 'em, 'Kid, for Chrise sake do your own time and let us do ours.' " In the present climate of whining self-pity, of practiced sickness, of professional goldbricking, of screaming charges about whose fault it is, one hears of very few who do their own time, who take their rap and don't spread it around. It is as though the quality of responsibility had atrophied.

It is hard to criticize the people one loves. I knew this would be a painful thing to write. But I am far from alone in my worry. My mail is full of it—letters of anxiety. The newspapers splash so much of it that perhaps we have stopped seeing. How is one to communicate this sadness? A simile occurs to me again and again. Our national nervousness reminds me of something—something elusive.

Americans, very many of them, are obsessed with tensions. Nerves are drawn tense and twanging. Emotions boil up and spill over into violence largely in meaningless or unnatural directions. In the cities people scream with rage at one another, taking out their unease on the first observable target. The huge reservoir of the anger of frustration is full to bursting. The cab driver, the bus or truck driver, pressed with traffic and confusion, denounces Negroes and Puerto Ricans unless he is a Negro or a Puerto Rican. Negroes burn up with a hateful flame. A line has formed for the couches of the psychoanalysts of people wound so tight that the mainspring has snapped and they deliver their poisons in symbolic capsules to the doctor. The legal and criminal distribution of sleeping pills and pep pills is astronomical, the first opening escape into sleep and the second access to a false personality, a biochemical costume in which to strut. Kicks increasingly take the place of satisfaction. Of love, only the word, bent and bastardized, remains.

It does remind me of something. Have you ever seen a kennel of beautiful, highly bred and trained and specialized bird dogs? And have you seen those same dogs when they are no longer used? In a short time their skills and certainties and usefulness are gone. They become quarrelsome, fat, lazy, cowardly, dirty, and utterly disreputable and worthless, and all because their purpose is gone and with it the rules and disciplines that made them beautiful and good.

Is that what we are becoming, a national kennel of animals with no purpose and no direction? For a million years we had a purpose—simple
in the miscreants but in our attitude toward them. Increasingly we lose our feeling of wrong. Huge corporations are convicted of price fixing and apparently the only shame is in being caught. It is a kind of a game. On the other hand, these same corporations, if Senate testimony is correct, offer bribes to members of other corporations, install listening devices and use all manner of spying methods against each other. I am dwelling on these clandestine practices not as wrong but as impractical. Businesses must not only watch rivals but must constantly spy on their own people to forestall treachery. And this is regarded as normal. Actually the use of both espionage and security in business is unworkable, expensive, and indicative of the collapse of the whole system, for any system which cannot trust its own people is in deep trouble.

When students cheat in examinations, it may be bad for them as individuals but for the community it means that the graduate is traveling with false papers and very shortly the papers—in this case the college degree—lose their value. When military cadets cheat it is in effect a kind of treason, for it means they have not learned to do the things they will be assigned to do. John Kennedy said his famous lines "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country," and the listening nation nodded and smiled in agreement. But he said it not because this selfishness might become evident but because it is evident, and increasingly so. And it is historically true that a nation whose people take out more than they put in will collapse and disappear.

Why are we on this verge of moral and hence nervous collapse? One can only have an opinion based on observation plus a reading of history. I believe it is because we have reached the end of a road and have no new path to take, no duty to carry out, and no purpose to fulfill. The primary purpose of mankind has always been to survive in a natural world which has not invariably been friendly to us. In our written, remembered, and sensed history, there has always been more work to do than we could do. Our needs were greater than their possible fulfillment. Our dreams were so improbable that we moved their reality into heaven. Our ailments, our agonies, and our sorrows were so many and so grievous that we accepted them either as inevitable or as punishments for our manufactured sins.

What happened to us came quickly and quietly, came from many
directions and was the more dangerous because it wore the face of good. Almost unlimited new power took the place of straining muscles and bent backs. Machinery took the heavy burden from our shoulders. Medicine and hygiene cut down infant mortality almost to the vanishing point, and at the same time extended our life span. Automation began to replace our workers. Where once the majority of our people worked the land, machines, chemistry, and a precious few produced more food than we needed or could possibly use. Leisure, which again had been the property of heaven, came to us before we knew what to do with it, and all these good things falling on us unprepared constitute calamity.

