

Reflections on Reality in America*

By Robert N. Bellah

I write these lines shortly after the resignation of Richard M. Nixon. While I am heartened that the rule of law is being affirmed I am not inclined to alter the basic analysis that I gave in November 1973 when the following piece was written. My mood is less grim today for both personal and political reasons but the basic problems of American society seem to me as serious now as then.

One of the reasons for my concern, as will be evident, is my dissatisfaction with both the liberal and the radical political alternatives to the present course of American history. Many times before, religion has played a positive role in American history and continues to play such a role at present. It is in this religious initiative for radical social change that I place the greatest hope. "Radical religion" is not just a term referring to the religious contingent of a general political movement. I believe that "radical religion" is the most genuine form of radicalism in human history and that it has an independent though certainly not exclusive role to play in the solution of our present problems. Indeed I feel that whether there is a solution at all depends in considerable part on whether there is any viable "radical religion" in America in the months and years ahead.

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Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. -- Wallace Stevens

It is winter in America, or so it seems.

This is the year we learned that the power of the presidency, in a complicated series of conspiracies for which the name "Watergate" is an inadequate summary, had come to threaten the existence of the republic as we have known it.

This is the year of the second battle of Wounded Knee.

This is the year we were told there was peace in Vietnam but the fighting has never stopped.

This is the year Salvador Allende committed suicide or was murdered and Chilean democracy crushed.

This was the year when for the first time in American history a Vice President resigned rather than face indictment, an indictment that would have involved over forty counts of bribery, extortion and conspiracy.

This is the year when, for the second time in American history, impeachment proceedings are being considered against an incumbent president.

This is the year in which Larry Casuse was killed in Gallup, New Mexico.

Some of you know that this is the first time I have spoken publicly since the death of my daughter in April of this year. Though a very personal tragedy, her suffering differed only in degree from that of many young people in America.

Today I want to talk about the religious meaning of America's present reality. I speak not only as a sociologist and a student of religion. I speak also as a father and as a citizen. I speak out of personal pain and common pain.

Our nation has been from the beginning a spiritual community. It has been based on shared beliefs and shared values and it has acknowledged a power that transcends it. At the beginning we were the new Jerusalem, in contrast to the Babylon that was Europe. Now it is America that is called Babylon. What we are today stands in dubious relation to the beliefs and values of our founders, and everything, including the beliefs and values of the founders, has been called radically into question.

Speaking then not as a disinterested observer but from within the national community I would like to use my disciplined knowledge for critical reflection about our present situation. It is the task of the social theorist to clarify if he can the common understanding, to reduce if possi-

ble the common confusion, not for the sake of knowledge alone but for the sake of right action, religious, moral and political.

I know that there is the risk of onesidedness in speaking out of my present somber mood. But perhaps there may also be some gain, some wisdom wrung from the grip of despair.

At any rate it seems to me that it is winter in America. We had a glorious revolutionary spring, a rich and fruitful mid-19th century summer and, after the Civil War, a long dusty autumn when the summer fruits began to moulder, rot and smell. Sometime after the Second World War our winter began, an imperial winter of great wealth and power but frozen, congealed. As always in our history, the record is complex and there have been notable achievements such as the dismantling of a centuries old system of racial segregation and significant aid for poor nations all over the world. But the hardening control of what Dwight Eisenhower called the military-industrial complex strengthened by an endless war in Southeast Asia and a public unwillingness to complete the process of inclusion of the poor and the minorities in our national community has deepened the climate of winter. Even those who hoped, as is natural in America, that there could be another spring, a return of April's green, a rebirth of love and freedom, have become disillusioned and sometimes embittered, contributing with their dogmatism and their violence to the icy atmosphere.

