

The Saturday Review

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BACK TO CADILLAC COUNTRY



By WILLIAM HARLAN HALE

On Independence Day weekend it seems particularly appropriate to take a steady, searching look at the current state of the Union. Here it is viewed through the eyes of a widely traveled journalist and historian, William Harlan Hale, who has recently returned to this country after a tour of duty as Director of the Public Affairs Division of the U.S. High Commission in Austria.

RECENTLY I returned home with my family after three-and-a-half years in Europe, most of them spent in an official effort to influence people along the mid-Danube and tell them the truth about America. Had the truth about ourselves changed in those three-and-a-half years? I couldn't know for sure, from so far away. There were moments when I expected the worst.

One such occurred when on landing I had all our baggage lined up on the pier. I recalled having read abroad a nervous Washington pronouncement informing all customs inspectors that small atomic bombs could readily be brought into the United States in suitcases, which had left me wondering as to what you could then bring in inside a trunk. And here we were, with our twenty-one pieces of baggage, including a

heavy, padlocked wooden crate and a mysterious-looking fat burlap roll, nine feet long. The crate was filled with children's books and ornamental ironware, and the roll consisted of rugs that had been woven for us on the island of Mallorca; but wouldn't the inspectors now tear everything open on the hunt for some infernal engine? Besides, we were ex-State-Department people, identifiable New-Dealers—suspicious characters maybe. Furthermore, I had not hit it off well with Messrs. Cohn and Schine when they descended on my office in Vienna, and had declined even to buy them the drink that is customary when investigators blow into town. Anything might happen.

What did happen was that the inspector, a tall Negro with a quiet, searching eye, glanced at my declaration, observed our children romping

over the questionable burlap roll, and then in his serious way said, "How did you stand it so long over there? Sure must feel good to be back"—whereupon, without a further word or look, he began pasting his stickers on all our pieces of baggage and waved them through the barrier, unopened.

What's this? I thought. Hadn't the man heard . . . ? Well, perhaps a little too much had been made of our alleged American jitters. With an upwelling of good feelings toward the Eisenhower Administration we descended to the street level. "What's dis?" said the truckman eying our big roll. "Prayer rugs," was the relaxed answer. "Is dat so?" he said, heaving it aboard. "Well, it takes all kinds. Don't go in for that church stuff myself."

There was evidently still freedom of speech.

ALONG with my other impedimenta I unloaded a car. Our veteran sedan had transported us safely over 30,000 miles of Europe, and I watched anxiously as it came swinging overside lest some accident befall it at the very end of its journey. Over three years ago, when it had reached us fresh from the Ford factory one day in wintry Vienna, it had come as a gleaming reminder of home. It had seemed big—bigger even than in the

advertisements—when driven through the narrow streets of the war-racked capital, looming above the handcarts, the hand-me-down Nazi-vintage Volkswagen, the puffing and ancient Steyr-Puch taxicabs, the squat Renaults of the better black-marketeers, and the low-slung Czech Tatra thickly populated with Russians. It had seemed especially big and glamorous in the back-country of the Alps, where in whole villages in 1953 there was not yet one resident automobile; and even down on the busy North Italian plain, among diminutive Fiats and puttering motorcycles, or in the French Jura, or on the dusty roads of Catalonia, where outside the tourist season one can travel for hours without seeing anything faster than a wagon, it remained the symbol of American power and success.

It had also, in its day, done duty at official balls and receptions abroad, following due protocol with its "Corps Diplomatique" plate and a magical low license-number that caused all Austrian policemen to salute; it had transported visiting Congressmen, interesting Hungarian refugees, French propagandists, Austrian politicians tipsy after their *Heurigen*, and even Cohn and Schine; Soviet sentries had frequently stopped it, and a Soviet truck had once nicked it; it was, I thought, a pretty distinguished car: not as distinguished as the Ambassador's Cadillac, of course, but, still, a vehicle with a history.

