

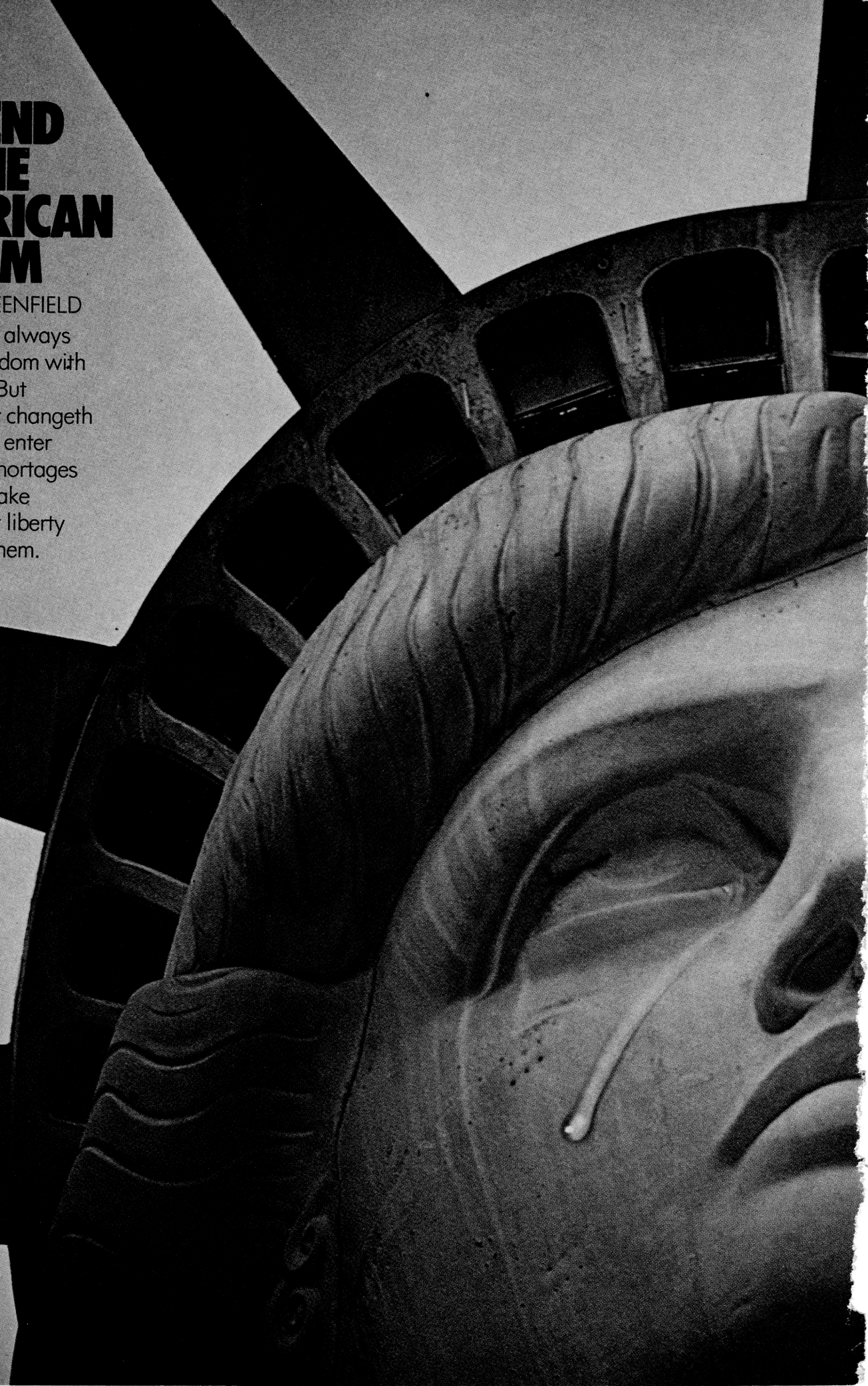
# THE END OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