It is winter in America and if we are to understand our present reality we must abandon our congenital American optimism and in Wallace Stevens' words "have a mind of winter." Today we must learn how to become a listener, one who, with Stevens,

... listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and
and the nothing that is.¹

"Nothing that is not there" means to see what is, not what one hopes there is nor what one always thought there ought to be. The hardest thing to see plainly and coldly is that the free society that we have known in America for two centuries and more may be coming to an end. It is an old story with republics: free institutions do not long endure. Two hundred years is a long time as republics go, and if we study the history of Athens, Rome, Florence or the modern republics we will find little comfort for the notion that ours is so unique that it can last forever. As in the case with previous republics in decline, long years of foreign war and domestic turmoil have accustomed us to arbitrary power and its justifications. Republics have often ended with Caesars, Napoleons, Hitlers, but they can also end with faceless, unflamboyant men. A generation ago Robinson Jeffers predicted our future in his poem "Ave Caesar."

No bitterness: our ancestors
 did it.
 They were only ignorant and hopeful,
 they wanted freedom but
 wealth too.
 Their children will learn to
 hope for a caesar.
 Or rather--for we are not aquiline
 Romans but soft mixed colonists--
 Some kindly Sicilian tyrant who
 will keep
 Poverty and Carthage off until
 the Romans arrive.
 We are easy to manage, a gregarious
 people,
 Full of sentiment, clever at
 mechanics, and we love our
 luxuries.²

Not a kindly Sicilian tyrant but a lonely, mistrustful Quaker from Southern California with an exaggerated doctrine of national security and executive privilege has taken us to the verge of purely personal rule, outside the rule of law. And it is not so much that he has succeeded as that

he has displayed how easy is the mark to the successor who is just a little more clever, just a little more careful in his choice of agents.

Republics are seldom overthrown by foreign armies. Even more rarely are they overthrown by internal subversives. Republics are most apt to fall when their citizens no longer believe in free institutions and put other values, comfort and profit, above civic virtue, which Montesquieu argued was the principle of republics, just as fear is the principle of despotism.³ When the spiritual substance of a republic is depleted, when the civil religion, that Rousseau held to be the basis of his ideal republic and that Machiavelli argued in his Discourses was basic to the Roman Republic, no longer command respect, then the caesars, great or small, arrive on the scene. Nor are they strangers: they exhibit fully the post-republican values which have already become dominant in a corrupt republic.

The threat, then, to us as citizens of a republic, comes fully from no one but ourselves. It is pointless for us to hate President Nixon. For an American to look at Richard Nixon is to look in the mirror. He is what he is not because he is different from us but because he is like us. If our republic is corrupt, and I believe it is profoundly, it is not because it's politics or its politicians are corrupt, it is because all its institutions -- governmental, military, economic, educational, familial, and even ecclesiastical -- are corrupt and its citizens no longer believe in its fundamental principle.

In this winter season of our national history there are two temptations open to even the most sensitive of observers that I think ought to be avoided. One is to interpret our present plight exclusively in terms of a great falling away from the high ideals of our founders. The other is to interpret it exclusively in terms of some fundamental defect in those very ideals. Our present predicament is more complex than either of these alternatives, for it is compounded in deeply

contradictory ways of both the betrayal and the fulfillment of the fundamental commitments of our origin. The present task of what Martin Marty has called "public theology,"⁴ that is, the critical reflection on the religious meaning of our national experience, is both to judge the national community in terms of its own deepest values, of the civil religion that I have argued has been a part of our history since the beginning, and to judge the adequacy of that civil religion itself, in terms of universal transcendence and the common experience of mankind, including much that up till now Americans have excluded.

As a starting point and benchmark for the judgment of our present against our past, I would like to take an example that is both fundamental in itself and highly appropriate in the context of this church, namely the great shipboard sermon of John Winthrop, the first leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony Congregationalists, preached just before the Boston landing. Winthrop, in describing the basic problem of the new society, places before the colonists two alternatives: obedience to God and disobedience to God and warns that the enterprise will prosper or fail depending on which alternative is chosen. The way he defines obedience and disobedience has remained fundamentally descriptive of the American situation ever since. Obedience to God he sees in terms of a communal ethic in a covenantal society:

... wee must be knitt together in this
work as one man, wee must entertaine
each other in brotherly Affeccion,
wee must be willing to abridge our-
selves of our superfluties, for the
supply of others necessities, wee
must uphold a familiar Commerce to-
gether in all meeknes, gentlenes,
patience and liberality, we must
delight in each, make others
Condicions our owne, rejoyce together,
allways haveing before our eyes
our Commission and Community in the
worke, our Community as members of

the same body, soe shall wee keepe
 the unitie of the spirit in the
 bond of peace....

