

# THE PERSISTENCE OF THE CAVEMAN

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**W**HATEVER man does he must do first in his mind. The machinery of the mind is the brain, and any machine can do only what it is made to do. Consequently, if we want to understand ourselves, we must understand what sort of machine our brain is.

Primarily, the brain is an organ of survival. It was built by nature to search for food, shelter, and the like, to gain advantage—before addressing itself to the pursuit of truth. Hence most human brains are unable to distinguish between truth and advantage, and accept as truth that which is only advantage. We use our brain mainly for finding ways to reach what we want. Simultaneously, we produce the thoughts and arguments which justify our feelings and dealings. I suspect that if I were in the business of selling shelters, my brain would tend to dwell rather steadily on the probability of nuclear war. If I were in politics, I might find my brain devoting itself less to the next generation than to the next election.

There is only one general rule regarding how an animal should be built to survive: it must be adapted to its surroundings. Our species was not built yesterday, but hundreds of thousands of years ago and probably has not changed during the last 20,000 years. We are adapted, then, to the conditions of life which prevailed twenty millennia ago. To learn about these conditions and to better understand ourselves, let us pay a brief imaginary visit to our nth great-great-grandfather.

At night we would probably find him in a cave, huddling with his small clan around a primitive fire, the greatest natural force he knew and handled. We would have to be a bit careful in approaching him: his dominant instinct being fear, he might strike us down. If we came upon him during the day, we would probably find him hunting close to the cave, because even a distance of ten miles seemed an infinity to

him, and the greatest speed he knew was that of some animal or of a stone he hurled. If we could talk to him, we would probably find he had not the least doubt that what he saw and thought was the ultimate reality.

This world, the world of our ancestor, was changed by science almost in one stroke, leaving us no time for readaptation. What science did was to peep behind the scenes of creation and put the hidden, superhuman forces of nature at the service of man. It replaced the speed of animals with the speed of jets, missiles, and radio waves, thus abolishing distance. The fire it replaced with atomic energy, one of those terrific cosmic forces which shape the universe. It introduced death control without birth control, making the human masses swell enormously. With distance abolished, these masses now rub directly against one another, with weapons in their hands which enable them to destroy one another without even leaving their backyard.

Here we stand in the middle of this new world with our primitive brain, attuned to the simple cave life, with terrific forces at our disposal, which we are clever enough to release, but whose consequences we cannot comprehend. Their dimensions are too far beyond our human dimensions. When my wife tells me, "the water is hot," I am careful. But if I hear that an atomic explosion

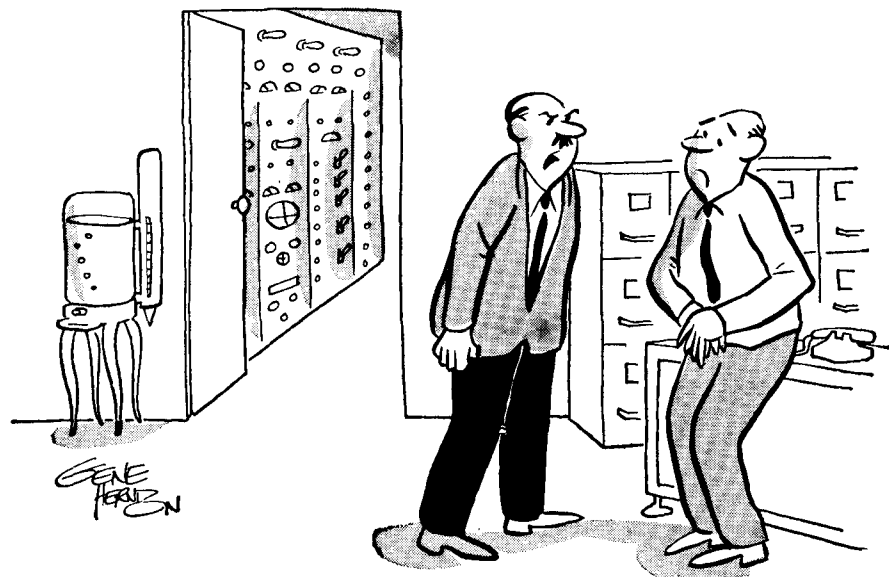
has fifteen million degrees of heat, it means nothing to me. I am deeply moved if I see a man suffering and would even risk my life for him. But then I talk impersonally about the possible pulverization of our big cities, with a hundred million dead. I am unable to multiply one man's suffering by a hundred million.