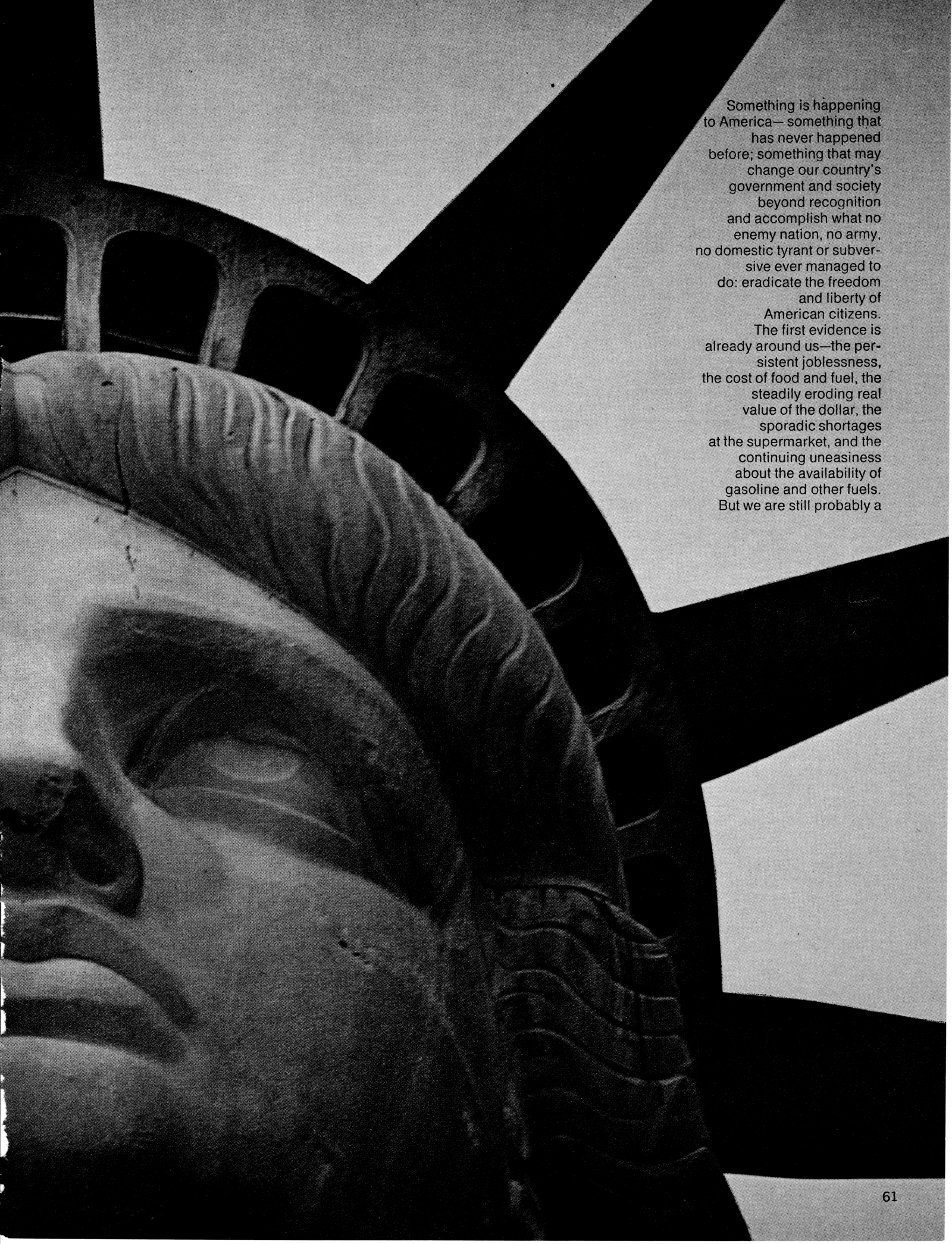
BY JEFF GREENFIELD

America has always equated freedom with abundance. But the old order changeth — and as we enter the Age of Shortages we'd better take care that our liberty isn't one of them.

