

NEW CARS AND NEW POLITICS

An examination of the mood and aspirations of
the American people in facing up to — and evading —
the political problems of our time

by JAMES C. DAVIES

PUBLIC OPINION—the sentiments and views of ordinary citizens on politics—has always been a significant factor in making public policy, even in old monarchies and modern dictatorships. But with the increase in political participation among all segments of society, the range of free action of public officials in a democracy has become somewhat narrower than in the days before universal suffrage, mass-circulation newspapers, radio and television.

In the past few years public opinion has created certain new limits. I'd like to discuss these limits in the light of public problems which, by and large, have been created by forces beyond the control of people and politicians in this country. In discussing this, I am concerned not with what Americans think about Eden, Nasser, or Nehru, but rather with the mood and aspirations of our people in facing up to and evading the political problems of our time. For it is the mood or basic attitude—the deep-seated tendency to react in particular ways to external events—which has so much to do with the kind of officials we elect and the kind of policy they can carry out.

Let me begin an appraisal of American opinion with a comment on some Caltech opinion I have been gathering among undergraduates since the fall of 1953. I ask each person at the beginning of a course to fill out a questionnaire which contains a series of personal questions, including one as to what he wants of life in terms of occupation, income, and other things. The most characteristic response expresses the desire to have a congenial and secure job, a good income, and a well-adjusted married life, with a house more or less full of kids.

The accent is on serenity, lack of trouble, and lack of outward direction. Even in another question, asking what the person is most worried or concerned about, the response is rarely related to distant horizons; it reveals

concern about the draft or being individually atomized, rather than concern about national defense, war, or peace. The goals, the worries, the concerns tend to be private and personal.

My explanation for this privatization of worries and aspirations among the undergraduates I have known necessarily relates to American society in general. For no university is an island unto itself: it is at most peninsular in its relation to the larger community; it is washed by the same currents, basks in the same sunshine, and lives through the same stormy weather as the mainland.

In saying, then, that Caltech undergraduates are in a mood for private concerns, I am saying that this is the mood of the general public, whose mood is so closely related to the character of public policy. One aspect of the mood is good will—in the abstract towards mankind; in the semi-abstract towards strangers one sees on the streets and highways, and in TV audiences; and lastly in close relationships with one's associates at work and play.

It is the temper of people to be pleasant to each other in a way that indicates an acceptance among the general public of the value of good human relations. The man who repairs the car, the drugstore clerk, the official who handles income tax problems, all are somewhat educated to the notion of being inoffensive and gay, presenting to the customer or applicant a visage that is bright and free of troubled preoccupation, repressed anger, or frustration. And the customer himself is unusually pleasant. We all expect others, and ourselves, to present in public the mildly ecstatic happiness of life in the movies or on the TV quiz show.

Coupled with this is the sense that one must, in all things, be moderate and non-controversial. The content of current motion pictures is an extreme example. Anything that might conceivably offend any group is hard to find: Catholics, Protestants, Jews, businessmen, members of the armed forces—everyone but the clearly identifiable villains, such as individual bank

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robbers, sports promoters, paranoid race-baiters, psychotic Naval officers, and mad scientists—must be presented as having nothing but whimsical faults. The implication is that there can be nothing to attack in any categorical way, that there is nothing wrong with society or any social group. It is not groups of people who are at fault, but only the inexplicably deviant individual. And when the reasons for an individual's deviation are analyzed, they are apt to revolve around the oversimple notion that, either because of inheritance, or a conveniently traumatic childhood, even the villain is not really responsible for his own socially inappropriate behavior.

In public affairs, the manifestation of this temper of our times is again moderation and avoidance of anything that might rock the boat as it sails serenely over the choppy seas of prosperity and peace. On the domestic scene, the intense and sustained controversy over economic and social policy during the New Deal period has been replaced by no more than serious concern over interest rates, expansion of social security, and equitable income for farmers. The McCarthy controversy, as the apogee of the postwar skyrocketing of frustration over the inability to wipe communism from the face of the earth, probably did not end with much increased understanding of the real and external threat of Soviet imperialism and the utopian appeal of Marxist doctrine to unindustrialized Asia and Africa. It ended more in the belief that we must be increasingly on our guard to avoid encouraging controversial trouble-makers who are violently pro- or anti-communist. Again, as is true of the movie makers, we avoid either individual or collective self-criticism and self-appraisal.