We have the things and we have not had time to develop a way of thinking about them. We struggle with our lives in the present and our practices in the long and well-learned past. We have had a million years to get used to the idea of fire and only twenty to prepare ourselves for the productive-destructive tidal wave of atomic fission. We have more food than we can use and no way to distribute it. Our babies live and we have no work for their hands. We retire men and women at the age of their best service for no other reason than that we need their jobs for younger people. To allow ourselves the illusion of usefulness we have standby crews for functions which no longer exist. We manufacture things we do not need and try by false and vicious advertising to create a feeling of need for them. We have found no generally fulfilling method for employing our leisure. To repeat—we have not had time to learn inside ourselves the things that have happened to us.

And finally we can come back to morals.

Ethics, morals, codes of conduct, are the stern rules which in the past we needed to survive—as individuals, as groups, as nations. Now, although we give lip service to survival, we are embarrassed and beginning to be smothered by our own numbers. Americans, who are makers and lovers of statistics, are usually puzzled and irritated when it is suggested that we are a statistic. But neither the sleeping pill, the Church, nor the psychiatrist can long hide from us that economic laws apply to ourselves, that increased supply causes a drop in value, that we already have too many people and are in process of producing far too many. Remember when we gave our Occidental sniff and observed that in China life was cheap? It never occurred to us that it could become cheap to us. Those codes of conduct we call morals were evolved for this thinly inhabited continent when a man's life was important because he was rare and he was needed. Women were protected to the point of worship because only they could bear children to continue the race. A cry for help brought out Americans buzzing like bees. Homosexuality brought down community rage on the practices because it was unconcerned and wasteful. Every pursuit, no matter what its stated end, had as its foundation purpose, survival, growth, and renewal.

Perhaps one can judge the health of a society by the nature as well as the incidence of crimes committed against it. Consider us today not only in the cities but in small towns and the country as well. There are of course the many crimes against property, but increasingly these are destructive rather than for gain. But the greatest increase is in crimes against people, against the physical bodies of people. The rapes have little to do with sexuality and much to do with destructive murder. The mugging in the streets and the violence which has turned our parks into jungles have little to do with robbery, although, as in the modern rape the ritual of sex is added, so in mugging there is robbery but its purpose and its drive seem to be destructive, the desire to hurt, to maim, to kill. Where need for money is the motive of the violence, the reason is again sad and sick and destructive, this time self-destructive, the need for drugs to abolish consciousness or stimulants to give shape and substance to a schizoid twin, hallucinatory aids in the creation of another world to take the place of this hated one. This too is a kind of murder, and finally what is known as kicks, the whipping of reluctant nerves, the raising of savage specters that even the maudlin witchcraft of the Middle Ages could not evoke—and this is another kind of murder of the self that might be called upon for responsibility.

These things are true for the practicers of our present-day necromancy, but how about the bystanders? Remember the windows slammed against a girl's cry for help in the night? People seeing or hearing a violence look away, walk away, refuse to talk to the police. Life is indeed cheap, and moreover it is becoming hateful. We act as though we truly hated one another, and silently approved the killing and removal of one among us.

Could it be that below the level of thought our people sense the dan-
ger of the swarming, crowding invasion of America by Americans? Starvation, pestilence, plague, which once cut us down, are no longer possible. And war? Well, during the last war, with all its slaughter, the world's population increased. Are people genuinely afraid of the bomb or do they look to it to do the job we have eliminated from nature? There seems to be little sense of horror when authority states that with the first exchange of bombs a hundred million Americans will die.

It is probable that here is where morals—in integrity, ethics, even charity—have gone. The rules allowed us to survive, to live together and to increase. But if our will to survive is weakened, if our love of life and our memories of a gallant past and faith in a shining future are removed—what need is there for morals or for rules? Even they become a danger.

We have not lost our way at all. The roads of the past have come to an end and we have not yet discovered a path to the future. I think we will find one, but its direction may be unthinkable to us now. When it does appear, however, and we move on, the path must have direction, it must have purpose and the journey must be filled with a joy of anticipation, for the boy today, hating the world, creates a hateful world and then tries to destroy it and sometimes himself. We have succeeded in what our fathers prayed for and it is our success that is destroying us.

If I inspect my people and study them and criticize them, I must love them if I have any self-love, since I can never be separate from them and can be no more objective about them than I am about myself. I am not young, and yet I wonder about my tomorrow. How much more, then, must my wonder be about the tomorrow of my people, a young people. Perhaps my questioning is compounded of some fear, more hope, and great confidence.