Photograph By Cosimo

60 PENTHOUSE





Something is happening to America— something that has never happened before; something that may change our country's government and society beyond recognition and accomplish what no enemy nation, no army, no domestic tyrant or subversive ever managed to do: eradicate the freedom and liberty of

American citizens. The first evidence is already around us—the persistent joblessness, the cost of food and fuel, the steadily eroding real value of the dollar, the sporadic shortages at the supermarket, and the continuing uneasiness about the availability of gasoline and other fuels. But we are still probably a

few years away from the day when, for the first time in our history, Americans begin to realize that this "land of plenty," is running out of riches, that until a new source of energy can be found we will be living in an Age of Scarcity. And the most chilling consequence of this scarcity will not be unemployment and longer gasoline lines, it will be the most serious threat to our *political and social freedom* that we have ever faced. Traditionally, Americans have believed in and valued freedom above all else and assumed its continuity largely because the very wealth of the land made government control—whether of our property, our work, or our thoughts—absurd. But now that scarcity may well become a pervasive characteristic of our national life, we had better try to discover—and quickly—how our ideas about freedom can survive in a less plentiful, less bountiful country. The alternative to learning how to keep our freedom will be the loss of that freedom.

The idea of abundance, more than the idea of freedom or individualism, has long dominated both the world's vision of America and America's vision of itself. The sweep of the continent, the riches of the earth, the bounty of the frontier, the power of the machine—these qualities have written our history and shaped our present.

Columbus's 1493 letter from Hispaniola tells of an "earthly paradise" in the Western hemisphere. An English joint-stock company in 1609 beckoned Londoners to a land where "they shall have meat, drink, clothing, with a horse, orchard, and garden for the meanest family [and] one hundred acres for every man that hath a trade." As one social critic has written, "From the Spanish quest of El Dorado to the Twentieth-Century folklore of Sicilian and Slavic villages, the myth persisted of America as the land of untold riches, where everyone dressed in finery and the paving blocks were of gold." The most remarkable thing about this myth is the amount of truth it has contained for five hundred years.

Of course the history of America is also checkered with privation, suffering, and outrages—the destruction of the Indian civilizations, starvation in the early settlements, death on the frontier, the sweatshops and slums in our cities, the hard lot of sharecroppers and migrant workers, the persistent exclusion of blacks, browns, and women from full rights, and the inequitable distribution of wealth that endures to this very day.

Yet the reality of the Golden Myth remains: America is a society abundant above all others. Moreover, this wealth has endowed not just a tiny elite, but the great mass of Americans, first with land and the fruits of that land, then later with a share of our incredible industrial production. More than a hundred years ago, John Calhoun said that a "kind providence has cast our lot on a portion of the globe sufficiently

vast to satisfy the most grasping ambition, and abounding in resources beyond all others, which only require to be fully developed to make us the greatest and most prosperous people on earth."

In the decades since, the story of gold in the Klondike, silver in Colorado, oil in Oklahoma, and coal in Appalachia has made Calhoun seem a modest forecaster. By the beginning of this century, Henry Adams could describe our country as the "child of incalculable coal power, chemical power, electric power, and radiating energy"—sufficient to make America into "a sort of God compared with any former creature of nature." And it is this image—and this reality—that runs like a river through our history, irrigating every element of our experience. We have so much, we consume so much, even our poor are, in comparison, so endowed (Harlem by itself would be one of the world's ten richest nations) that we cannot understand the threat posed by scarcity until we see just

---

“  
God Himself  
was recreated in  
the image of  
America the Plentiful.  
”

---

how the idea of abundance forms the bedrock for our most basic beliefs.

Every idea brought here from Europe was transformed by the richness of the American landscape. The philosopher George Santayana once wrote that American life "seems to neutralize every intellectual element, however tough and alien it may be, and to fuse in it the native good will, complacency, thoughtlessness, and optimism." And looking at the impact of abundance on our most basic ideas, this description seems exactly right.

God Himself was recreated in the image of America the Plentiful. Why believe in the sinfulness of luxury when the earth has brought forth such treasure? Instead of the biblical doctrine that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God," American religion favored the notion of the Elect: the sense that God favored with worldly success those des-

tinued for Paradise. From Cotton Mather on down through Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, and Norman Vincent Peale, a major strain in our religious activity has been the comforting of the comfortable. It reached a peak of some sort when ad man Bruce Barton wrote *The Man Nobody Knows*, in which he described Jesus Christ as the "Great Salesman" and the Apostles as the first board of directors.

