

What's Happening to America?

JOHN STEINBECK

It is customary (indeed, at graduations it is a requirement) speakers to refer to America as a "precious inheritance"—heritage, a gift proffered like a sandwich wrapped in plastic on a plastic tray. Our ancestors, so it is implied, gathered to the invitation of a golden land and accepted the sacrament of milk and honey.

This is not so. In the beginning we crept, scuttled, escaped, were driven out of the safe and settled corners of the earth to the fringes of a strange and hostile wilderness, a nameless and hostile continent. Far from welcoming us, it resisted us. This land was no gift. The firstlings worked for it, fought for it, died for it. They stole and cheated and double-crossed for it.

But we built America, and the process made us Americans—a new breed, rooted in all races, stained and tinted with all colors, a seeming ethnic anarchy. Then in a little, little time, we became more alike than we were different—a new society; not great, but fitted by our very faults for greatness: *E Pluribus Unum*.

The whole thing is crazy. Every single man in our emerging country was out for himself. When communities arose, each one defended itself against other communities. All that was required to release the mechanism of oppression was that the newcomers be poor, weak in numbers and unprotected—although it helped if their skin, hair, eyes were different, and if they spoke some language other than English, or worshipped in some church other than Protestant. The Puritans took out after any other faith; the Germans clotted for self-defense until the Irish took the resented place; the Irish became "Americans" against the Poles, the Slavs against the Italians.

It occurs to me that this very cruelty toward newcomers might go far toward explaining the speed with which the ethnic and national strangers merged with the "Americans." In spite of all the pressure the old people could bring to bear, the children of each ethnic group denied their background and their ancestral language. Something was loose in this land, and the new generations wanted to be Americans more than they wanted to be Hungarians or Italians or British. And in one or two, certainly not more than three generations, each ethnic group has clicked into place in the union without losing the *pluribus*.

One of the generalities most often noted about Americans is that we are a restless, a dissatisfied, a searching people. We spend our time searching for security, and hate it when we get it. We are an intemperate people: we eat too much, drink too much, indulge our senses too much. We work too hard, and many die under the strain; and we play with a violence just as suicidal. The result is that we seem to be in a state of turmoil all the time, both physically and mentally. We are able to believe that our government is weak, stupid, overbearing, dishonest and inefficient, and at the same time we are deeply convinced that it is the best government in the world, and we would like to impose it upon everyone else.

Americans seem to live and breathe and function by paradox; but in nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths. We shout that we are a nation of laws, not men—and then proceed to break every law we can if we can get away with it. Our most persistent folktales—constantly retold in books, movies and television shows—concern cowboys, gun-slinging sheriffs and Indian fighters. The brave and

honest sheriff who with courage and a six-gun brings law and order to a Western community is perhaps our most familiar hero. And in these moral tales, so deep-set in us, virtue does not arise out of reason or orderly process of law—it is imposed by violence and maintained by the threat of violence.

I wonder whether this folk wisdom is the story of our capability. Are these stories permanent because we know within ourselves that only the threat of violence makes it possible for us to live together in peace?

No one can define the "American Way of Life" or point to any person or group who lives it, but it is real nevertheless.

Our means of governing ourselves, while it derives from European and Asian sources, is unique. That it works at all is astonishing; that it works well is a matter for amazement. In thinking about conferring the blessings of our system on other people, we forget that ours is the product of our own history, which has not been duplicated anywhere else. We have amassed a set of feelings which grew out of our background, but which are just as strongly held when we do not know that background.

For example, Americans almost without exception have a fear and a hatred of any perpetuation of power—political, religious or bureaucratic. Whether this anxiety stems from what amounts to a folk memory of our own revolution against the England of George III, or whether in the family background of all Americans from all parts of the world there is an alert memory of the foreign tyrannies which were the cause of their coming here in the first place, it is hard to say. Regardless, any official with a power potential causes in Americans first a restiveness, then suspicion and finally—if the official remains in office too long—a downright general animosity. Many a public servant has been voted out of office for no other reason than that he has been in too long.

In nothing are the Americans so strange as in their attitudes toward their children. I have studied children in many countries, and I find nothing to approximate the American child-sickness. Before it appeared, parents were delighted to have children at all and content that they might grow up to be exactly like themselves. Farm boys grew up farmers; housewives trained their daughters to be housewives. Population explosions were taken care of by wars, plagues and starvation.

Our child-sickness has developed very rapidly in the last 60 years, and it runs parallel, it would seem, with increasing material plenty and the medical conquest of child-killing diseases. Suddenly it was no longer acceptable that the child should be like his parents and live as they did; he must live better, know more, dress more richly and, if possible, change from his father's trade to a profession. Since it was demanded of the child that he be better than his parents, he must be guided, pushed, admired, disciplined, flattered and forced. But since the parents were and are no better than they are, the rules they propounded were not based on their experience but on their wishes and hopes.