

Editorial I

Superstitions and the Stuff of History

THE RECENTLY published monograph of a relatively unknown Hoosier historian, Mr. Harry Emerick, has moved me to productive meditations on the nature of America's present distemper, for he writes about American superstitions. Not surprisingly, Mr. Emerick, a forester by vocation and a grammar school dropout, has managed to preserve an admirable lucidity and fundamental intelligence which distinguishes him from more celebrated historians, such as Dr. William Appleman Williams and Professor Gabriel Kolko, who do not seem to realize that they too write about superstitions. Mr. Emerick's book, *Recipes, Remedies, and Reflections — 1770-1807* (advertised elsewhere in this issue), chronicles some of the gorgeous and idiotic superstitions which our oafish antecedents held as Gospel. I cannot see how they differ essentially from the superstitions of our own day, save that they might have been less mischievous to the common wealth.

Some of this marvelous guidance could only counsel a man on sound personal hygiene or on invincible strategies in *amour*, but other more cosmic injunctions, I am sure, benefited national polity, and so formed our incomparable heritage. For instance the early superstition that "a live snake put in a barrel of cider will keep it from spoiling", and keep it sweet" might strike modern bacteriologists as improbable, and it probably never influenced President Jackson's thoughts on, say, the Bank of the United States, but who believes that Mr. Jackson ever turned down the sheets without first enjoining Major Lewis to "check the snakes"? By such ruminations I do not mean to smudge Mr. Jackson's venerable image. We all know that public figures — regardless of their sagacity — are only rarely secure from that ambience of dubiety and buncombe which seeps throughout society in general, and the superstitions of yesteryear are but amusing prefaces to the nonsensical notions of today. A certain set of *wunder* guidelines once instructed a President on preserving his apples; a later equally silly set inspires a President's dealings with Oriental thugs.

Superstition has molded the contours of all history. The birth of a new era merely indicates the triumph of less familiar, more beguiling superstitions. Nowadays our political messiahs are rejected as hypocrites and scoundrels, unworthy of high office, if they do not wink at the truth and proclaim their deep solicitude for Chicanos, Indians, students, homosexuals, tomboys or whatever the next object of American iconography is to be. How does this essentially differ from the moonshine of the last century when many wise men of affairs solemnly believed that blisters on the tongue were caused "by tellin'

lies"? Of course this mysterious knowledge never elevated their *ruses de la politique*, but it certainly created boom times for peddlers of tongue cosmetics, and many a rising young Van Buren saw his swindle sink into the deep because of what was really little more than the primitive state of oral hygiene.

Though Mr. Emerick never mentions it, I imagine the secret service maintained elaborate files concerning the tongues of every suspicious politician and editor in the Grand Republic. And undoubtedly President Wilson relied heavily on tongue surveillance at the German Embassy and the State Department to expose Zimmerman's infamous note. Of course, all this was superstition triumphant, but it is flesh and blood to today's tommyrot about "establishing dialogue" — a contemporary superstition which snags practically every politician in the land and threatens the very ecology with rubbish heaps of foolish verbiage every time some sort of social difficulty is revealed.

The nonsense about blistered tongues and sweet apples are just two examples of twaddle which Mr. Emerick has dredged from the past. There were other superstitions equally preposterous and surely as potent and none is without its equivalent in our own enlightened age. For instance, Mr. Emerick notes that many Americans of the last century dutifully believed that one should never "sleep in the moonlight. This may cause you to go crazy." And if one were ever so foolhardy as to cut his hair in the dark, the grim truth was that it "might cause baldness." Everyone from the first Adams to the renowned Harding realized that "a dirty sock worn round the neck on going to bed will cure a sore throat." This one wondrous recommendation does much to explain the circumstances surrounding Eleanor Roosevelt's tortuously reliable throat and marital discomfort — a troubling historical puzzle cracked only recently by Mr. Joseph Lash. Certainly a great number of American peasants in the early part of our own century believed that "thunder sours milk and kills the chicks in sittin' eggs," and undoubtedly many New Yorkers believe it to this very day.