And disobedience is seen as an opposition to these communal ideals:

But if our heartes shall turne
 away soe that wee will not obey,
 but shall be seduced and worship
 ... Other Gods, our pleasures,
 and proffitts, and serve them; it
 is propounded unto us this day, wee
 shall surely perishe out of the good
 Land whither wee passe over this
 vast Sea to possess it....⁵

The colonists decided to come to America in the first place to escape the corrupt society of Europe and to found just such a society based on brotherly affection in which men would abridge themselves of their superfluities to supply others necessities, make others conditions their own and be members of the same body. But they brought with them on the very first boat that unprincipled cupidity that Winthrop saw as idolatrous worship of private pleasure and profit and which he believed would lead to the utter shipwreck of the whole venture. Every subsequent generation in America has had its version of that conflict, not least our own. It is a conflict not simply of individual motives but of principles of social organization. Time and again when Americans thought they were building the New Jerusalem, a society in which each individual would fulfill himself through the love and support of all, they found themselves instead in a society that used public power to support private profit through the domination and exploitation of the powerless.

In the Great Awakening of the 1740s Jonathan Edwards called for the mass regeneration of Christian citizens who would give evidence of their newness of heart not merely through negative abstention from private vice but through the loving construction of a genuine community.

He looked forward to the second coming of Christ in the North American continent. The Revolution of the 1770s, for which the Great Awakening prepared, generated intense religious expectation of a new community in which the New Testament promises of freedom would be fulfilled, overcoming the merely negative constraints of the law and hierarchy.⁶ Even relatively sober and sceptical leaders saw the possibility of a republic based on the civic virtue of frugal farmers dedicated to their independence and the common good. Of course that confusion of wealth and freedom noted by Robinson Jeffers, that intermixing of the two principles that Winthrop wanted to separate, was already evident in the revolutionary period. Indeed faction and dissension and the undermining of the common cause for private advantage were widely evident in the third or fourth year of the war. The constitution that followed the war was a realistic compromise between practical interests and republican ideals. Already the utilitarian notion that the way to obtain the public good is to cultivate private selfishness was current in America, but it would not become dominant until late in the following century.

The Second Great Awakening of the first half of the 19th century mobilized support for an idealistic version of the national community as the first had for its creation, and led into the movement for the abolition of slavery, the greatest blot on that conception of the nation. While the revivals were attempting to alter the motivation of individuals so as to contribute to a more perfect community many in the early 19th century were experimenting with utopian societies which would give visible evidence of that more brotherly community that the nation had not yet become. The great writers of the mid-19th century, taking the role that Winthrop and Edwards played earlier -- Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman -- held up a critical mirror to existing society and showed an alternative ideal of community that was yet to be fulfilled.⁷

The Civil War saw a great outburst of millennial fervor comparable to the Revolution a century before. The Civil War was to complete what the Revolution and the great Fourteenth Amendment with its command for "equal protection of the law" was to fulfill what the Constitution in its original form had left unfinished. Indeed the equal protection of the laws interpreted to mean the fulfillment of the natural rights of every citizen is as close to the establishment of the brotherly community as a legal document could come. But the very triumph of idealism was accompanied so swiftly by its utter betrayal that the Civil War remains to this day the great turning point in American history. The triumph of American idealism turned out to be at the same time the triumph of an economic system, industrial capitalism, that was deeply subversive of that very idealism and deeply inimical to the establishment of the brotherly community. Melville, some ten years after, said the war was a black day in the New World's history and called it a "True Bridge of Sighs," "Sad arch between contrasted eras."⁸

Since the Civil War American idealism in the sense of the hope for and the struggle for a genuine community on this continent has been on the defensive in a way it had not been before, and the forces of socially organized cupidity have grown ever stronger. In the late 19th century and the early 20th another great campaign, religious and political, was waged in the effort to realize once again what had so often proved illusory. A complex of interrelated movements -- populism, the social gospel, and the Socialist Party -- attempted to bring industrial capitalism under some kind of popular control. The rhetoric, as in the case of Bryan and Debs, was often biblical and millennial. In addition Debs molded the language of abolitionists to his own ends by arguing that the abolition of chattel slavery needed to be completed by the abolition of wage slavery, for only then could the natural rights of every citizen be guaranteed. By the First World War some regulation of the most rampant abuses of capitalism had been legislated but nothing like the

