

A LOOK AT AMERICA

by Jill and Ernie Wentzel

In 1975 at the invitation of the State Department we spent two months in the United States. This is a frankly biased account of our kaleidoscopic impressions of that vast country. We arrived hopeful yet apprehensive: if a free society did not work in America one might as well abandon that as a practical political aim. Above all other impressions we believe that America does function as a democracy and that this is relevant to South Africa as it, for the first time, is faced with the job of remodelling itself.

There is a vitality in American institutions which contrasts with our mixture of rigidity and ad hoc concessions. In the first episode of the T.V. series "Civilization", Kenneth Clark used this word "rigidity" to describe a dying social order. Toynbee, writing on the same theme, speaks of petrification which condemns a disintegrating society to a temporary life-in-death.

A once creative minority loses its gift for creation and the faculty for attracting the allegiance of the majority without resort to force. It seeks to impose its authority by force and in so doing invites its own destruction by force.

We face that fate, and with it the prospect of accession to power by authoritarian-minded forces with their own rigidities.

As even Mr Kruger has pointed out, there are parallels between 1976 South Africa and the America of some years ago when black power exploded violently in American cities. The contrast is in the responses of the two societies which in their case has largely defused the extreme radical movements while in ours confrontation is our prospect.

It is not inappropriate to spell out some of the reasons for this distinction.

Black power is a response to white-imposed discrimination. It is that discrimination which is the evil within the society, not the black assertion of black dignity. It was of the nature of American institutions that the evil was recognized. The society is structured to respond to these challenges because they can be accommodated within the political system. Ours, on the other hand, is essentially a colonialist system which we white South Africans have inherited from the British. It is that foundation which gives us our belief that we can impose our will, sometimes for good but often for evil, upon blacks. It is a primary condition for change that we cross that psychological barrier and see that the fate of all South Africans is either one fate or alternatively that it is whites who will have the separate disaster.

The American constitution is the foundation of the vitality of the society. It is honoured and quoted by all from right to left as the justification for their particular programmes. Astonishingly it has not become a cliché but operates dynamically. This is indeed the miraculous product of the collective genius of the founding fathers. It was Madison who persuaded them of the truth of an idea which they at first found shocking: "Collision is not only natural to governments but the source of their health". (Alistair Cooke.) A constitution was written based "on the instinct of the balance valve, which yields steam protectively first to one side then the other" (Cooke).

The Court, the Congress, the States and the President: each is assigned a role by that constitution. The Bill of Rights introduces the individual citizen as a constitutional institution in himself. These are the forces created by the constitution; they compete one with another and there is frequently tension between them. It is that tension which is the sign of the life and vitality of America and the antidote to that deathly rigidity.

Americans believe fiercely in their disparate ideas and organize pressure groups and lobbies to secure legislative and executive action or sponsor litigation to secure the Courts' sanction for their programmes. There is not a feeling of helplessness in the face of authority or society as it is; nor is authority readily allowed to turn the offices to which it is elected into fortresses of secrecy and privilege against those who elect it.

It is at the local level that one best sees American society operating on the day-to-day basis. We live in a country which believes that social security makes a community feckless. We heard this complaint in America too. Indeed there are abuses of the welfare programmes, but the Johnson War on Poverty programmes which have given increased security and comfort, particularly in the recession of these past few years, have not devitalized but revitalized Americans. They are community conscious and take a keen interest in their schools, parks and environment. Communities seem to have responded to increased material security by regaining confidence in their society, and with that confidence a belief that problems can be solved. Community vitality which followed on the introduction of massive welfare programmes has resulted in a blurring of the demarcation between governmental and voluntary services. To take an example, a poor community in South End, Boston, where some 70% of the families have some welfare

assistance, persuaded its local borough to allow it the use after school hours of the local school facilities (which are considerable, including fully equipped workshops of all kinds) for training in home renovation and many other classes. The city pays, but the community controls the programme, which reflects the community's needs.

We visited schools ranging from well-to-do areas like Fairfax County near Washington D.C. to a Harlem high school. The problems we have read about are there and not always solved. In some schools there is still a good deal of violence. In some absenteeism is a major factor. Some educationists, especially at universities, complain that many students leave school insufficiently trained in the three R's to fit them for higher education. No doubt much of this is true. The encouraging sign is the determination to tackle these issues vigorously. Each principal appears to deal with the problems in his own way. There is not the stifling hand of some department but rather the pragmatic testing of dozens of favoured solutions.

Parents here whose children have problems and who suffer endless financial, organizational and social hardships in trying to deal with these problems would be envious to see what a welfare-orientated country could do for them. Within many local schools are classes for every kind of disabled child — physically handicapped, retarded, disturbed, or just foreign and needing extra help with language. All these special classes are small. Not only do parents benefit by having their children cared for in their own neighbourhood environment (and taken to school each day in the school bus like all the other children:) but the children are not forced to live apart in eerie institutions: instead they are encouraged to join the ordinary part of the school for as many classes as possible.

At the Ben Franklin High School in Harlem one got some insight into the dimensions of the problems the children face. A few years ago the school was so drug- and violence-ridden that no one wanted to be principal. Melvin Taylor, a black, did so. At first he applied very tough measures including calling in the police. That problem is past but the children have all the handicaps of poverty, illiteracy and violence in their home environments. They feel this bitterly and teaching is difficult when so many pupils are either aggressive or apathetic. A day in that school was however encouraging. These children were not part of some separate school system neatly tucked away. The teachers (many of them white) identified with the children and encouraged them to express their anger and to demand and expect more of life. We saw human material in these schools which will, in time, transform those communities. These children are greatly helped to

“get out of it” by the original and imaginative action of New York City College, which has abolished its entrance examinations and adjusted its standards in first years to accommodate students who have gaps in their education. During these first varsity years, special programmes and classes help the children fill in these gaps. This was for us an exciting example of society accommodating itself to absorb people who hitherto seemed to be hopelessly stuck on its fringes.

When one speaks of welfare to whites in South Africa, they recoil in horror, feeling one is threatening them. They fail to see how vastly they themselves would benefit by living under a more caring and helpful type of government. Americans are anxious to come to terms with basic issues; why does a man get to prison, how does one make the patient in the public hospitals feel not like a number in a file. On occasion it may seem too self-examining, but this is more at the theoretical than the practical level. In the schools, hospitals and prisons themselves we felt the strength of openness and self-criticism.

Perhaps one incident above all stands out. We were in the Hirschon Gallery in Washington looking at a sculpture. We were suddenly aware of someone behind us and turned to see a black caretaker. “Could you do it?” As we hesitated in our reply he went on, “You know the terrific thing about this place; it makes you want to try.”

That is the strength of American society. It makes you want to try on every level. When people try they can be especially trying to those in authority. There is always turbulence and dissent in such a society and a lot of noise and talking. Alastair Cooke's steam valve is a noisy one; but then when, like us, you close it you must get ready for an explosion.

American society encourages the very people our society fears: the concerned, the activist. We respond by detentions designed to preserve the structure of society and the power of those who control it to introduce changes if and when and how they please. It is this bossy attitude, and not too much welfare, that makes communities feckless — that causes their most imaginative people to be wasted.

A few years ago when there was violence in American cities white South Africa responded with smug pride in its law and order. That smugness was shattered in 1976. As we consider the future we should think of America and what it has to teach us. The encouragement of the full participation of the people within the system is the vitality of America. The dispersal of power between states, legislature, executive and courts is some assurance that persecution of minorities can be avoided. As a white minority about to lose its power, we should actively strive for that kind of society. □

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