

**O**N THE SURFACE, it would appear that the American people have never been in better shape. Certainly, the statistics are auspicious. According to the current report of the U.S. Surgeon General, life expectancy at birth for the average American is moving well up into 70-plus years—contrasted with 47 years at the beginning of the century.

Just in the past two decades, the mortality rate for children—both white and black—has been cut in half. It now stands at 14 per thousand, a record low. Deaths from heart disease for all ages have dropped 22 percent since 1968. Last year, tuberculosis, diphtheria, poliomyelitis, and gastroenteritis produced a combined death toll of 10,000 lives. If the death rate for those diseases were the same today as it was in 1900, they would have claimed 800,000 lives.

Despite these gains, other threats to life are increasing. The grisly fact about life in the United States is that accidents and murder are replacing disease as the prime killers—especially of the nation's young people. Murder has become the greatest single cause of death among nonwhite American youths. Last year, firearms claimed the lives of 50,000 in the 15- to 24-year-old age group. Handguns are the most frequently used weapons. For the population as a whole, the United States now has the highest murder rate of any major nation in the world. Our 10.2 homicides per 100,000 people compares with 1.3 for Japan, 1.1 for Sweden, 1.0 for Great Britain, and 0.9 for France.

Next to murder weapons, automobiles are the most lethal devices in the United States. About 2 million Americans were disabled last year in automobile accidents, and almost 50,000 were killed. More than half of the casualties were under the age of 24.

Still another social problem is represented by the increased use of alcohol

and drugs, once again especially among young people. About 80 percent of teenagers between the ages of 12 and 17 have had experience with liquor. About 3 percent drink daily. The percentage of high-school students who come to class intoxicated at least once a month has doubled in the past 15 years—from 10 to 20 percent.

In 1950, drug abuse was virtually nonexistent in the United States. Only 2 percent of the entire population at that time had sustained experience with such narcotics as cocaine, heroin, and marijuana. By 1976, 60 percent of the 18- to 25-year-old group had used marijuana; 20 percent had "graduated" to the harder drugs.

One of the most disturbing facts to emerge from the Surgeon General's report concerns the increased incidence of venereal infections. Venereal disease has replaced smallpox, tuberculosis, and diphtheria as the disease posing the biggest threat to our youth. An estimated 12 million young Americans today are carrying sexually transmitted diseases.

Pregnancy is now also a major risk for American teenage girls. About 1 million adolescents became pregnant last year, 300,000 of whom were under the age of 15. Children born of these mothers carry all sorts of disabilities, beginning with low birth weight. An additional health threat with pregnancy becomes apparent in the fact that at least three out of 10 teenage pregnancies are aborted.

What to do about these assorted problems? Any approach to problems must begin by making connections. It is no coincidence that the increase in violence corresponds to increased use of alcohol and drugs; moreover, the murder rate is directly correlated to the easy availability of handguns in the United States. Since 1960, annual sales of handguns have quadrupled; last year 6 million were sold over the counter and

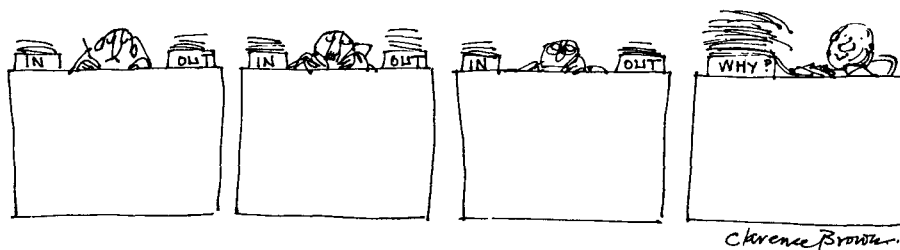
through the mails. During the same period, the murder rate of 15- to 24-year-olds rose from 5.9 to 14.2 per 100,000.