Assuredly these are all preposterous, if juicy, notions, but as I say, they have moved me to reflect on our own time, for their modern equivalents differ significantly in that today's superstitions are held by more influential minds. Consider the following from the pen of Mr. Tom Wicker, resident wit of the *New York Times*: "... there is, in fact, no place to hide from the kind of society we have created, or allowed to develop. *The blacks and the poor didn't make that society; it put them in their present place*" (italics added). Twenty-four car-

at balderdash indubitably, but for the believing minds it is packed with dynamite, and for many policy makers it is irresistible. You can take it for a certitude that many American politicians, social planners, professors, disc jockeys and elevator operators devoured this passage with approbation and edification, though for the thoughtful few it is as incomprehensible as Chinese cuisine. It is just another of the multitude of high-toned superstitions which influential people merchant these days. Some of the superstitions are admittedly entertaining and provide hours of amusement for civilized men. I should not want to live in this world if we did not have them around to delight us, but others are proving to be a nuisance to a wide variety of innocent persons. Some of these superstitions concern poverty and national defense.

II

Hardly a man runs for high office these days without earnestly assuring the populace that he will eliminate poverty. The problem is that before eliminating what we in America call poverty we shall have to eliminate politicians who use poverty as political catnip, and, in the absence of a more enlightened legal code, this will continue to be criminal.

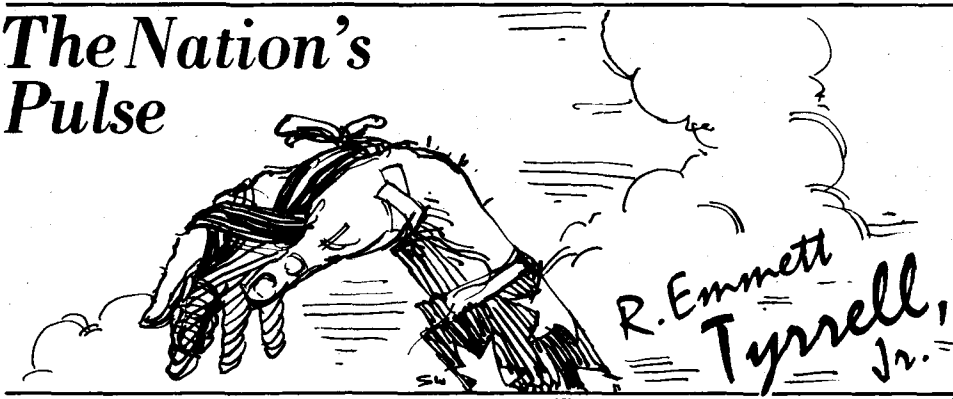
American poverty is the lack, at least in the cities, of enough income to prevent one from *feeling* poor. Social scientists as different as Edward Banfield and Victor Fuchs agree with this definition. In our cities even the poorest people can, through welfare, provide themselves with life's essential needs. Through government programs they can provide themselves with adequate health care and sufficiently nutritious diets. Through transfer payments they can even avoid persistent inconvenience and discomfort. That they do not is not because the income is not available; it is because of an excruciating intractable syndrome, designated by Oscar Lewis as the culture of poverty and designated by Banfield as the lower class.

At the end of the last decade, social policy allotted some forty billion dollars in transfer payments. Yet only twenty-four billion dollars ever reached those living under the poverty line drawn by the Social Security Administration (\$3,335 for a "non-garm" family of four in 1967) and, though it raised their income forty-two per cent, only one half the families below the poverty line ever received any transfer payments. About twelve billion dollars of income separated the poor from the poverty line, but the inefficiency of government is so costly that it would take about thirty billion dollars to close this gap. Imagine, if you will, that the government could raise that money and bring every American's income to the poverty line. Does anyone actually believe that a family of four living on an income of just over three thousand dollars would not feel wretchedly poor in a nation whose median income is over nine thousand dollars?

Fuchs claims that the elimination of

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The Nation's Pulse



The Conservatives' Revolt

WASHINGTON — Dinned as we are by the instinctively objurgative, frequently malevolent, journalism of a thinly intellectualized news media, few Americans are given to thinking of that man in the White House as a wise man. Yet, I have no doubt that of all the presidents of this century, Mr. Nixon is one of those most capable of offering the average American wise counsel. He is a man whose basic good sense has been cultured by years of grim experience and animated by a sharp and assiduous intelligence. He is also one of the most cunning presidents of this century, a characteristic that is in itself undesirable only when uninformed by principle.

The problem with a statesman of cunning, then, is not that he is shrewd but that he might be unprincipled or that he might, in his genius, spin off from that mass of slower moving particles that form his constituency. If this happens and no therapeutic action is taken, it is only a matter of time before he spins quite beyond the wider confines of reality and so into the coffin of history.