Private excitements

Being unable to really do without the excitement of variety and change, we look away from politics toward our personal lives for these things. And here we are furnished with many delightful new means of diverting ourselves. For 1957 we have the daring new "inner" automobile with its sculptured look. You can get there faster, more comfortably, and perhaps even more safely than ever before. What's more, if you get a new car, your discriminating taste will mark you off among strangers and neighbors as being a leader, a distinct and tolerably different person—distinct because you have a new and different car, reflecting your belief in moderate progress; tolerably different because your discrimination reflects acceptance of the basic belief that progress in America is measured in terms of improved and more abundant products of the technologically most advanced nation on earth.

At this point you very likely have made an inference either that there is something inherently pernicious about this current American mood, or at least that *I* regard these tendencies as pernicious. Nothing could be further from the truth, and nothing closer to the half-truth.

If our movies and our own actions reflect a disbelief in the merit of promoting controversy between Protestant and Catholic, military officer and enlisted man, or between scientist and non-scientist, I must say I share this disbelief. If the smile of the TV master of ceremonies is sometimes not heartfelt, and the happy tax clerk is internally seething at the cupidity and stupidity of a querulous taxpayer, I would scarcely advocate that the emcee snarl and the tax clerk bite. If the often handsome and always more powerful 1957 cars are harder to fit into the garage, this does not imply that we should get back to the true merits of the Model T, when men were men and could apply a strong right arm to the hand crank. Nor would I advocate in politics that we return to the bitterness engendered by the almost irreconcilable inter-group conflict during the New Deal, or to the suspicion, hatred and hysteria engendered by McCarthyism. Unless a person likes conflict, immoderation, and difference for their own sakes, he must acknowledge that these times are in most ways happier than any we have had since 1929—a full quarter-century ago.

Relaxed societies

In fact, the mood of moderation and turning away from public to private concerns can be largely explained by the intense and inescapable involvement in a wide range of long-needed domestic reforms, and in a devastating war which could have been avoided by our country only at the risk of losing all sense of public morality—and perhaps of losing the material benefits of our advanced economy as well. Human beings, collectively or individually, cannot stand unrelieved periods of great tension and effort. Broad national societies must relax just as individuals have to.

The difficulty is that, while we have been enjoying an ever higher standard of living—with longer, lower new cars that have that sculptured, supersonic look—other societies have been confronting us with new politics which we, as Americans, have had far less part in creating than we did with the growth of Nazism in Germany.

If our carefree isolationism of the 1920's was in part responsible for the tragic set of events that ended in the chaos of war, it is not so easy to demonstrate that our recently more mature and responsible participation in international affairs is responsible for the growth of nationalism and the demand for the benefits of industry and technology which have become so strong in the Orient. It was not America that exploited Egypt, northern or southern Africa, India, the East Indies, or China. We have been relatively humane in our brief imperialistic period, and can point with true pride to our course of action in giving independence to the Philippines and Puerto Rico.

Relatively free as we are from moral responsibility for the exploitation of underdeveloped societies in the Near and Far East, the inescapable fact is that the

Orient, in all its parts, is at last no longer a Gulliver, tied down while asleep by Lilliputian armies and civil servants and entrepreneurs from the West. The metaphor is more apt than one might think, from the majestic and powerful standpoint of Western civilization. The world's population is now over 2.6 billion, out of which almost two-thirds (1.7 billion) live in either Asia or Africa.

Poor neighbors

At present, the peoples of Asia and Africa are like the poor and prolific neighbors down the street who thus far have done little more than demand of other neighbors of ours that they stop picking fruit off Asian or African trees, stop freely digging wells in the backyard, and stop acting as though they had a perpetual right to collect fees from every traveler who takes a short-cut across the lot. But many of these poor and prolific neighbors have proud family histories which, they are now reminded, contain glorious chapters of ancient and established culture—including military and imperialistic greatness that made even the Western world tremble in terror before the brave armies of Genghis Khan.

