

EDITORIAL

by

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

The Wonderboy at Midpassage

In an earlier era Jimmy Carter of Plains, Georgia would be devoting himself to procuring his eight-year-old daughter's first pair of shoes, a bottle of Peruna for a fat wife, and a dusty flivver for himself. At day's end he would withdraw to the humid coziness of the local Coca-Cola parlor, there to discourse upon the latest intrigues of the Popish camorra and to remain *au courant* with reports of frightening suicide rates experienced by misguided Negroes lured to the Sodoms of the North and taught to read. As the years ambled on, and his wife fattened, he would feel the itch of public service. He would compose diatribes about Demon Rum or the abominations committed by hyphenates swarming into New York City. Folks would take note, and—if he were as gifted as he is now—one day he would hit pay dirt with a speech identifying Jesus Christ as the first Elk and be raised up to high public office. Eventually, he might even buy a judgeship from local Prohibitionists and so, midst the dust and the peanut vines, age in dignity until felled by a necrotic liver. All in all, a better Jimmy Carter, one more intellectual, more principled, intrinsically more interesting, and far less menacing to the Republic.

Yet Jimmy Carter is with us today, thirty years into the palmiest era of economic growth known to man. Materially he longs for very little. In his lifetime he has seen the wizardry of indoor plumbing come to his Plains, Georgia manse. The streets are paved, flivvers abound, the hookworm has been thwarted, and electric-powered gadgetry eases his worldly woes. The Pope's siege has been lifted, and all those mysterious scoundrels who denied him the fellowship of his black brethren gratefully vanished years ago. Yet he is bestirred by vast yearnings. Progress has invaded Plains, and with it has come the modern American system of values, a system esteeming only wealth and power and then only when amassed by those who pontificate against them. The old Southern values were a tragedy. They have been replaced by a farce.

In 1955 Jimmy was at one with thousands of other middle-aged American men: rich, saucy, ignorant, and bored. He had energetically thrown himself into making it; but once he made it, life lost its old lilt. The days became dull burdens. He took up square dancing, but it edified him not at all. He sought renewal in the stock cars, but the races always ended. Biographers tell us Jimmy and his wife even sought refuge from their existential travail in Americus, Georgia, where bowling alleys were plentiful, but the cosmic

questions still swelled up, begging to be answered.

Finally there was that historic reunion with his sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton, wherein she explained that idiotic smile then continually disfiguring her face, causing dark speculations amongst the local Pharisees, and giving her family many alarums. According to Ruth, she had drunk of the blood of the Lamb and become a Bible-pounding evangelist learned in the ways of supernatural chiropractorship. She urged Jimmy to accept Christ into his heart. He felt a jolt and shortly thereafter became the peppiest species of Christian. He also took up politics, and so with these two mighty heaves illustrated that the Founders knew what they were about when they remonstrated against the mingling of Church and State. Something there is about the spiritual and the political that summons forth the petty tyrant and gives him large opportunities to work his philistine will upon his fellows. No pol since William Jennings Bryan has thrown both Holy Writ and Democracy into an assault on the citizenry. But when Sister Ruth elucidated her secret to Brother Jimmy, he saw its possibilities at once; the Wonderboy's scramble for power had begun, and it was to be astonishingly swift.

Grinning Dunce

Happily, the Great Emancipator had been a Republican, and when Jimmy chose his party the choice was both effortless and auspicious. He would be a Democrat. Such is the colossal good luck that seems to have hovered about him from the moment he foresook the bowling temples of Americus and took up public service. In 1966 he launched a preposterous campaign for the governorship of Georgia and was so easily defeated that a candidate less blessed by the good fairy would be esteemed for life as a laughing stock never to be taken seriously again. Yet, four years later, the grinning dunce of 1966 was again tramping through the Georgia back country; only this time everyone knew his name, and he had the endorsement of such worthies as the Honorable Lester Maddox and of such respected citizens' groups as the Georgia Ku Klux Klan. Even when he honeyfogged the most exalted strata of Georgian society, luck covered for him. Solemnly he would declare himself "basically a red-neck," and no one in the audience would pause to question him about the five-million-dollar Carter fortune. He was a child of felicity.

Once in the Governor's mansion, his time was essentially his own; for the

trickier questions of governing Georgia were then being handled by the federal courts. Jimmy had time to indulge his darker side by bickering with the state legislature and impersonating various Old Testament eminences. More importantly, however, he was able to assume ambiguous responsibility for governmental acts, while the courts did the dirty work. Ambiguity is today the essence of Carterism. Pretending helplessness in the face of a despotic judicial system, he has suavely assumed both sides of vexed issues like abortion and busing, apparently to the complaisant satisfaction of large numbers of voters. Such blatant dissimulations were rarely practiced so successfully before Jimmy rose up from the Georgian boondocks, but he had the good fortune to hold office in one of the first states governed by mandamus, and he quickly learned the usefulness of this democratic innovation. As judicial despotism overtakes the federal government doubtless many elected officials will emulate the Wonderboy's technique, but history will duly record that this was his discovery, a discovery made possible mainly by his fortunate origins.