Nothing does less credit to the American people than the way Congress has allowed itself to become bamboozled by the gun lobby. Even the proposed law that confines itself to the registration of handguns has been sidetracked because of the incredible power of gun manufacturers and users.

What makes the situation all the more bizarre is that polls show a dramatically high percentage of the American people favoring gun control. It is absurd for Congress to allow a highly organized minority to impose its will on the entire country. The time has come for the American people to translate their outrage over easy access to murderous weapons into sensible legislation.

With respect to the problems resulting from sexual activity among teenagers: The clear need is for an all-out educational effort—not just for youngsters but for their parents. It is estimated that two thirds of unmarried boys and girls in their teens have engaged in sexual intercourse. Of these, 25 percent have never used any form of contraception. According to the Surgeon General's report, "If sexually active young people who do not want to become pregnant were to use some effective form of contraception regularly, premarital pregnancies would drop by more than 300,000 a year." The Surgeon General is correct in believing that contraception would reduce the number of teenage pregnancies. Parents and educators, however, should also address themselves to the more fundamental question concerning sexual precociousness and promiscuity.

Obviously, none of these problems sprang into being overnight. They are the result of a wide range of interactive causes involving many segments of the society. They do not exist outside ourselves but are the reflection of internal weaknesses and defaults that have been accumulating over a long period of time. It is a serious error to suppose, therefore, that the total situation lends itself to a quick fix. The corrective changes will come about, as they have come about in the past, when enough people decide to take personal responsibility. Before we celebrate the conquest of many diseases in the United States we have the obligation to show progress in the conquest of violence and moral breakdown. —N.C.



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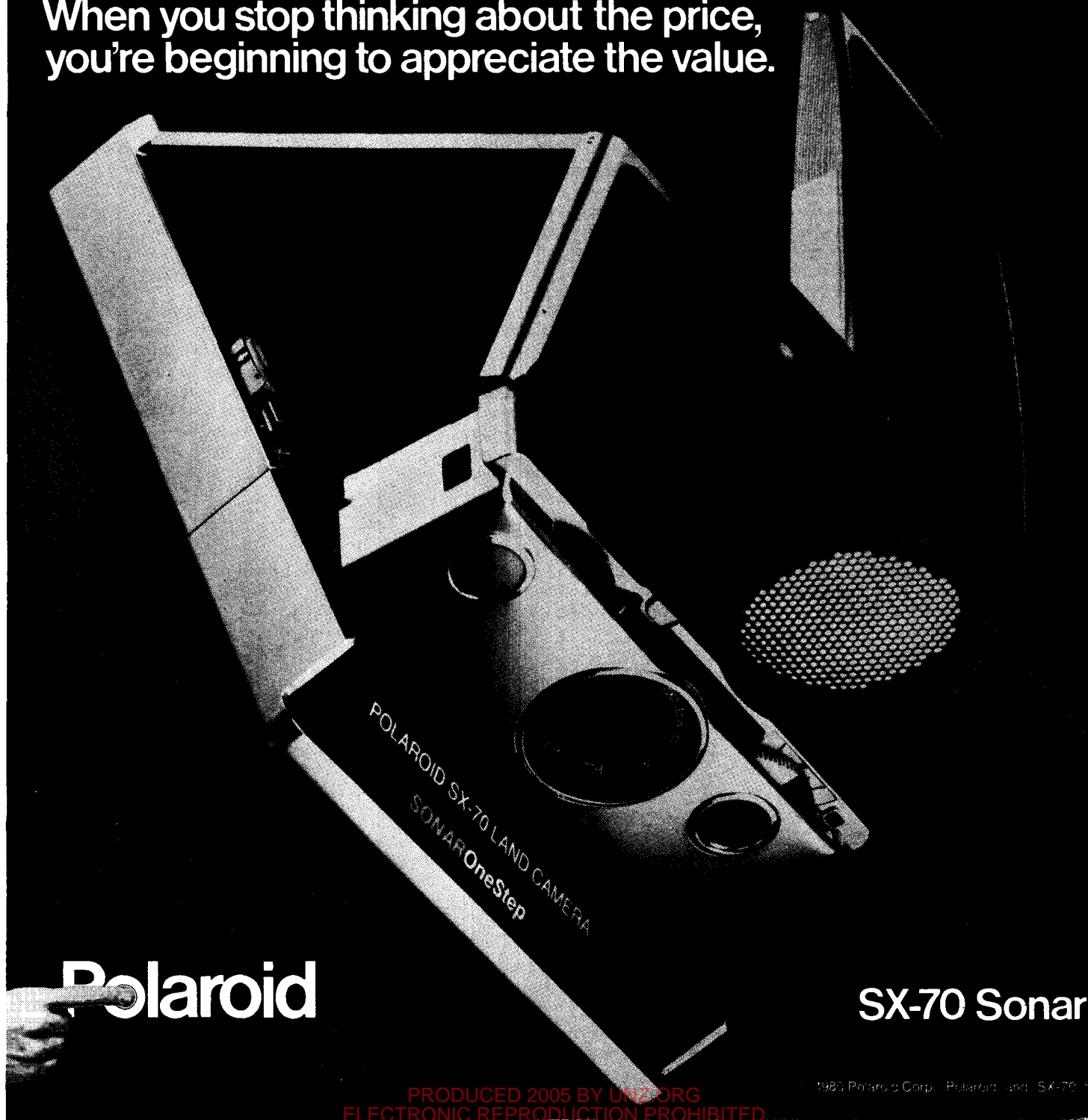
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I DON'T KNOW WHY, but *stink* used to be considered a word that wasn't quite polite. When I was a child, I was told not to say that something stinks. It was all right to say, "It smells bad," but not, "It stinks." In a scene in *The Philadelphia Story* the mother tells her younger daughter that she should not say *stinks*. "Say 'smells,'" she says, "but not 'stinks'."