Fourteenth Amendment had been achieved to give this movement even an illusory sense of victory. The New Deal, though it played superficially with the rhetoric of the great tradition of community in America in its contrast of human rights versus property rights, did not represent so much a new vision of community in America as a contrasting model of how a very uncommunitarian society was to be run. Alongside the vast private bureaucracies that the business corporations had become, the New Deal erected a vast government bureaucracy whose function was to ameliorate and soften the impact of economic power on the average citizen, but it did not propose a genuinely alternative pattern of social organization. Nor did it prevent the corporations from enormously developing and perfecting that orchestration of private greed through their domination of the mass media in advertising and the content of mass entertainment, which became the effective support and energy for an unbrotherly and exploitative society.

Only in the religious and political activism of the late 1950s and its continuations and successors such as the Peace Movement and cultural revolution of the 1960s have fundamental alternatives to the entrenched pattern of American social organization once again been raised. So tenuous had the genuine tradition of American idealism become by then and so powerful the forces of idolatry against which Winthrop warned that many in the recent Movement failed to see their own link with their predecessors and turned against the entire tradition of America, which they symbolically spelled with a K. Beneath the surface, however, they were more deeply in the grip of the opponent they fought than any American opposition movement had ever been before, for their ideals were often profoundly unbrotherly, based solely on a rhetoric of interest and calculation and involving ultimately no more than an inversion of the cupidity of the dominant society. But perhaps it is unfair so to characterize a movement that never quite came togeth-

er as a whole and that in some of its fragments continued consciously or not the most authentically biblical tradition of American community.

At any rate that most recent effort to make America fulfill the promise which is its justification came to its final end with the November elections of 1972 and in the year that has followed we have become aware of the devastation to be seen in the wake of its failure. It would be hard to imagine a society farther from Winthrop's ideal, for we are not knit together as one man, we do not rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, and we do not keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. We do not train our children in brotherliness but competition. We do not expect them to make others conditions their own but to better their own conditions at the expense of others. We live in a society that publicly idolizes relentless greed and endless material accumulation in a way no previous society has ever done and then are shocked at the social disorganization, emotional bitterness and ever rising street crime on the part of those most effectively excluded from the race for riches. To point out the causes of the urban breakdown which has turned parts of all our great cities into free-fire zones is not permissiveness. A cruel and brutal act is wrong quite independently of the social condition of the person committing it and social deprivation is no excuse for inhuman violence. But to stop at the moral condemnation of the criminal and not to condemn the immoral society that has helped to create him, to stop at the moral corruption of the poor and not to condemn the far more harmful corruption of the rich and the powerful is to misunderstand the seriousness of our present condition. We have never realized perfectly the ideal of community that motivated the earliest colonialists, but some approximation to it was the basis for the development of our free institutions. Unrestrained greed and open competition for material accumulation may be good for economic growth and technological advance but they are quite incompatible with the principle of a republic which, as Mon-

tesquieu saw, is civic virtue based on personal frugality and devotion to the common good. In other words the systematic institutionalization of unbrotherliness, such as we have seen it especially since the Civil War, is a corruption of the values on which American society is based, so serious that it must prove ultimately subversive of our republican institutions. Fear and secrecy, the principles of despotism, have gone far to replace civic virtue as the motive of our public life. Under such circumstances Jeffers is right and the caesars are not far behind.

So far we have weighed present-day American society in the balance of its fundamental values and found it woefully wanting. It is time to critically inspect those values themselves, to see whether they can still bear the weight of our hope and whatever action may yet be possible to implement them. It seems to me that the ideal of community expressed in the classic words of John Winthrop and reiterated in more secular form by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence and by the framers of the Constitution and later the Fourteenth Amendment, is still valid, but the way it was held even by Winthrop and his noblest successors leaves much to be desired and must be subjected to relentless criticism. Indeed the way in which the fundamental vision was often interpreted has contributed significantly to our present predicament. There have been two pervasive difficulties with the way in which the ideal of community has been expressed. One has to do with the definition of the community -- who would be included and who excluded. The other has to do with the distinction between the ideal community and the actual community and the continual optimistic tendency to confuse the latter with the former.