They are also constantly reminded of the more recent history of their exploitation by the West. The Chinese recall that in 1842, at the end of the Opium War, they had to give Hong Kong to Britain, pay an indemnity for opium the Chinese had destroyed, and later to legalize the importation of opium so that Chinese could lapse into further doped slumber, to the profit of supposedly Christian and unmistakably Western traders. Chinese also recall the Boxer Rebellion which left their country even more prostrate before Western exploitation at the turn of the century, and humbled them with periodic reminders in the form of indemnity payments, programmed for a third of a billion dollars, to pay for Western property destroyed, not in the West but in China.

Indians are reminded that England started to colonize their subcontinent about the same time that America was being settled, at the beginning of the 17th century, and that India completely lost its independence just when America was gaining its own, at the end of the 18th.

Those Asiatic and African nations that have thrown off the imperial yoke see themselves in a position much like that of the United States of 175 years ago. The comparison for them is both more idealistic and realistic than we might imagine. During the 1948 Indonesian revolution, which ended in its independence from the Netherlands, a streetcar in Djakarta carried the inscription, "All people are created equal." And in his 1956 visit to the United States, President Soekarno made a pilgrimage to Monticello to see the

home of Thomas Jefferson, the author of the inscription on the Djakarta streetcar.

My main concern here is not the current mood and opinions of people in Asia and Africa but those of people in America. Mention of the renaissance in the Near and Far East is relevant though, because only at great risk can we escape active involvement in events occurring outside Western civilization. The irony of Marxist dogma describing the increased exploitation of the working masses by capitalists is that it has taken firmest hold in countries that have experienced mostly non-industrial exploitation. What this reflects is that Africa and the Orient are looking abroad for help in extracting themselves from the poverty and inertia of ancient feudalism and modern colonialism. They are looking with enthusiasm toward the dogmatically simple and seemingly humane Soviet and Chinese proposals, and Soviet and Chinese Communist leaders are eyeing the uncommitted Orient and Africa with even greater enthusiasm.

Party leaders

So we are confronted with a vast, almost world-wide two-party system in which we are leaders of the party which refuses to lead. The two-party competition is not the black-and-white one of communism against anti-communism; it involves the difference between a system which believes in making changes with the active political consent and participation of the people, and one which makes changes without such consent.

It should be apparent that I see the major problem of new politics as being the relation between us and the underdeveloped nations with their dark-skinned peoples. The reason I regard this as more portentous than the problem of atomic warfare is that I do not believe that the leaders of any country will venture upon an atomic war which can end only in destruction of both combatants. Even Hitler, who seems to have been a psychopath by any standards, did not initiate the use of lethal gas, which he recognized as being so mutually deadly a prospect. I cannot see either the Russians or ourselves getting so desperate as to resort to nuclear weapons to decide a conflict which they and we know would produce victory or survival for no one. Wars of considerable intensity may very well occur, but at present it seems most unlikely that they will be wars fought in large theaters, and involving an utter commitment of the full armed potential of any great nation.

If this appraisal makes sense, it means then that the conflict will be more political than military. It means a struggle over the means by which the underdeveloped nations will achieve the industrialization, the decent standard of living, and the self-respect which

CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

they are determined to get by whatever means.

If the goal is reached by governments which become increasingly democratic—responsible and responsive to the basic policy choices of the ordinary citizen—the prospects for international peace, friendship, and stability are very great. This is so, it seems to me, because no general public in any nation has given prior approval to the launching of a large aggressive war by its leaders in government.

If, on the other hand, the goal is reached by irresponsible, undemocratic governments, the prospects of peace, friendship, and stability are remote. This does not mean that the ensuing wars would be atomic, but that they nonetheless could involve substantial commitment of armed forces by all participants in Korea-like theaters.

Even in the absence of widespread war, the prospect is not bright if we remain aloof in the two-party political struggle. We have become increasingly dependent on overseas sources for the maintenance of the industrial productivity and high living standard which are too exclusively the mark of American accomplishment. If the underdeveloped countries achieve economic well-being, can we really expect them *not* to establish quotas and outright embargoes on raw ma-

terials which will become as necessary to their economic goals as they are to our own? This does not seem likely, when the needs of two-thirds of the world's population become really competitive with our own, and when these peoples a generation hence have no reason to be grateful for aid that was circumscribed by the conditions of the cold war. And mutual defense pacts with nations too poor to afford armies are not an international trade commodity that encourages economic give and take.