For our ancestor in his cave, the world meant the people he knew. Nations comprising hundreds of millions of people no longer represent people in our minds—they are abstractions. So their leaders begin to talk about abstractions, National Glory or National Survival, for which they are ready to put up with hundreds of millions killed.

We are not actually bad. We are just humans, carried into dimensions where we do not belong, with a primitive brain that cannot grasp how hell on earth could look. To stay alive we must create an entirely new world with new human relations, and the question is: who can help us?

Science? It may seem a logical idea that the forces created by science can be governed without mortal danger only by that which created them. Can the scientist help us then?

There is no such thing as the "scientist." There are thousands and thousands working in science, and, as everywhere, there are a few dangerous  
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"Univac wants to see you."

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## A New Sense of Reality

AN AUSTRIAN journalist, reporting his impressions of a visit to the United States, finds that the American people are running out of interesting things to do or think about. He says they have no real feeling of involvement in the nation or the world, except as it may affect their earning power. To Thorstein Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption, the visitor adds the notion of lavish drift.

In particular, he says that American wives are liberated from everything, including purpose and a sense of responsibility. They make an occupation out of being decorative. They are expensive, self-centered, demanding, complicated, vestigial. As for the husbands, he claims that so much male energy goes into pyramiding their business holdings that very little is left for family life and almost none for national issues.

The Austrian writer emphasizes that his impressions are purely personal and lack the comprehensive evidence that would be required for a sociological survey. Even so, he says, he feels obligated to pass along what he believes to be true. On the same informal, limited, nonsociological level, we would like to report a somewhat different set of findings. During the past year, we have been in at least twenty communities in all the principal regions of the United States. We have been encouraged by what we saw. To be sure, there was enough aimlessness and boredom to create the kind of impression carried away by the Austrian

journalist. But this was not all; it was not even the dominant part.

The dominant mood in America today, it seems to us, may be one of uneasiness, but it is not necessarily the uneasiness produced by lavish drift or boredom. There is a feeling that we are capable of doing better than we are doing—on every level. People have a sense of being part of an epic challenge without being summoned to an epic response. A terrible sense of reality has invaded the consciousness. People no longer have to be pounded or shocked before they accept the fact of over-riding danger. The ease with which the world could slide into nuclear war and the consequences of such a war are no longer rejected or even resisted. They would like, therefore, to be part of a great responsive effort, one that is relevant, convincing, inspiring. They feel a genuine thrust inside them they would like to pit against the growing peril. But they have no way of making the vital connection. In short, they have no feeling of being used.

NOT SINCE the end of World War II have we found lecture audiences as aware, as concerned, as responsive as they are today. Their questions come from deep within; they are not merely trying to pick flaws in an argument or engage in a forensic exchange. They are genuinely searching for answers. Most of all, they want to know how the individual can invest himself in a total effort to help meet a total problem. They seem to realize that government

in a free society can only be a projection of their own adequacy or lack of it. But, again, they don't know where to take hold. They seem to be saying: "Enough alarms and drum-beating; we're ready to move. Where do you want us to go? What do you want us to do?"

It is this frustration, verging in some cases almost on exasperation, rather than purposelessness, that may represent the main characteristic of the American temperament today. The American people right now are living under their moral capacity and they know it. They want material comforts—who doesn't?—but no greater error could be made than to assume that they could not be persuaded to commit themselves to larger goals. If there is concern that America may be stuck on a treadmill, the easiest way to relieve that concern is to point to the way off and out.

Our Austrian friend may be even wider of the mark in the particular than he is in the general. Any inventory of the national assets would have to begin with American women. Nowhere in the world have we found women who are more seriously interested in world affairs than in the United States. The Helen Hokinson cartoon conception of the American clubwoman is as dated as automobile kerosene lamps. The keenest and most knowledgeable questions and letters today come not from men but from women. Not all of them, apparently, are using their liberation from drudgery just to float from beauticians' chairs to bingo parlors. A rather considerable number are reading and thinking and probing. They have the increasing conviction that if their families and the world in general are going to be saved, the job may have to be done by women.

AS FOR American men, we cannot accept the view that they are totally preoccupied with building business empires. At various conferences or meetings in different sections of the country, and in individual discussions, we have been impressed with their serious desire for serious consideration of serious world problems. Once the executives become aware that they are not being instructed or admonished but are taking part in a genuine exploration of ideas, they become creatively concerned about their own part in shaping an adequate national policy to meet world problems.

Common to both men and women, as indicated earlier, is the feeling that only our best will be good enough to meet the danger but that no one seems to be speaking to it or providing the inspiration for its release. There is energy and power in this resource. It should be put to work.

—N.C.