

On My Mind

The Fearful American: A 40-Year Marathon

by Jeff Greenfield

You watch the dancers drag each other across the endless floor of the Aragon Ballroom; you listen to the saccharine strains of the dance orchestra and the booming voice of the emcee, ancestor to all the Warren Hulls and Jack Baileys bellowing cheers for the tears of cancer-ridden widows on 1950s tv; and you begin to understand something about this country which has been hidden from our view.

And if you leave "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" and read the recollections of dozens of men and women in Studs Terkel's masterpiece "Hard Times," you begin to understand what underlies the anger and the outright hatred of Middle Americans. You see why the turmoil of Vietnam and campus disorder, assassinations and the riots of cops and hardhats, is part of a pattern far more disturbing, far more dangerous than the last bloody decade.

The fact is that the Depression is more than an invisible scar, more than a psychosis which drives union leaders to keep qualified blacks out of their unions so that jobs can be hoarded, more than an anxiety which propels teachers into identifying institutional dry rot with their own security. Rather, the Great Depression marks the beginning of a sense of doubt and struggle which has been a permanent part of American history for more than 40 years. For most Americans, in other words, the horror of that, marathon dance for survival never ended.

This is all but incomprehensible to someone who grew up after the Second World War, or

as a consequence of some personal failure, not as a product of institutional collapse. So this youth heard the shouts and tears of his parents. And he found himself leaving school to help keep himself and his parents alive for another day or another week. The first decade of maturity, then, drove home the lessons of privation, suffering, guilt, and struggle.

When he was 21, the Second World War began. And for him, there was no tension between graduate school or the Peace Corps or feigned homosexuality

or a teaching job until the magic age of 26. He went to war, and counted his friends who were not coming back, and learned that in protecting your country you tried to kill someone who would kill you if he could and who would take over your country if he won. He learned that when your country goes to war, you better learn to hate if you want to live.

It seems ludicrous, insane, immoral to hear Americans defend the slaughter of innocents on the ground that "they're all slopes and dinks anyway." But ask your parents if they remember the spirit of World War II; ask them if they remember songs like "We're Going to Find a Fellow Who is Yellow and Beat Him Red, White, and Blue" or "When Those Little Yellow-Bellies Meet the Cohens and the Kellys."

Ask them, also, if they remember the ads in Life and Look, Collier's and the Saturday Evening Post of 1943 and 1944: the tire companies and auto lines that promised a brave new world of peace and prosperity when the

war was over. And then ask them what they remember coming back to.

We have been taught that post-war America was pastoral in comparison with the violence and divisions of the late 1960s. But for this 50-year-old man, back from the war at about the age of 25, it was something far different. It was a time when the seeds of McCarthyism were sown by the Hiss case, by the notion that a pillar of the American establishment could be accused of hiding secret documents in pumpkins to be turned over to the Soviet Union; a time when our ideological enemy had the tools to blow us off the face of the earth, when the historic sanctuary of two oceans was almost instantaneously erased; and a time when the American people learned—accurately or not—that two members of the American Communist party had stolen the secret of this awesome atomic bomb and had given that secret to the Russians.

And then in 1950, when this weary American turned 30, the Korean war broke out. If he was

unlucky, he was called to fight again. But even if he escaped the Army, he was still afflicted with a war which, for the first time, could not even be understood. Instead of Germans eating babies or slaughtering Jews, we had a war fought over an ideology, a war which the President did not even call a war (it was a "UN Police Action"), and a war in which one of the most popular American commanders in history was fired when he proclaimed his determination to win.

Throughout the early '50s, then, he had been taught that subversives in high places were undermining the American republic, that Americans were dying in a war which could not be understood, and that we were living under the shadow of sudden, absolute annihilation.

If this 30-year-old American was troubled by a sense of the world closing in, his life at home was equally turbulent. The early '50s saw the issue of juvenile delinquency rise to the level of a national obsession and remain there for almost a decade. To

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whose first knowledge of political life came when John Kennedy was murdered in broad daylight. We tend to date the days of chaos from November 22, 1963, marked by such milestones as the escalation of the war in Vietnam into a major Nuremberg crime, the consistent and repeated acts of lying by respected, important men, and the explosion of violence in ghettos and on college campuses.

But if we look back, we can see a steady, continuing sense of darkness that has surrounded the average middle-aged American since his youth. And just as we ask others to look beyond the violence of a riot or a campus disorder into the roots of discontent, it is not enough to deplore the ignorant outrage of Middle America.

We can begin by trying to look at America as it seems to a 50-year-old man. When he was nine years old, the stock market crashed, and the Depression began. His first view of the world was of widespread unemployment, hunger, and outright starvation, and the steady collapse of the pillars of financial respectability—corporations, banks, insurance companies, and the life savings of ordinary citizens they took with them as they fell.