These days, when almost anything goes and good authors who once knew better words now only use four-letter words, you'd think *stinks* would be quite acceptable. But I suppose it isn't. I say this because I noticed that in Franco Zeffirelli's big television film, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Lazarus' sister Martha, leading Jesus to her brother's tomb, says, "He hath been dead four days, and by this time his body must be decaying."

I am by no means a Bible scholar, but I know those are not the words that appear in the King James version. For after I had been told not to say something stinks, I saw in the Bible that Martha's words are, "Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days." Verily I rejoiced, saying "Aha! How come I'm not supposed to say *stink*, and here it is, right in the Bible?"

When I heard the line in Zeffirelli's film, I wrote it on a scrap of paper and filed it away. Then, out of curiosity, I went to the New English Bible to see how they handled the line. There, Martha says, "Sir, by now there will be a stench. He has been there four days." Evidently, *stink* is still in disrepute.

Just now I said I had filed that scrap of paper. This is perhaps as good a time as any for a confession. I do, in fact, have filing cabinets full of thousands of "Fans Double-Crostics," but for everything except Double-Crostics, my filing areas are desk tops, table tops, a day bed, wicker baskets, plastic baskets, cardboard boxes, bookcases, drawers, pigeonholes, clips glued to the walls, and, occasionally, chairs. So the truth is that I filed Martha's dialogue in a desk drawer under an ancient Remington electric shaver. When I dug it out yesterday, I found next to it another slip of paper with, "Olivier: I'll make a ghost of him that hinders me."

I'm not sure when I committed that jotting, but I suppose I must have been watching Sir Laurence's film of *Hamlet* on television, and obviously I was struck by his having altered Shakespeare to conform to today's English—with good reason, I think.

The line is from the scene in which Hamlet wants to follow his father's ghost. Horatio and Marcellus try to stop him, Horatio warning him of how foolhardy it is to follow ghosts. When his two friends grab Hamlet, he says, "Hold off your hands." Still they try to hold him, so he says, "Unhand me, gentlemen, By heaven! I'll make a ghost of him that lets me!"