Our belief in individualism seemed to have resulted from the wealth of the continent. The early settlements in Jamestown and Plymouth, which emphasized collective effort, collapsed in large measure because there was simply too much fertile land for the taking. There was no need for men to work together when it was not too difficult for each man to enrich himself separately; nor was there any need for a powerful, intrusive government. "Here in America," Carl Schurz said, "you can see every day how little a people need to be governed. . . . Here you witness the *productiveness of freedom*." Indeed, our American Revolution was born as much out of impatience with Britain's economic policies as her political policies. Samuel Eliot Morison argues that "Boston became the hub of the American revolution largely because the policy of George III threatened her maritime interests."

The doctrine of "natural rights"—so central to the Founding Fathers—became through the first century of our history the unfettered right of the powerful to enrich themselves as they wished, without state interference. Those who didn't like it could pack up and carve out a new slice of our endless continent for themselves. Our corporate growth, manifest destiny, isolationism—all these reflect a sense of America as a self-sufficient, infinitely self-sustaining entity. Whether this Idea of Abundance has been *good* for us is a matter of doubt. What is beyond all doubt is the enormous influence the idea has had on our character, on our most definitive traits as a people and a culture. In his classic essay on the closing of the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner summarized the impact of abundance on the American people. It had produced, he said, "that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good ends and for evil; and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes from freedom. . . ."

We can find this influence everywhere. Look at our newspapers and magazines—the startling use of white space, graphics, photographs. Look at the blaze of neon in Times Square and Las Vegas. Look at the way we live—in housing thirty miles from our jobs and five miles from a food store. Look at our pattern of typically uprooting ourselves more often in a ten-year period

than most of the world's peoples do in a lifetime.

Listen to our political and cultural debates, and see how the concept of abundance bridges the widest-seeming gaps between Americans. Economic conservatives point to our material standard of living and argue that our system works for all who are willing to work. Liberals point to this same wealth and argue that in so rich a land, privation exists only by a conscious decision ("If we can put a man on the moon. . ."). Our counterculture, with its professed distaste for the values of growth and acquisition, has been based on the capacity of the huge middle class to pay for the lifestyle of its disaffected children.

But there is something else that the pervasive idea of abundance has brought to our country. In America, growth has not been just a value, but the reason *to be*; possession is not just a means to happiness, but happiness *itself*. What has happened in America is that, as abundance came to dominate our thinking and living, it came to replace other, more traditional, sources of gratification. We made a kind of cosmic bargain—trading roots, community, stability, and craftsmanship for the dizzying excitement of growth, plenty, and power. Now, forces seeming beyond our control are making that bargain obsolete. Instead of vast riches, we may be facing a sharp decline in our basic material expectations, and that may produce an incalculable alteration in our traditional sense of possibilities.

A new civilization found new ways of holding men together—less and less by creed or belief, by tradition, or by place, more and more by common effort and common experience, by the apparatus of daily life. . . . Americans were held together less by their hopes than by their wants, by what they made and what they bought.—Daniel Boorstein, *The Democratic Experience*.

To some critics, this "bargain," this exchange of stability for consumption, has produced the American capacity to solve problems and improve our lot. To others, ranging from Thorsten Veblen to Paul Goodman and Charles Reich, it has produced a corrosive loneliness—even as we possess more, we wonder more at our lack of satisfaction. But while thinkers debate the worth of the bargain, the fact that we are living within that bargain is clear.

To survey familiar ground once again: we travel in shiny cars along eight-lane highways to see America, and what we see are more eight-lane highways and Holiday Inns and McDonald's that we left behind at home. We relax in comfort before color-television sets, but we are remote from tangible experience and personal participation. There is no corner bar or grocery store to find companionship in—often there is not even a *corner*, no center of existence where we casually cross paths

with neighbors. Because we live so far from our needs, we power 3,000-pound machines to carry a 150-pound man for a loaf of bread. The work we do seems less and less to be either productive or useful, so we take our satisfaction not in what we *do*, but in what we can buy with our labor. In fact, what we have *is*, for millions of us at least, what we *do*. The vacations, the snowmobile, the home—these are the ways we measure our lives.

This is not necessarily a losing bargain; affluence can be as gratifying as more traditional values. In the words of Max Lerner, "The loss of a sense of independence in the productive process has been replaced by a feeling of well-being in consumption and living standards. The values of income, consumption, status . . . are values, not emptiness or formlessness."