Two years ago, when he kissed his mom bye-bye and struck out for the 1976 Democratic nomination, his luck remained golden; for in 1976—as in 1972—all the major contenders had again forgotten to study the abstruse nominating procedures of their party. Jimmy had studied them for months, and halfway through the primaries he was being touted as a political genius. Truth to tell, he harvests very few pearls from his noodle, and he made a pathetic spectacle of himself on numerous occasions; but his competitors were unhorsed by their own party's reform mania, and Jimmy—unblack, unyoung, and unfeminine—was sole beneficiary. Now all he faces is a party that has been decapitated, bleeds profusely, and is bereft of ideals and ideas. No pol in this century has been so favored by sheer luck, a matter that surely has not escaped the notice of Sister Ruth.

Yet few polys have ever been more banal, more tedious, and more stupendously uninteresting. Perhaps had Jimmy not so recently and thoroughly been deKluxed and debumpkinized there might be more to him. He might not be the near vacuum who now leaves almost every writer maundering. Yet modernity overwhelmed Plains, and Jimmy has been sanitized. Search the record, you will find not one diverting anecdote, nor one piquant quality in this essentially vacant man. He is all go-getter,

(continued on page 33)



George Urban

A Conversation with George Kennan

Is the West imperilled more by the Soviet threat or by its own decadence? Noted diplomat and historian George F. Kennan discourses on Western civilization, its underpinnings, its situation today, its future. His outlook is one of pessimistic optimism.

George Urban: I am struck by a cluster of broadly synonymous words which occur in your Memoirs with remarkable frequency. They all have to do with your personal anguish at seeing the world, and especially the contemporary world, governed by myopia, ignorance, and folly; and they express your loneliness and helplessness in the face of so much, as you see it, avoidable evil. You are "totally caught...totally helpless...in black despair...horried...lonely...extremely lonely...afflicted by loneliness...profoundly depressed...vulnerable." You have a "foreknowledge of disaster"; you raise "anguished objections"; you feel "tossed" into some "impossible position between two worlds"; and you are overcome by a sense "of the enormity of responsibility and of our inadequacy to it."...

The main source of your pessimism would appear to me to be the disintegration of our traditional order, going back, I suppose, to the 18th century. This would include industrialization; the urbanization of agrarian societies; the despoliation of nature; the degradation of taste; and the shallowness, and ultimately the disappearance, of religion as a public experience. In a revealing comment you speak of the "discomfort I experience in my status as a contemporary of the 20th century." You also tell us that "For years, Gibbon's dictum 'Under a democratic government the citizens exercise the powers of sovereignty; and those powers will be first abused, and afterwards lost, if they are committed to an unwieldy multitude' has lain at the heart of my political philosophy...."

Kennan: I am an American and, like all of us, and especially all of us who were born at the time I was born and brought up—before World War I—I grew up with a certain faith in American civilization and a certain belief that the American experiment was a positive development in the history of mankind, that it was a good thing that the United States had come into being and developed as it had developed. I now see all these assumptions crashing to pieces around us. I do not think that the United States civilization of these last 40-50 years is a successful civilization; I do not think

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that our political system is adequate to the needs of the age into which we are now moving; I think this country is destined to succumb to failures which cannot be other than tragic and enormous in their scope. All this, of course, is not an easy thing to live with.

—Isn't it especially difficult for one brought up in the traditions of a foreign service officer who must surely feel it incumbent upon him to represent, not only the interests, but also the character of his country?

Kennan: I have never shared a sense of shame about my country vis-à-vis other countries, which you see reflected in the American press and in the sentiments of a large part of liberal and radical youth, because I don't think we are that much worse than anybody else. I am in despair about this country, not so much from the standpoint of what it is doing to other people, which has not been that horrible, as from the standpoint of what it is doing to itself. This is what gives me a great sense of sadness.

But I don't see any wide appreciation of the self-destruction of the United States in the country at large—I don't see it in the press, not in the political leadership, not even in academic life. A few people—yes—and many who have misgivings of one sort or another, but there are very few people in this country who have taken the measure of the inadequacy, not just of our traditional institutions, but also of our habits of thought and assumptions.

Let me jump to a major conclusion: the older I get, and the more I occupy myself with the history of the past century in Europe and the United States, the more I am persuaded that the Industrial Revolution itself was the source of most of the bewilderments and failures of the modern age. This does not, of course, mean to say that there should have been no technological improvements in the early 19th century; but it does mean that the revolution in technology should never have been allowed to go uncontrolled as it did, that one should have examined each improvement in technology very carefully with a view to its total impact on society. I do not mean to reproach our forefathers; they were part of their time, they shared its scientific optimism, and they could not foresee the consequences of what they were doing. I am merely saying that I can't see the answer to the problems of modern civilization in the framework of our highly urbanized industrial society. This society bears the seeds of its own horrors—unbreathable air, undrinkable water, starvation—and until people realize that we have to get back to a much simpler form of life, a much smaller population, a society in which the agrarian component is far greater again in relation to the urban component—until these appreciations become widespread and effective—I can see no answer to the troubles of our time. →