The fact is that our own domestic welfare—including the new inner automobiles with that sculptured, super-sonic look—is inescapably tied up with our relations with Asia and Africa over the next generation. I think it is true, as Lincoln would have said, that the world cannot long remain half-slave, half-free. I think it is also true that the world cannot long remain half-im-poverished, half-prosperous.

And all of this brings us back to the mood of the American public—of which you and I are members—and what this portends for the future. In international affairs we appear to be as preoccupied with gadgetry as we are at home. Just as we see the good life being implemented by better detergents and better cars, so

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38

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To supplement our trust in total weapons, we assure ourselves by comfortable-sounding slogans. If one says or hears: "We shall always adhere to the principles of the UN," or "We have no territorial ambitions," or "We shall never abandon our allies," or "America is the friend of the oppressed everywhere," or "Pray for peace" (which appears on postage stamp cancellations), he is prone to think foreign affairs are under adequate human and divine guidance—and forgets the disturbing slogan: "By their deeds ye shall know them."

The public mood of moderation in all things, and a generalized good will toward all men, shows dangerous signs of having become a vacuous complacency that is incapable of the dynamism and involvement necessary to insure that the world can become, or even remain, a place of peace and good will. We seem, in our escape from public to private concerns, to have lost a clear

understanding that ignoring the former endangers the latter. It is the ancient irony of having to dirty one's hands to get the dishes clean. We cannot enjoy a decent, private, non-political pursuit of happiness without involving ourselves in politics.

The truth of this is apparent, I suppose, to everyone who has had his personal life interfered with by a period of military service. It is harder to understand, but no less true, that concern with public affairs—particularly our relations with "dark" Asia or "darkest" Africa—is inexorably linked to our standard of living, our values of individual freedom and dignity, and to all that is wrapped in the parcel labelled the good life.

Comparisons inevitably come to mind of our present times with the insouciance of the isolationist 1920's. The comparison is limited by the clear fact that we are in general now committed to a position of responsibility in international affairs. The group in Congress that is like the LaFollettes and Borahs of the 1920's is now restricted not to being against international involvement, but to opposing more than minimal involvement in the UN, NATO, and foreign aid. But the fact that the 1950's are different from, and much more mature and responsible than the 1920's, does not mean that

CONTINUED ON PAGE 42

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Over 1,000 years ago in China, the Middle Kingdom and the T'ang Dynasty were regarded, with much reason, by intelligent Chinese as being the center of world civilization. As one recent writer put it:

"They were already old and tired and disillusioned, weary with the weariness of those who had experienced all, mellowed with the sadness of those who knew the vanity of all things earthly, those for whom all questions have been answered, who have found their state of poise in the scheme of things and know there can be no other, who still have longings but no aspirations."

The vitality, or at least self-admiration, of Chinese civilization was not quite played out. Some 800 years later King George III of England sent a trade mission to China, more in search of tea than sympathy. The mission returned to England with a sympathetic message from the Emperor. He complimented George III for

his "humble desire to partake of the benefits of our civilization," and ended with: "It behooves you, O King, to display even greater devotion and loyalty in the future, so that by perpetual submission to our Throne you may secure peace and prosperity. Tremblingly obey and show no negligence." How different from the Emperor's message to England is our current attitude toward the Near and Far East?

I am ill-disposed to assume that death, as it must to all men, must come to Western and American civilization. The undiminished vitality of the Roman Catholic Church, which has but a few centuries to go in its second thousand years, suggests that those institutions and values in Western culture that we prize so highly need not be submerged in a sea of squalid Orwellian despotism imposed by either our own government or by rulers of the dynamic Far East. But in a society where government is responsible to the general public, the responsibility for thinking anew and planning anew is ours, and we are escaping from that responsibility into the poor and brittle shelter of our prosperous private lives. And in doing so, we have established limits to our foreign policy which are dangerously narrow for the slowly mounting crises coming our way from various lands of the rising sun.

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