There is no need to say much about the inclusion/exclusion issue today since so much has been said about it of late. Winthrop's conception of community did not include the Indians who were to be displaced if not exterminated by the new settlers planting their garden in the wilderness. Even if, as was fitfully the case, there were efforts to extend the notion of community to the

Indians, they could be included only by essentially renouncing their own culture and religion and accepting that of the dominant society. Jefferson's "All men are created equal" meant effectually all white Americans, for neither Indians nor blacks were meaningfully included in the newly independent republic. Even though the definition of inclusion was continually broadened in the course of the abolitionist movement, the social movements of the turn of the 20th century and the political and cultural movements of the 1960s, the problem of creating a genuinely multi-cultural community in America has never been solved and the rhetoric of community has often had a latent exclusiveness, not least in the recent use of the word "people" to mean some people and not others, that belies its own deepest intent.

Tensions about inclusion and exclusion in America have become lethal when they have combined with confusion over the difference between the ideal and the actual community. When this imperfect society is identified with the actualization of its own highest aspirations then a messianic self-confidence can result which justifies any measure of domination against those within or without the society who are not included in its essential membership. Both racism and imperialism and their combination find their justification in this pervasive interpretation of the underlying American vision. If God has chosen America and America has actualized God's will on earth then anything that America does at home or abroad is justified. The greatest Americans have always cautioned us against idolatry. Lincoln warned that we are an almost chosen people and that as a nation we will submit to the heavy hand of divine judgment for our failures to actualize God's will on earth. Writers such as Melville and Whitman, who in their early writings extolled the innocent vision of America's claims, later, and at almost the same time *Clarel* and *Democratic Vistas*, held up American pretensions to withering inspection. Some have argued that a deepening maturity on this issue is a product of our historical experience and that at some point

America has lost its innocence or come of age. But chronology is far from the whole story. Winthrop, Mathers and Edwards had deeply realistic conceptions of how far short their society fell from their ideal expectations. On the other hand, our present president sees American society as innocent (in his first inaugural he said, "I know America. I know the heart of America is good.") and indeed as almost perfect (in his second inaugural he said, "America's record in this century has been unparalleled in the world's history for its responsibility, for its generosity, for its creativity and for its progress," without any counterbalancing note of criticism.) Many who have seen the perversions to which the American vision has been submitted -- an exclusivism that its own inner universalism does not warrant, a confusion of the ideal with an actual society which has betrayed it -- have decided to reject that vision out of hand as a botch and a failure and a vicious one at that. They have opted instead for some purely individual spirituality, some religious or political sectarianism or some dogma or class conflict that has never explained American society nor provided an effective strategy for changing it. What I would like to do instead, without giving up that vision of brotherliness, is to look at the abyss that underlies it. So far we have been trying to see America as it is -- "nothing that is not there" in Stevens' words. Now it is time to look at "the nothing that is."

Defeat is not a common experience in America, or perhaps I should say, it not a majority experience, and there have been many ways to mitigate its consequences. When the going got tough Roger Williams could go to Rhode Island and Jonathan Edwards could go to Stockbridge. The history of the Mormons is one of the most instructive in this regard.⁹ The Church of the Latter Day Saints was the largest and most successful of all the 19th century communitarian experiments and its history is almost a paradigm of that of the nation. Harassed in Ohio the early Mormons under Joseph Smith moved to Missouri. Driven out of Missouri they built their thriv-

ing city of Nauvoo in Illinois. With Nauvoo burned and the prophet murdered they set out in the dead of winter under the leadership of Brigham Young to cross the prairies and the mountains and found a new Zion in Utah. There they established an independent and self-maintaining agricultural society only very loosely under American governmental control. In the 1880s they were finally defeated in Utah too and lost their economic marginality to carve a secure place in the larger society. Today they have almost obliterated from their memory the experience of one of the most crushing series of persecutions and defeats any community has ever suffered at the hands of the American government.