These words were written before the explosion of the 1960's; that decade taught us that prosperity without purpose may not be enough. But now we face a more basic question—one we have never had to ask before: what happens once we have exchanged the rewards of community, craft, and identity for mobile affluence—and *then* find our mobility and affluence draining away? What happens, in a society taught to measure happiness by the things we have, when we find we have less? The conclusion is frighteningly easy to suggest. If we have less, our lives must be less.

And the fact is that for the rest of this century, Americans *will* have less. Whatever happens to employment and the value of the dollar, our five hundred-year link with cheap energy, cheap food, and cheap raw materials, is ending. Certainly, the current picture is grim enough. Our industrial capacity is one-third idle, and eight million are jobless. Yet the cost of living rises at a faster pace than at any time since World War II, propelled by a combination of shortages, the near-monopoly control of much of our economy, and skyrocketing state and local taxes (the average American works four months a year just to pay the tax collector).

So great is the continuing rise in the cost of living that a family that earned \$12,626 in 1967 will need \$16,000 just to stay where it is in 1976. In fact, the typical family has now lost every penny of the real buying power it had gained since 1964. Pessimism runs rampant. According to a *Wall Street Journal* survey, businessmen and economists believe that a savage new round of inflation will trigger a major economic collapse sometime in 1977 or 1978—"future fear" the *Journal* calls it. A noted economist says that the "prospects for improvement in the American standard of life are much less than they have been." And Edward Donnell, chairman of the board of Montgomery Ward, says, "The age of conspicuous consumption is over."

Thus, after living through all of the social upheaval of the last decade, from domestic riots and a divisive, debilitating war to

the murder of our leaders and wholesale corruption within the White House itself—after all of this—the single remaining consolation, the conviction that materially at least things will continue to get better, is also turning to dust. No wonder pollsters unanimously report the most pervasive national pessimism in measurable memory.

The foreseeable future holds no solace. In recent years, our abundance has been rooted essentially in the existence of cheap fuel on which to base our industrial machine and personal living habits. But now the era of cheap fuel is over. The foreign oil cartel will by 1980 have accumulated some \$460 billion of cash reserves—virtually all of it drained away from the United States and Western Europe. And to avoid paying higher prices abroad we will have to pay hundreds of billions of dollars at home—there will be higher prices for light, heat, and gas, and more expensive tax-supported subsidies. Even then we may well lose the battle. The National Academy of Sciences says it is all but impossible for the United States to achieve energy independence within the next twenty years, and the United States Geological Survey recently found that we have less than half the oil reserves we once thought. One government official predicts that "we should expect to run dry [of domestic petroleum] around the year 2000." The Atomic Energy Commission, a zealous advocate of nuclear power, now admits enormous problems with the "breeder reactors" of the future.

The energy shortage of two winters ago demonstrated in a small way what will happen if America runs short of fuel. But if we must pay far more for fuel, the consequences will go far beyond car pools and chilly buildings. Cheap fuel is—*literally*—the motive power of an auto-based economy and lifestyle. If automobile production, sales, and use sag, then so does the vast web of our industrial life: steel, rubber, service stations, fast-food franchises, shopping centers, amusement parks, domestic tourism—all will flourish or atrophy on the mobility of the car.

And there is much more. Fuel powers the tractors and combines of our agricultural life. Fuel powers the machines that nurture the fruits in the vast orchards of California and Florida. Fuel powers the trucks that abridge space and season to put fresh vegetables on wintry tables thousands of miles away. Inflate the price of fuel and you inflate the price of food. Mix this fact with the growing worldwide demand for our bounty to see that the Secretary of Agriculture is obviously right when he says, "The era of cheap food is over."

And more. Oil is the core of petrochemical products. Jack up the cost of oil, and the price goes up for plastics, synthetic fibers, records, pipe, packaging, furniture, etc. Moreover, Japan and other industrialized nations compete more strongly for our wool, cotton, and wood. The price of clothing soars. Paper shortages cut the

size and circulation of newspapers and magazines.

In sum, abundance as we have known it—abundance in the sense of an unlimited source of sustenance for ourselves, our machines, our way of life—is over.

