

FRONT RUNNERS



Sharing the Burden

When the oil carrier *Amoco Cadiz* sprang a leak off the coast of Brittany, experts at coping with this sort of mishap were flown in from all over. They didn't cope very well.

The man they should have sent for was Max Pitcher. He might not have saved the coastline, but he surely would have been a great comfort to the Bretons.

Pitcher is a vice-president of the Continental Oil Company, which has been championing at the bit to drill in the Georges Bank, off Cape Cod. Last winter, Yankee fishermen persuaded the state of Massachusetts to block the award of drilling leases until clauses are written in to protect their ancient fishing grounds.

On that occasion Pitcher told *The New York Times*, "This part of the country just seems like it does not want to carry its share of the energy burden."

We had puzzled over these words. They are now clear, and they should be a source of pride to those Breton toilers of the sea. Along with the oil companies, the Bretons have indeed carried their share of the burden, and they will for years to come.

Resilient Refugees

Remember back in the spring of 1975 when a national furor developed over bringing Vietnamese refugees to the U.S.? Opponents of large-scale Vietnamese immigration said then that the refugees couldn't adapt to American culture and would wind up as burdens on the taxpayers.

But it hasn't happened that way: The Health, Education, and Welfare Department, which keeps track of Vietnamese refugees, says in its latest report that their employment "compares favorably with that of the American work force in general."

As of last November, HEW says, 89 percent of Vietnamese refugee households had one family member

or more working, though their wages sometimes were so low they needed supplementary aid. But only 11 percent of refugee families were "totally dependent" on welfare.

Overall, says HEW, about two thirds of 148,355 Indochinese refugees in the United States last November were working. Cost to the U.S. Treasury: \$202 million since May 1975 to resettle and train the refugees and to provide them with cash aid. HEW doesn't say so, but it's obvious the fears of 1975 were groundless and that the Vietnamese refugees already have repaid the U.S. investment in them through their taxes and productivity.

Last fall President Carter signed legislation enabling about 130,000 Vietnamese refugees to change their immigration status from "parolee" to "permanent resident alien"—the first step toward U.S. citizenship.

Stairway to the Stars

Is the next big sports craze going to be stair climbing and stairwell racing? Experts say that if you go at it gradually, walking or running up stairs can make you lean and fit and will, of course, help you to rise in the world.

A year ago, oil executive William L. Huntington began walking up the stairs of his Indianapolis office building in order to toughen himself for mountain climbing. At first he could manage "only" 10 flights of stairs. But within three months he was striding up all 83 flights—1,600 steps—in about 40 minutes. To pass the time while ascending the stairs, Huntington reads spy thrillers.

In New York City, meanwhile, a runners' club recently sponsored a race up the stairs of the Empire State Building—86 floors, or 1,575 steps. For reasons of safety, all entrants had to be "ultra-marathoners" used to running upwards of 30 miles. The 15 finishers included a fifty-five-year-old man and two women—one a housewife with five children. The winner was thirty-seven-year-old Gary Muhrcke (*not* pronounced Mercury), who bounded up the stairs—about a fifth of a mile, vertically—in the astonishing time of 12.32 minutes.

The equally astonishing postscript: It turned out that Muhrcke is an ex-New York City fireman who retired on a disability pension because of a back injury suffered in line of duty. He can run, Muhrcke explained, but can't do the heavy lifting routinely required of a fireman. His story seems to check out, but the fire department says it will review the case.

Riposte

Are you turned off by notes written on paper headed "FROM THE DESK OF" so-and-so? Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, American writers living in London, have been known to answer such notes as follows: "Dear Desk:..."

FRONT RUNNERS



Enjoy Your Stay!

The following message, posted in each room of a prominent hotel, was commonplace at the turn of the twentieth century:

This room is equipped with an Edison Electric Light. Do not attempt to light with match. Simply turn the key on the wall by the door.

The use of electricity for lighting is in no way harmful to health nor does it affect the soundness of sleep.

A Bearish Market

Despite our much-publicized grain deals with the Soviets, Japan is still the biggest single foreign purchaser of U.S. grain, soybeans, and cotton—and it is also an active market for other, lesser known products of farm and countryside. Which products? Would you believe bear bile and cattle gallstones?

According to a recent Department of Agriculture bulletin, a buyer in Tokyo is eager to purchase "100 percent pure 'cattle gallstones' ... in perfect form, wrapped in vinyl film, stuffed with cotton." The same buyer is looking, cash in hand, for "bear bile, perfectly dried, and amber in color." Two pounds of either the gallstones or the bear bile will bring about \$3,000. What does the buyer want these items for—medicinal use? And how does a citizen go about accumulating two pounds of dried bear bile? On these points the Agriculture Department bulletin wisely remains silent.

Submissions

SR will pay readers \$25 for any clipping or item accepted for use in Front Runners. We regret that we cannot acknowledge receipt of materials, run by-lines with items, or return unused submissions.

Please send items to:
Front Runners, Saturday Review,
1290 Avenue of the Americas,
New York, N.Y. 10019.

In the Dead of Night

Strange nocturnal comings and goings at the University of Minnesota. It seems that every day after sundown, dozens of homeless young drifters slip into campus buildings. There they prowl the corridors, take showers, sack out, and in general make themselves at home. Some of them, the rumor goes, even smuggle themselves into daytime classes held in the buildings where they stay at night. All this has been going on for about four years, says William House, head of university security, who adds that the interlopers spend a lot of their time just trying to stay one step

ahead of the college's janitors.