Others have not been so fortunate and have had to give defeat a more unflinching look. The South of the Civil War was the only part of our nation ever to experience directly the devastation of modern warfare in what was one of the largest and most destructive of 19th century wars. While an indelible consciousness of defeat has lingered in the South it was softened by two contrasting strategies: one was the sentimentalization and glorification of the "lost cause"; the other was the identification with the aggressor which has made southerners among the most nationalistic and militaristic supporters of American imperialism. In the work of William Faulkner, perhaps the only 20th century novelist worthy of standing beside Hawthorne and Melville, however the southern sense of defeat has been deepened into a genuine apprehension of tragedy, not so much by dwelling on the actual military defeat as by an unsparing delineation of the triumph of rapacious commercial values that followed it. Faulkner's description of the rape of the land, the destruction of a stubborn and hard-pressed peasantry and the corruption of the southern middle and upper classes by those values transcends its particularly southern context and applies to America generally.¹⁰

Without any question it is the racial minorities -- Indians, blacks, Mexican Americans and Asian Americans -- who have known defeat most deeply, most bitterly and most continuously in American history and it is only in the last ten years that we have begun to become aware, partially and ambiguously, of the spiritual meaning of those defeats. There is of course more than one way to respond to radical defeat. One consequence is sheer disintegration and its spiritual expression a wordless scream. Too much of American history is punctuated with such screams out of the darkness. Another way of handling defeat, as I have mentioned in connection with the South after the Civil War, is to identify with the aggressor and parody the worst aspects of the dominant system. It is not popular to mention this aspect of minority group response today, but I have been too close to the destructive consequences of false guilt in idealistic young white people to participate in the sentimentalization of the experience of the oppressed. Oppression often dehumanizes and there is nothing to be gained from hiding that fact. Even so there is a third response from which the society as a whole has much to learn. In the face of defeat one can attempt to build and maintain some kind of community that will not only aid in physical survival but be a model of human values in stark contrast to the oppressing society. It is natural that such efforts should fail more often than they succeed but even the defeats can be instructive. Many examples could be discussed but I would like to consider one from that group whose present existence is perhaps the most damning testimony against the course of American history: the American Indian.

An analysis of the second battle of Wounded Knee, with its effort to create community in the face of suspicion, its combination of idealism and despair, its testimony to the corruption of both oppressor and oppressed, and its tragic heroism in trying to actualize human values against impossible odds -- would be most instructive, a kind of microcosm of much American history,

but would take a paper or a book to do justice to. Instead I would like to take the simpler but no less stark example of the death of Larry Casuse that I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture.¹¹ On the morning of March 1st of this year Larry Casuse, a young Navajo student at the University of New Mexico, entered the office of Frankie Garcia, mayor of Gallup, and put a gun to the mayor's head. He marched the mayor to a nearby sporting goods store which was quickly surrounded by police. The mayor escaped by jumping through a window and Larry Casuse was shot to death. Exactly what this previously peaceful young Navajo had in mind was not clear. Perhaps he wanted to hold the mayor hostage to negotiate about Indian problems in Gallup. Perhaps he merely wanted to humiliate the mayor and show the often humiliated Indian population that officials are only human. Certainly if his intention had been murder he could have carried it out easily. Some observers saw his action as suicidal from the beginning.

Larry Casuse was born and grew up in Gallup and his effort to learn about the traditional Navajo way had only begun in adolescence. He had become fascinated with the Navajo ideal of harmony with nature and man and the contrast to that ideal that American society presented. He became president of the Kiva Club, the Indian Society at the University of New Mexico, and guided its interest both toward a recovery of traditional Indian thought and efforts to improve the conditions of Indians in American society. Larry and his friends were intrigued with the Navajo conception of "false people" so lacking in human feeling and so hypocritical that they can scarcely be considered human. Frankie Garcia, the mayor of Gallup, was a prime example of a such a false person, because while an owner of a tavern catering to Indians he was chairman of an alcoholism project. When Garcia was nominated as a regent of the University of New Mexico Larry Casuse went to Santa Fe to testify against the nomination. "The man is an owner of the Navajo Inn, where numerous alcoholics are born, yet he ironically is chairman of the alcohol-abuse re-