What happens to a society where freedom has been equated with abundance? Well, if we have less, then perhaps we shall be less free. Once a society has to make hard choices about who gets what, then the political process becomes much more ominous and threatening.

America has always professed to believe in self-reliance, to feel, in President Ford's phrase, that a "government big enough to give us everything we want is big enough to take it all away from us." Even after the New Deal, the New Frontier, and wartime controls, we have managed to retain a healthy skepticism about what Washington should be doing for us and to us. Yet, virtually unnoticed during the energy shortage of 1973-74 was the incredible, unchallenged expansion of government power into every area of our lives. The federal government became our thermostat adjuster, our highway patrol, our wage negotiator, our price-setter, our custodial engineer. We were told that we might have Christmas lights on our tree but not on our shrubs. We were told that we could buy gasoline on Saturday but not on Sunday. Prospective homeowners had to petition local boards for emergency fuel supplies if they wanted to move.

If this is how the federal government intends to respond to future energy shortages—with detailed, case-by-case power over local and personal choice—then the federal power implied is total. In extreme form, it suggests the power to shut down television stations to conserve energy, the power to allocate newsprint, the power to decide that the Indianapolis 500 will take place but not some rock concert, the power to permit college basketball games to be played but not professional ones.

And if scarcity results in this kind of government control over energy, what will happen if other shortages take place—shortages of food, lumber, wool, cotton? Will we have a federal agency allocating newsprint? Will government boards send fruits and vegetables to different parts of America, based on their conception of regional tastes? If this sounds impossible, remember that a hundred years ago the idea of a government zoning land would have been just as laughable in many parts of America. Then, as urban centers grew more crowded, the idea that every landowner had full control over his property was replaced by tighter and tighter controls. We now face—with no preparation and with little recognition that it *can* happen—the possibility of government "zoning" fuel and other scarce commodities.

Moreover, a stronger government with control over our lives means that there is a greater potential for bitter national division. All of us know that in influencing gov-

ernment, some citizens are more "equal" than others. But when government decides who will drive, who will work, who will suffer, and who will prosper, then political and economic power obviously become much more consequential. Truckers can shut down a city by blockades or by strikes that sever the chain of food supply. Farmers can dump milk and slaughter livestock to maximize prices in a food-shortage economy. Oil companies can cut production to force prices to climb even higher. And the rest of us can watch and wait for the government to tell us whether we shall work, whether and what we shall eat, whether we shall be cold. . . .

Once before within recent memory America faced substantial shortages—during World War II. And some observers say optimistically that the experience brought us closer together, made us a more united people. From Rosie the Riveter to dollar-a-year bureaucrats, our work had a purpose, a common goal. And that, of course, is exactly what we do *not* have now. We aren't fighting for our survival as a free nation; we don't have Tojo, Mussolini, and Hitler to revile; we don't have magazines and newsreels promising us better days just ahead. Furthermore, World War II was actually a time of providential prosperity compared with the preceding Depression—indeed, it was war that ended the Depression. Meatless Tuesdays were not that much of a hardship for families that had lived through foodless Tuesdays a few years earlier. Today, scarcity will come only after more than two decades of feverish consumption by people who have literally never known the meaning of hardship. Finally, we are more *apart* from each other now. We live neither in cities nor on self-sufficient farms, but increasingly in far-flung suburbs, unreachable by public transportation. We are neither accustomed to nor organized for cooperative sacrifice, and this will make scarcity far harder to cope with.

What, then, can we do? Without some very hard, very fundamental changes, a leaner existence will mean for millions of us a lesser existence. Since we have cashed in so many other sources of gratification for possessions, since we have chosen to cast our lots separately instead of together, we have created a vicious cycle: increasingly dependent on consumption for gratification, we have become a society that is built to consume wastefully. And since we have shaped our political ideas of freedom from our material bounty, we face a future in which we will see ourselves as less free because we will have less chance to evade limits on our impulses.