But this was more than a vision. The chances are that this youth saw his father fighting other men for jobs that did not exist, that he saw his home ripped apart by bitterness and anger; for as one of Terkel's people recounts, the guilt of Depression families was intensely *personal*—they saw their suffering

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those first hearing anguished adults bemoan the radicalism of "these kids today" in 1970, it may be some solace to learn that the same thing was being said 20 years ago—except the outrage was directed not at political upheaval but at street crimes and acts of mindless destruction and terror. Ethnic gangs in New York City, middle-class gangs in the suburbs, sex clubs in high schools, and the rise of rock and roll—"that filthy jungle music"—began putting people in something of a nervous state (the fight over banning rock festivals was presaged in 1954 when Bridgeport, New Haven, and Boston banned the Alan Freed rock-and-roll-style shows).

It's impossible to recount the state of unease that gripped post-war America in the early '50s—the sense that afflicted today's 50-year-old that the promises of peace and ease had been betrayed.

The late '50s—now seen as a time of Eisenhower-imposed somnolence—were in fact a time of more doubt and unease. If our middle-aged American was 37 in

1957, he saw the Soviet Union orbit an earth satellite. And this time nobody could "comfort" himself with the thought that the Russians had simply stolen the secrets of superior American ingenuity. This time they had done it by themselves. They had put that basketball up there, spinning around our heads, sending a mocking "beep-beep-beep" to taunt our long-held notions of American technological conquest. And it did not help when, a few months later, an American Vanguard rocket rose one foot off the launching pad, paused uncertainly for a moment, and settled back down to explode all over Cape Canaveral. We laughed but we wondered.

At the same time, other comforting notions were falling by the wayside. While Life magazine explored the failure of our high schools—while this middle-aged American wondered what was happening to his teenage child in that expensive high school in his Levittown—other blows were hitting home. He learned, to cite an example that seems trivial now, that the quiz show heroes of the

late '50s—the Charles Van Dorens who won fortunes with their knowledge—were frauds, that the fix had been in, that he had been duped by a manipulated package designed to sell products. And when he bought those products they didn't even work, just as he moved into houses which didn't seem built right.

With the '60s came the connection between politics and upheaval. The "colored" people he had been taught by 1000 films to admire for their rhythm and laugh at for their stupidity and cowardice, seemed to be forgetting their place. An obnoxious, bearded young doctor in fatigues thumbed his nose at us, in the words of every politician running for office, "90 miles from our shores"—and we almost blew up the world in confronting Cuba.

And it was at that point—after the missile crisis had eased, after the test ban treaty had been signed, after we had all taken a long deep breath—that John Kennedy was killed on a Dallas thoroughfare and the recent series of chaotic, violent upheavals began again.

Understand what this means: to be 50 years old today is to have lived a life of constant, unremitting uncertainty, anguish, and suffering. It means that it is not simply Vietnam or Cambodia or long hair or dope that has unnerved you, but a life spent searching for nothing more than a little peace and quiet and security

which never seemed to be there. It is, then, not surprising that a pitch like Vice-President Agnew's falls on fertile ground. Beyond the big words and the squint, beyond the bully-coward facade, is a powerful message to middle-aged Middle America: "Look, you *should* be angry, look what they're doing to you. If they'd only shut up and be quiet, we could all relax a little."

Of course they're angry at television and the press—who has brought them this constant decades-long tale of crisis and violence; who has told them that they, and now their sons, will fight these insane wars; who has told them that the blacks don't want to die like sheep any more, that they're going to fight to live like men; who has taught their kids to let their hair grow and smoke those killer weeds and mock what they have spent a lifetime struggling for? Agnew did not exactly discover that it was good politics to kill the messenger.

I would be a hypocrite if I said I knew the way to get through to this Middle American. It's true, of course, that if Nixon drags us into a Depression he will not be able to run again by denouncing college students to unemployed factory workers. And I suppose there's something to the newly discovered interest in blue-collar economic problems—some attempts to link anti-war and civil rights issues to tax reform, consumer protection, and job security

have proven politically successful. But that isn't going to be enough. For the middle-aged American, the marathon has gone on for 40 years—for all his life. Unless the left can learn to respect this man—unless we can learn to empathize with the hard times he has been through, and the scars he has carried through his life—the slogans of the new populism will ultimately fail. We need something more than a posture of tolerance. We need to learn the kind of respect we instinctively have for friends, so that when we argue against his simplistic patriotism, when we call him up for his willingness to use the techniques of bullies, when we talk about his racism, we will be doing so with some recognition that this Middle American is also a victim of his times.

Shakespeare Rally

Supporters of the New York Shakespeare Festival were called to rally at City Hall today (Thursday) at noon to support Lindsay's capital budget amendment for the acquisition of a public theatre. The Mayor is expected to urge the Board of Estimates to vote their approval of the city's purchase of the Astor Library Landmark Building (\$5,100,000).

Sambo, the Festival's touring jazz show, and George C. Scott are scheduled to appear before the crowd as they await the Board's decision.