It is far too harsh and too early to criticize Mr. Nixon for being an unprincipled statesman. One is on surer ground to state that Mr. Nixon has, in his grand policy leaps, left behind many of those loyal and industrious men and women who compose his natural constituency. History may indeed judge these policies to have been informed by his wisdom, but if Mr. Nixon does not soon pause to consult with the conservatives within his party, historians may be making their judgments of him earlier than they had anticipated.

On 29 December Congressman John Ashbrook, an ex-chairman of the American Conservative Union, announced his intention to challenge Mr. Nixon in the New Hampshire primary. In his press conference Mr. Ashbrook seemed to be expressing the opinion that Mr. Nixon has lost touch with America's self-conscious conservative movement and so, danced away from the political realities of America at this point in history. This was not the first time Mr. Ashbrook had expressed these sentiments. In a long, vividly suggestive

speech delivered on the floor of Congress on 15 December, he deposited the conservatives' complaint against the administration, averred his remedy, and in the last paragraphs adumbrated the course conservatives might follow if Mr. Nixon were to neglect his warning. We have edited this historic statement and reprint it below that our readers might gain a better understanding of the nature of what might one day be recorded as the conservatives' revolt.

Rep. John M. Ashbrook

IT IS ARGUED by his spokesmen that while President Nixon shares conservative concerns on the issues, he is faced with intractable conditions. He must confront, in the first place, a hostile Congress which wants to go much further in the liberal left direction than does the administration, and the administration's half-measures are intended to prevent even worse things from occurring.

In addition, there is the fact that certain things must be done for political reasons even though President Nixon himself may not like them. There is the further fact that the President has to face up to hostile pressure from the media and from marching mobs, and that some of these things must be done to placate these forces.

The invariable clincher is that any imaginable alternative to what the President is doing would be infinitely worse, so conservatives should back the President even as he is heading to the left.

On examination, each of these extenuations for the President's policies appears to be mistaken. It is not true, for example, that many of the Chief Executive's leftward initiatives are forced on him by a hostile Congress. On several occasions, indeed, as my colleagues are well aware, there have been indications that Congress was quite willing to take a conservative stand on some issue and representatives of the administration have stepped in to prevent such an outcome. The President has often refused to use his own legitimate weapons in contest with liberal initiatives by the Congress.

Equally to the point, Nixon has repeatedly failed to use the considerable leverage of his office in other ways. Assuming a continuing tension between

the White House and Congress, the obvious course for a president seeking maximum conservative results would be to make vigorous demands — a total end to OEO, deep slashes in federal spending, a "thick" ABM, and so on. The resulting compromise with the legislature would fall somewhere between the President's views and that of Congress.

The argument that the President must head left for political reasons is even less persuasive. If the things he is doing are what the American people want, and if these are imperative steps for a Presidential politician — why did he not campaign on them?

The excuses offered for this administration's performance leave out yet another factor, perhaps the most important of all—the factor of presidential leadership. While on certain matters such as taxation and rising prices public attitudes seem relatively stable, on others they are responsive to cues provided by the White House. This is particularly true on foreign policy and defense questions where information levels are low, issues complex, and the whole business remote from the man in the street. On issues such as these strong presidential advocacy can shape and alter public opinion.

In the case of Red China, to take the obvious instance, there was little or no pressure of public opinion on this administration to pursue a course of appeasement. To the extent that the American people had any settled notions on the issue, they were decidedly the reverse.

President Nixon's own course of action, however, has perceptibly softened U.S. feeling toward Red China. Thus rather than the President being pushed left by political pressures, the procedure has been exactly the opposite. He has gone left, and created pressures on public opinion to follow him. And, of course, on the defense philosophy professed by the President and outlined in detail by Deputy Defense Secretary Packard, there would be massive consternation among the American people if they clearly understood that their leaders were leaving them exposed to potential attack in order to "reassure" the Soviets.

The net effect of these observations is to deny the assertion of administration spokesmen who attempt to justify the President's policies to conservatives by saying that the President shares conservative principles and is doing the best he can amidst difficulties to put them into practice. The emerging perception is something different: That, whatever the reason for his performance, and whatever the affirmations of his heart of hearts, he clearly does not share conservative convictions — or what I would call traditional Republican convictions — on a day-to-day operational basis. And for every realistic purpose, that unfortunately is the perception which counts. Feelings the President has which do not issue in public policy are regrettably beside the point.

What many conservatives viewed with

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