For years I—and, I suspect, millions of others—thought that Hamlet's "of him that lets me" meant "of him that permits me," that he was saying something like, "If you get in my way, you'll have to let

me run you through with my sword."

Actually, Hamlet's *let* is the *let* that barely exists today. It is the archaic *let* of "without *let* or hindrance" and tennis's *let ball*, a serve that is impeded in its flight over the net.

*Let* is one of those words with two almost diametrically opposite meanings. It has meant both *to permit* and *to prevent*. There are lots of other words that seem to contradict themselves, although only a few come to mind immediately: *cleave*, meaning both *to unite* and *to divide*; *overlook*, meaning *to inspect* or *examine* as well as *to ignore* or *disregard*; and *fast* (a superfast man can run a hundred yards in nine seconds, while a superfast dye does not run at all).

I first noticed a word with opposite meanings when I was in my teens and my favorite Shakespearean play was, of course, *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* is, or at least used to be, irresistible to adolescent boys, with its blood-gouted blades, murder most foul, gory locks, and eyes that glare without speculation.

After Macbeth has made Duncan's quietus with a bare bodkin, he tells his wife about the voice that cried:

"Sleep no more!  
Macbeth does murder sleep!"  
the innocent sleep,  
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve  
of care.

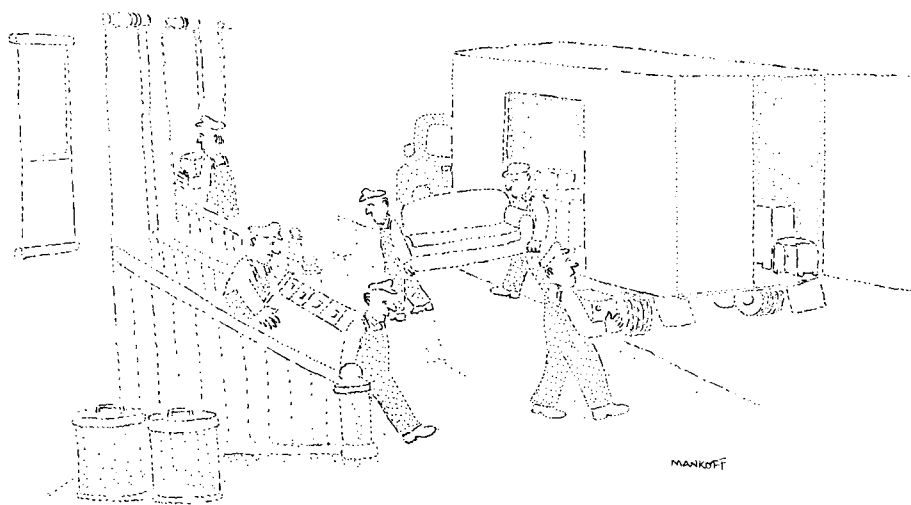
Naturally, I pictured the sleeve of the image as one of my sweater sleeves, whose elbows and cuffs had a tendency to become ravell'd or unravell'd.

It wasn't until years after I'd been graduated from college that I learned that Shakespeare's *sleeve* had nothing to do with a *sleeve*. A sleeve is a thin strand of silk obtained by separating a thicker thread. Because Macbeth's line is so well known and so often quoted, *sleeve* has come to mean also simply a "tangle." And, speaking of a tangle, let's go back to *ravel*: *The Random House Dictionary* says *ravel* means "to disentangle ... to involve; confuse; perplex ... to make clear; unravel." Is that clear?

Macbeth wants to get some innocent sleep that will knit up his ravell'd, or unravell'd, sleeve of care, but he hears a voice that won't let him, or, as Hamlet might have said, *will* let him.

Contemplating these linguistic aberrations in conjunction with my filing system, I can only sigh, "Confusion now hath made his masterpiece."

—Thomas H. Middleton



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