habilitation committee," he told the senators. "Does he not abuse alcohol? Does he not abuse it by selling it to intoxicated persons who often end up in jail or a morgue from overexposure?"¹² When Garcia's nomination as a regent was confirmed by the legislature in January Larry Casuse was very bitter. That may have helped bring on the March 1 confrontation. After his death a statement from the Kiva Club, addressed to "All Human Beings," said, "The real issue is not who-shot-whom, as the national media seem to imply, but rather why Larry Casuse so willingly sacrificed his life in order to communicate with the world his dream of unifying human beings with Mother Earth, the Universe, and Humanity."¹³ In our terms Larry Casuse died for a conception of community that he found sadly lacking in his social environment. That he made the classic American mistake of defining his community too exclusively, distinguishing too radically the subhuman "false people" from the "Human Beings," does not deprive his act of meaning but makes it more complex.

At this point in American history the defeat that up till now only minority groups have experienced faces the society as a whole. For one thing a nation that has never known anything but military victory has twice in recent years had to settle for a draw, the most recent one showing every prospect of turning into a rapid defeat, though a peripheral defeat, far away and not vital to us. Nonetheless what has happened in Vietnam marks the end of the brief period of world hegemony of the American Empire. We are still immensely powerful but we cannot dictate the outcome of history anywhere on the planet. Far more serious is the apparent inner collapse at home: our inability to deal with the problems of an economy whose expansion or contraction would alike spell disaster; our inability to deal with social problems when the middle class seems determined to cling tenaciously to its own accumulation whatever happens to the disadvantaged; and our inability to believe in ourselves anymore when our behavior contrasts so strikingly with

our inherited values. Our mounting defeats and failures may culminate in complete collapse -- we may indeed, as John Winthrop warned, perish out of this good land whither we passed over the vast sea to possess it -- or perhaps there is still the possibility that we may gain some wisdom by looking at the abyss, which after all has been there all the time, and that we in America have for so long steadfastly refused to see.

Of course not all Americans, even in the majority community, have refused to see. The Puritan fathers were quite aware of the darkness that is so important a part of human existence, and even in the 19th century when progressive optimism seemed to carry all before it there were those who saw the truth. The personal experience of our greatest artists revealed to them that to which their compatriots remained blind. Hawthorne, for example, in 1859, on the very verge of the Civil War, saw "that pit of blackness that lies beneath us, everywhere. The firmest substance of human happiness," he said, "is but a thin crust spread over it, with just reality enough to bear up the illusive stage scenery amid which we tread. It needs no earthquake to open the chasm. A footstep, a little heavier than ordinary, will serve; and we must step very daintily, not to break through the crust at any moment. By and by, we inevitably sink!"¹⁴ Melville in 1876 in describing happy domestic life, a mother and child, remarked, "Under such scenes abysses be -- /Dark quarries where few care to pry,"¹⁵ perhaps remembering that day not ten years before when his own eldest son, 18 years old, shot himself to death in his room at home. But deep as was the sense of personal tragedy in Hawthorne and Melville it was part of a larger vision of social tragedy. Both men worried deeply about the future of their society and in that same immense poem of 1876 that I have just quoted Melville expresses his concern about the coming "Dark Ages of Democracy" since the New World has come too suddenly "to share old age's pains -- /To feel the

arrest of hope's advance," and then mankind will hear the sad cry, "No New World to mankind remains!"¹⁶ Melville already foreshadows the transformation of New Jerusalem into Babylon.