Yet here, as we drove our veteran off the pier into New York's streets, it seemed that everyone had a Cadillac. This was not as it had been when

we left, three and more years ago. At that time, also, New York's avenues—at least some of them—were still thoroughfares. Now, they seemed to have become areas in which cars of the finest makes, with engines running, stood in closed, stationary formation for long periods of time, giving their passengers ample opportunity to gaze into each other's windows or at the shop fronts. This was perhaps the new American leisure of which we had been hearing in the housekeeping magazines.

There were still certain observable class distinctions among American automobilists, some Cadillacs being with chauffeurs and some without; and there were so many Cadillacs abreast, all lined up for a sprint to catch up with the next batch of Cadillacs piled up at the next traffic light, that I wondered whether at the head of the procession there might not be some primordial leader-Cadillac, whom everyone else was following and which was probably also held up at a light.

My modest Ford, when speeding down European byways, had brought glances from the roadside as of people peering at the unattainable. At home everything now seemed attainable; yet even the acquirers of the biggest and fastest seemed to be having trouble in making it take them where they wanted to go. The automobile horn, once a safety device, seemed now on its way to becoming an instrument of mass social protest, when sounded by drivers in unison, bogged down in the traffic which their own prosperity had created. Against whom

and what were they protesting? The traffic cop? He was as helpless as they amid the onrush of splendid, pent-up power. The mayor? He had done what he could, and appointed a committee. The super-sedans in front of them, to the left of them, to the right of them? Why, these were but the images of their own: to protest against them would be to protest against one's self.

SINCE my departure evidently we had acquired great riches. Had we also acquired an embarrassment of them? The ruling impulse, clearly, was to acquire more of the same. Yet there seemed to be an uneasiness in the air that if we all did acquire the same, we might end up like "Mike and Ike—they look alike." Theoretically, I presumed, the Cadillac people would like to sell every American one of their cars. Yet their advertising emphasized that a Cadillac conferred upon its owner a special *cachet*, as of the possession of so rare a thing as a Rembrandt. Mass-produced goods, which in my day were simply mass-produced, were now being "personalized." Not only the "exclusive" shirt or tie, but the common fountain pen or blanket were now being sold with some gimmick that would appear to make them unique to their possessor, and I asked myself whether we would next hear of individually monogrammed refrigerators.

In Mallorca, where I had last stayed, there were almost no refrigerators, and of the two Cadillacs on the island one belonged to the Captain-General of the province, a man high in the counsels of Generalissimo Franco, and the other to Juan March, the banker and big-time entrepreneur who had put up much of the money that originally financed Franco. There was something to be said against everybody having identical Cadillacs, yet perhaps the Mallorquin solution was less than ideal, since it left everybody else to the individualism of possessing identical donkey-carts.

Were the Spaniards a happier people than we because—with the exception of a few dozen Captains-General and Juan Marches—they didn't even try for Cadillacs? I couldn't tell; we had spent eight months there, yet their reserve was great. We knew the Austrians better; and they had once been fellow subjects of the same Apostolic Majesty. Proud of Mozart, Haydn, and even Grillparzer (the Shakespeare of late-Biedermeier Vienna), the Austrians looked down on what they considered our Cadillac culture and our almighty pursuit of the dollar; yet I had never seen anyone pursuing the dollar so avidly as the Austrians themselves, swarming

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Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

GUILLOTINES, GIBBETS AND SUCH

Violet M. Cobb of Los Angeles, California, asks you to identify ten historical characters, each of whom was executed, by their last words. Allowing ten days off for each correct answer your sentence will read: eighty or better, a full pardon, seventy a temporary reprieve, and sixty—may the Lord have mercy on your soul! Answers on page 19.

1. "Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as shall never be put out."
2. "I heard say the executioner be very good, and I have but a little neck."
3. "Never mind—we are sure to arrive."
4. "O Liberty! What crimes are committed in thy name!"
5. "I am not afraid to die—you cannot hang all of us!"
6. "Please aim for my heart, so that my mother will not be caused unnecessary suffering when she looks upon my face."
7. "I never could believe that Providence had sent a few men into the world, ready booted and spurred to ride, and millions ready saddled and bridled to be ridden."
8. "In the name of your mother, monsieur, let me stay covered."
9. "Where is it? Where is it? I cannot find it?"
10. "You cannot prevent our heads from kissing in the basket."