The situation at Minnesota is remindful of the science fantasy story about the man who moved into a giant department store and had a grand time, once he learned how to duck the night watchmen and their police dogs. Later he found that the store was full of illegals like himself, some of whom had lived there out of the sunlight for so long that they were pallid to the point of near-invisibility. At Minnesota, even the four-year illegals have not yet become that ghostly, but the guards nonetheless find them elusive. Occasionally, the campus police catch a few and issue trespassing summonses—but the culprits seldom turn up in court for sentencing.

White Water

Though kayaks are colorful, sleek little craft, they do look a bit lost amid the lordly power cruisers and sailing vessels that crowd our waterways. Why, then, the current boom in kayaking? For one thing, it's exhilarating—as when a kayaker goes plummeting down a white water course, frantically stabbing a double-bladed paddle into churning foam. Further, the sport isn't expensive—a \$600 two-seater can last you for 20 years.

But above all, according to kayaking maven Dieter Stiller, the sport is booming because it ties in so nicely

with older, more established pastimes such as fishing, bird-watching, nature photography, and other average-guy pursuits that enable people to escape the stress of daily living. American kayakers can be seen paddling on Alaska's Prince William Sound, surrounded by glaciers, islands, and wildlife; on the Delaware and Hudson rivers; or anywhere there is water. Some of them even commute by kayak. Eric Evans, former editor of *Down River* magazine, says there are about 100,000 kayakers now at large in U.S. waters—which is, incidentally, well over three times the number of Eskimos living in North America's arctic regions.

ARE WE AFRAID OF LIVING LONGER?

The Strange Resistance to Aging Research

by Albert Rosenfeld

IN HIS NEW NOVEL, *Paradise I*, Alan Harrington envisions a time, only a few decades hence, when injections of "T-minus serum" rejuvenate the old and confer an indefinitely extended life-span on the lucky few who are chosen by computer lottery. Those rejected by the computer, the masses who have no access to the precious serum, grow increasingly restive and resentful. Finally: "Pogroms ... against the favored people ... in New York, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Atlanta. ... Bounty hunters hire themselves out. ... and the hunt is on."

In an earlier short story, by Stephen Leacock, the characters no longer die of old age; they die only because of physical accidents. As a consequence, they spend most of their time and attention being very careful *not* to have an accident. In yet another story, by Alan Nourse, the long-lived heroes have so much time that they take all the time they have. They never get a project off the drawing board.

Do such literary imaginings accurately reflect the ways in which people would behave if antiaging substances were available to them? None among us can say for sure, of course. But the young among us may get the chance to find out at firsthand.

For we in this century may well have the capacity for the first time in human history to do something about the process of aging—to hold back, even to *turn* back, its ravages.

Yet we are not leaping at the opportunity.

Why not?

Partly because we fear the consequences of success. But mostly because of a large credibility gap: We still can't really believe in the sudden science-factual feasibility of an outcome that we had assumed would always remain purely science-fictional.

It is important that we close this credibility gap because our government is right now, at various levels, discussing research on aging and its future consequences. If the scenarios being envisioned do not incorporate into their considerations the very real possibility that we may discover the basic biological mechanisms of the aging process and thus acquire the long-dreamed-of possibility of extending significantly the good years of human life, then to that extent those scenarios will be seriously defective—if not useless.

These thoughts resurfaced in my mind recently when I was invited to testify before a congressional subcommittee on aging. This was a "futures" hearing, and the topic was

"Life Extension and Tomorrow's Elderly." Such discussions are going on in many places outside the government as well. The trouble with most of them—though less so outside the government—is that people tend to think of life extension as being modest gains of another few years and as continuing increments of more of the same. These would come about by virtue of the alleviation or cure of specific degenerative diseases such as late-onset cancer, heart disease, and stroke. The result would be an ever larger population of elderly people facing social, economic, and ethical problems similar to today's, only aggravated and a bit more complex.

"In any attempt at futurology," said Dr. Leonard Hayflick, a distinguished gerontologist, at a Chicago conference last year, "it is wisest to base predictions on similar events that have happened in the past." But what if there are no similar events to be found in the past? Some events are unprecedented, such as our capability of recombining DNA molecules and of manipulating genes. On which past events may we base our predictions of the consequences? In all likelihood, the outcome of successful research on aging would generate conditions radically different from those we now face—especially as the merely old chronologically became less and less elderly and aged physically. We talk and write glibly about "the graying of America," but I for one wouldn't place any bets that gray will be the predominant hair color of future old folks. And nursing homes as we now know them could become as rare as TB sanatoriums already have.

We cannot be certain that this increase in longevity will happen, but to rule it out of our future considerations as if it could not happen is simply foolish. It not only could happen, it could probably happen much sooner if we deliberately choose to bring it about rather than wait passively for the knowledge to accrue. In a study conducted by the RAND Corporation, a sampling of scientific forecasters guessed that a 50-year increase in human longevity could be attained by the year 2020. Other surveys have come up with more conservative predictions, but they still indicate that many experts consider such ideas anything but preposterous.

Late in 1977, the Academic Press brought out a new and completely revised edition of *Time, Cells and Aging*, a seminal book first published in 1962 by Dr. Bernard L. Strehler, of the University of Southern California. Strehler was amazed at the quantity of new knowledge that had accumulated in the 15-year interim, allowing him to be much more optimistic in this edition about the prospects of conquering old age