I have named the destroyers of nations: comfort, plenty, and security—out of which grow a bored and slothful cynicism, in which rebellion against the world as it is and myself as I am are submerged in listless self-satisfaction. A dying people tolerates the present, rejects the future, and finds its satisfactions in past greatness and half-remembered glory. A dying people arms itself with defensive weapons and with mercenaries against change. When greatness recedes, so does belief in greatness. A dying people invariably concedes that poetry has gone, that beauty has withered away. Then mountains do not rise up as they once did against the sky, and girls are not as pretty. Then ecstasy fades to toleration, and agony subsides to a dull aching; then vision dims like the house lights in a theater—and the world is finished. As it is with a poet, so in a people.

It is in the American negation of these symptoms of extinction that my hope and confidence lie. We are not satisfied. Our restlessness, perhaps inherited from the hungry immigrants of our ancestry, is still with us. Young Americans are rebellious, angry, searching like terriers near a rat's nest. The energy pours out in rumbles, in strikes and causes, even in crime; but it is energy. Wasted energy is only a little problem, compared to its lack.

If the world were walled and boundaried as it once was in feudal towns, we could destroy the irritant of creative restlessness, punish the lively guilty—and subside. But the world is open as it has never been before, and the skies are open, and for the first time in human experience we have the tools to work with. Three-fifths of the world and perhaps four-fifths of the world's wealth lie under the sea, and we can get to it. The sky is open at last, and we have the means to rise into it. Revolt against what is is in the air—in the violence of the long, hot summer, in the resentment against injustice and inequality, and against imperceptible or cynical cruelty. There is blind anger against delay, against the long preparation for the long journey—perhaps the longest, darkest journey of all, with the greatest light at the end of it.

In our prehistory—only now beginning to open its cloak a little—we have set a guard of secrecy and holiness on the unknown. The forest, the sky—the unconceivable large, the unseeable small—we once placed beyond our reach in mystery; taboo to approach, forbidden to inspect. Our dreams we gave to ancestors, cantankerous and selfish and dead, while our closest and most precious possession we gave into the hands of God or gods, not kindly or wise, but vain and jealous and greedy—in the image not of ourselves but of the ugly things, precarious and usurped, that power makes of us. Here is a world or a universe unknown, even unconceived of, and perhaps at last open for exploration: the great and mysterious mind and soul of man, a land full of marvels.

Americans do not lack places to go, and new things to find. We have
cut ourselves off from the self-abuse of war by raising it from a sin to an extinction. Far larger experiences are open to our restlessness—the fascinating unknown is everywhere. How will the Americans act and react to a new set of circumstances for which new rules must be made? We know from our past some of the things we will do. We will make many mistakes; we always have. We are in the perplexing period of change. We seem to be running in all directions at once—but we are running. And I believe that our history, our experience in America, has endowed us for the change that is coming. We have never sat still for long; we have never been content with a place, a building—or with ourselves.

(1966)

Afterword

The pictures in this book are of our land, wide open, fruitful, and incredibly dear and beautiful. It is ours and we will make of it what we are—no more, no less.

Something happened in America to create the Americans. Perhaps it was the grandeur of the land—the lordly mountains, the mystery of deserts, the ache of storms, cyclones—the enormous sweetness and violence of the country which, acting on restless, driven peoples from the outside world, made them taller than their ancestors, stronger than their fathers—and made them all Americans.

Maybe the challenge was in the land; or it might be that the people made the challenge. There have been other strange and sudden emergences in well-remembered and documented history. A village on the Tiber spread its fluid force and techniques through the known world. A blaze from Mongolia spread like a grass fire over most of Asia and Europe. These explosions of will and direction have occurred again and again, and they have petered out, have burned up their material, smoked awhile, and been extinguished. Now we face the danger which in the past has been most destructive to the human: success—plenty, comfort, and ever-increasing leisure. No dynamic people has ever survived these dangers. If the anaesthetic of satisfaction were added to our hazards, we would not have a chance of survival—as Americans.

From our beginning, in hindsight at least, our social direction is clear. We have moved to become one people out of many. At intervals, men or groups, through fear of people or the desire to use them, have tried to change our direction, to arrest our growth, or to stampe the Americans. This will happen again and again. The impulses which for a time enforced the Alien and Sedition Laws, which have used fear and