Even Whitman, who generally lacked the tragic vision of Hawthorne and Melville, looked on America with a somber eye in *Democratic Vistas* written during the late 1870s. In examining America's imperial quest he said, "But behold the cost, and already specimens of the cost. Thought you greatness was to ripen for you like a pear?... For you too, as for all lands, the struggle, the traitor, the wily person in office, scrofulous wealth, the surfeit of prosperity, the demonism of greed, the hell of passion, the decay of faith, the long postponement, the fossil-like lethargy, the ceaseless need of revolutions...."¹⁷

For a long time we have been able to evade those warnings. We imagined that somehow in North America the imperatives of history and sociology do not apply, that we could go on from triumph to triumph, amassing ever more wealth and power, and there would never be any price to pay. We have but lately had a Vice President who told us to talk about what is right with America, not what is wrong with it. But now that Vice President is gone and the President he served is not very securely ensconced. All the reassurances of Mr. Nixon's two inaugural addresses with their many changes on the theme of why we should have pride in America sound remarkably hollow when read today. And of course they are no more hollow today than they were the day they were spoken, but the scales have begun to drop from our eyes.

This is not a moment for self-righteousness or recrimination. It is we the American people who have made Richard Nixon what he is. It is we who live by his values in our homes, offices, schools and churches. It is we who elected him with an overwhelming majority, knowing well enough after twenty years of him in public office what he was. It is time for sober self-reflection, for looking inside as well as outside. Nor do I think that those of us who did not vote

for Mr. Nixon need take any comfort. We will find inside ourselves what is in our countrymen who did vote for him. It is time for all of us to look at the abyss, the personal and the social abyss, the nothing that is there. Perhaps then again it may be possible to regain some of that common humanity from which Americans have thought they could escape. We have for long looked with condescension at primitive societies, at backward societies, at under-developed societies, at totalitarian societies; but it must by now be clear that there is not one negative trait in any society in the world that we cannot find represented somewhere in our own. Our past is of uncertain value and our future, as a republic or at all, is unclear. How similar we are to other men, how prone to sin, how much in need of grace. Maybe through some such reflections as these we might find the wisdom that all our arrogance and all our power and all our wealth have not given us.

Many of my friends dismiss the 1976 Bicentennial as a joke or a hoax. I do not. Ritual and commemoration are part of the bloodlife of any society -- the sociology of religion has at least taught me that. But the Bicentennial can hardly be the holiday of self-congratulation that some have intended. Indeed rather than make it a year of national celebration we should perhaps make it a year of national mourning and repentance. It might still be possible to use it as an occasion to dedicate ourselves to the completion of that unfinished revolution that began two centuries ago. We have seen in our recent troubles at least a few men still motivated by civic virtue. Perhaps it is still not too late to found in America that brotherly community for which Americans have for so longed hoped, only now in humility rather than pride.

But of hope I do not have much to say. Rather as the long nights of our winter season grow still longer I am reminded of the words of the 21st chapter of Isaiah:

"Watchman what of the night?
Watchman what of the night?"

The watchman says:

"Morning comes, and also the night.
If you will inquire, inquire:
come back again."

NOTES

¹ The concluding lines of "The Snow Man," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 10.

² F.O. Matthiessen, *The Oxford Book of American Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950) p. 793-794.

³ The best recent application of Montesquieu's thought to the problems of American society is James Seller's *Public Ethics: American Morals and Manners* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

⁴ In oral comments made during a public consultation on civil religion in America at Drew University, February 1973.

⁵ John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," reprinted in Conrad Cherry (ed.), *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971) pp. 42-43.

⁶ I am indebted to an unpublished paper by Ruth Bloch, "Millennial Thought in the American Revolutionary Movement," 1973, for these reflections.

⁷ See A.N. Kaul, *The American Vision: Actual and Ideal Society in Nineteenth Century Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

⁸ Herman Melville, *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, Walter E. Bezanson (ed.) (New York: Hendricks House, 1960), p. 422.

⁹ I did field work in a Mormon community in New Mexico in 1953 and at that time read a great deal about the history of Mormonism. Recently the opportunity to read an as yet unpublished manuscript on the Mormons by Mark Leone of Princeton University has rekindled my interest and the following remarks are in part indebted to him.

¹⁰ See Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

¹¹ My account of the life and death of Larry Casuse is based on Calvin Trillin, "U.S. Journal: Gallup, N.M." in *The New Yorker*, May 12, 1973.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun* (Signet Edition, 1961), p. 122.

¹⁵ Herman Melville, p. 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 483-484.

¹⁷ *The Works of Walt Whitman, Volume II, The Collected Prose*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), p. 257.