The first step toward a solution is the clear recognition by our political leadership that we can no longer afford to consume without acknowledging the consequences. Nearly a century ago the closing of the frontier meant that we could no longer swallow up virgin land, drain it of its



# AMERICAN DREAM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 66

nutrients, and move on westward. And what is ending now is the age of "frontier consumption." As a society, America is facing the terrible lesson that individuals learn when they pass from youth to middle age. To personalize it: America can no longer stay up all night and drink and devour all it can, certain that it will be replenished in a new day. Our country has provided a kind of fountain of youth, but now we face childhood's ends.

Many of the critical decisions will indeed restrict our freedom—if we continue to define "freedom" as the right to a lifestyle independent of the real costs, what economists call "externalities." The right to clog city streets with automobiles carrying one passenger; the right to drive snowmobiles instead of sleds; the right of federally subsidized housing and highways to suburbanize all America—all of these "rights" create enormous costs. And an energy-scarce America will not be able to afford them.

The question is whether our political leadership, traditionally so cowardly in the face of powerful forces that profit by existing conditions, will use its power at the source of these problems or whether it will impose massive restrictions on the living habits of individual Americans. If Washington has to choose between requiring automakers to produce only fuel-efficient engines and banning Sunday driving, the choice *must* be made to impose efficiency at the top. If Washington has to choose between drawing more families to the suburbs or inducing them to return to more efficient urban living, this choice, too, is clear. If building codes can be changed to require more adequate insulation, isn't that better than banning Christmas lights? But the problem is that all these choices require a government with the guts to go after powerful economic interests; and we have seen precious little of that from government in recent years.

An energy-scarce age also requires some strong action by consumers themselves. The central message of Ralph Nader's activity is that there *is* no direction given to manufacturers by consumers—no seeking, for example, for an organized channel through which to check the wasteful growth of petrochemical packaging, a hundred different kinds of deodorants, and other production forms that waste precious fuel. The idea that some companies may shut down because others are gorging themselves on fuel products is unconscionable, but consumers have no mechanism for protecting jobs and energy sources.

This may, in fact, become a new kind of lifestyle for a nation no longer able to pay the costs of indulgence. It's true that we don't have a dangerous visible foreign enemy to fight—a Hitler or a Tojo. But a country whose people can no longer in-

dulge every private source of leisure may well find a new source of purpose in the organized attempt to make the products they buy, the air they breathe, and the water they drink safer and more rational. Across a whole spectrum of our lives, we have become atomized—separate from each other in the way we live, travel, and play. Now conditions seem to be forcing us to adopt Benjamin Franklin's classic toast on the eve of the signing of the Declaration: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

In New York—a city that will be struggling to save itself for years to come—a new ethic seems to be emerging, an understanding that we cannot pay for all of our public needs, that some of them must be supplied by citizens recognizing obligations. In the coming months, we may well see New Yorkers giving of their time to staff libraries, day-care centers, hospitals, and parks which cannot be supported by tax-dollars that are just no longer there.

In a national sense, this may be an encouraging wave of the future. Just as government must redirect our energy to more efficient uses—to mass transportation instead of the automobile, and public parks instead of private retreats—so citizens may have to redirect their energies toward greater common effort to keep us whole during the inevitable age of scarcity. This is not state socialism, but rather a spirit of cooperative, voluntary effort symbolizing much we have forgotten about our own past—from the Mayflower Compact to barn-raising and rural cooperatives.

All this can be done. What we do not yet know is whether our political process, born out of an optimistic belief in an abundant land, can adjust to this new condition. The European democracies have long maintained freedom in their personal and political lives while applying strict limits to the ambitions of private power. To do the same, America must learn for itself the fact that civil liberty and the license to run roughshod over fragile resources are not the same thing.

Well before the coming of the age of scarcity—in fact, all through the post-World War II boom, as our incomes swelled with our doubts—we had begun to feel that we had lost all control over our lives, that we were being dragged without consenting into an ominous future. We seemed to have shifted from a sense of purpose to a sense of compulsion; or, as Daniel Boorstein put it, from a sense of mission to momentum.

No, there is no choice but to choose. To do nothing is to surrender to a fate no one desires. We do not have what Americans have always *believed* we have: all the time in the world, all the land, all the wealth, all the power, all the energy. We will either face the age of scarcity squarely, or we will fulfill the darkest fears of our bankrupt leadership and America will indeed become a pitiful, helpless giant. ○—