

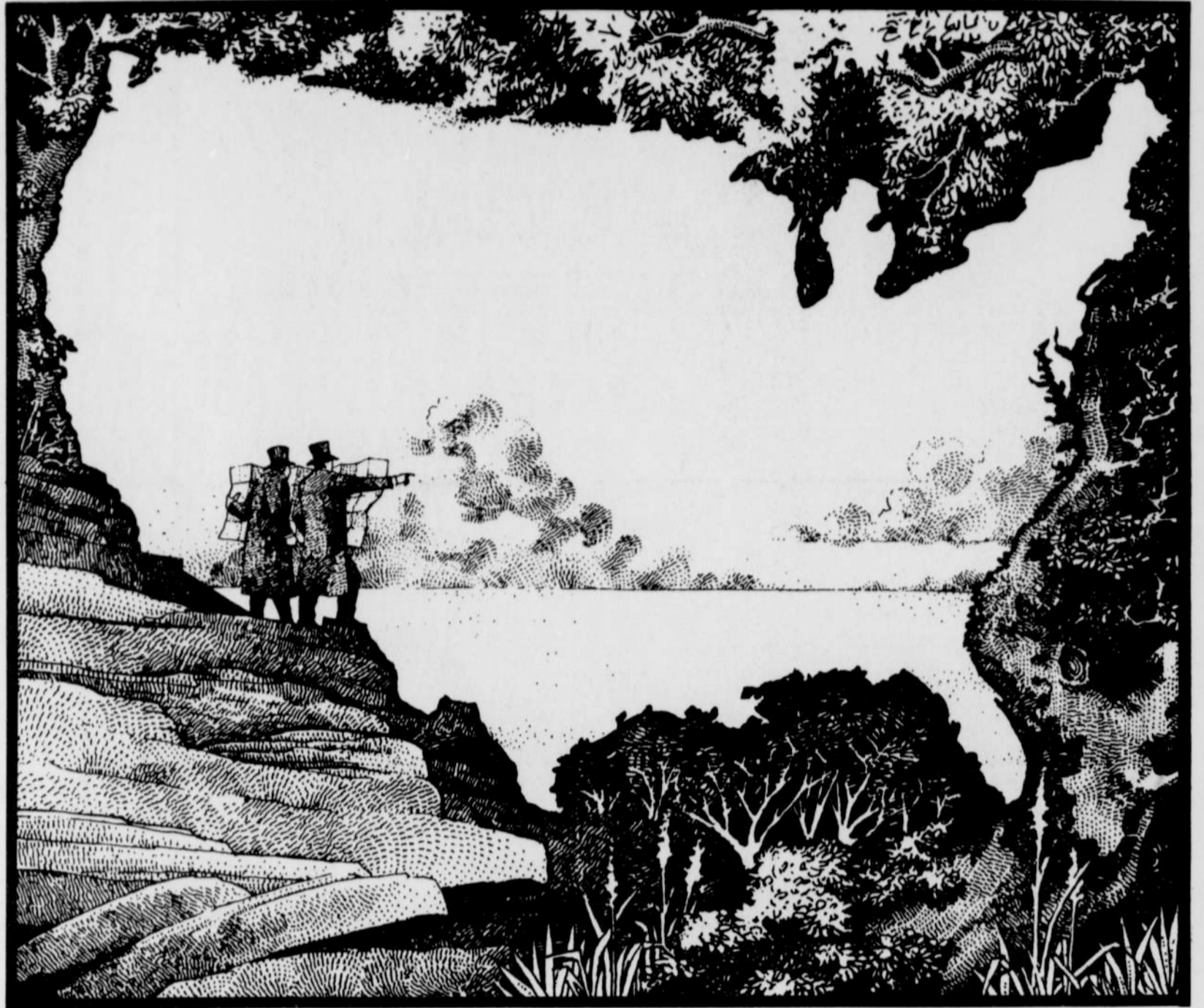
FROM MANAS*

"It is far easier to look back than forward a hundred years. Yet obtaining instruction from history is easier said than done. What, we might ask, have we failed to learn from the past hundred years? What passions which were so genuinely aroused during those years are now dead and forgotten? Is there any theme, besides getting and spending — which has been a continuous expression of human purpose? Are we entirely made by the events of the hour or are there goals which seem independent of human vicissitudes?"

—MANAS, January 8, 1986

The dreams of the Utopians, when applied to the affairs of imperfect human beings, fail continuously, yet are constantly reborn, with new definitions of what must be done. The dreamers are accused by "practical men" of ignoring the facts of life, yet the practical men, the dreamers reply, close their minds to the underlying reality of human possibilities and the capacities of men and women to learn from experience. It is certainly the case that some institutions of a given society function as confinements which stand in the way of constructive change, and need to have their hold loosened, if not destroyed, while other institutions may serve as natural platforms for progress. History is, or ought to be, the study of human thinking about these matters and its consequences in the sequence of events. The documents to be studied in order to understand what ought to be done, and what should be avoided, form the curriculum.

For example anyone who wants to understand American history ought to begin with, say, a reading of the *Federalist Papers* and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, both of which deal with the political and cultural institutions of the late 18th century. Paine set out more or less successfully, to destroy the alliance and loyalty of the colonists to the King of England, using for leverage the self-reliance and sense of freedom of the settlers in America. The *Federalist* writers (James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay) used hard reasoning as a means of showing the need for a strong central government for the United States. We are likely to be persuaded that they were right, yet



MARTIN AVILLEZ

AN OUTGROWN INSTITUTION

today, two centuries after they made their arguments, we are likely to find that William Appleman Williams' case for the decentralist government of the Articles of Confederation applies very much to our time, when the national state has become a very different affair from the sensible vehicle of order it was for Hamilton, Madison and Jay. It is the regionalists who today speak to our condition, not the nationalists. In key with what the bioregionists are now saying is the historical perspective provided by Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution*. In a chapter on "The Revolutionary Tradition," she points out that only Thomas Jefferson among the Founding Fathers realized that, after the War for Independence, the excitement and visionary fervor of the Declaration of Independence would be lost to the American people in the days of constitution making, which required stability and no longer revolt:

"...he knew, however dimly, that the Revolution, while it had given freedom to the people, had failed to provide a space where this freedom could be exercised. Only the representatives of the people, not the people themselves, had an opportunity to engage in those activities of "expressing, discussing and deciding" which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom. And since the state and federal governments, the proudest results of revolution, through sheer weight of their proper business were bound to overshadow in political importance the townships and their meeting halls — until what Emerson still considered to be "the unit of the Republic" and "the school of the people" in political matters had withered away — one might even come to the conclusion that there was less opportunity for the exercise of public freedom and the enjoyment of public happenings in the republic of the United States than there existed in the colonies of British America. Lewis Mumford has pointed out how the political importance of the township was never grasped by the founders, and that the failure to incorporate it into either the federal or state constitutions was "one of the tragic oversights of post-revolutionary political development." Only Jefferson among the founders had a clear premonition of this tragedy, for his greatest fear was indeed lest "the abstract political system of democracy lacked concrete organs."

Today, far more than in Jefferson's time, we are beginning to realize the practical effect on our lives of a "democracy" that lacks "concrete organs." The threat of and preparations for nuclear war, over which "the people" have virtually no control is but one among several practical considerations. The virtual bankruptcy of the nation is another. The ills of both agriculture and industry, the sickness of our system of education, the pollution of water, air, land and sea are others. It must be admitted, however, that only a comparatively small minority of people are exercised about these matters, while the majority,

in Neil Postman's apt phrase, is "amusing itself to death." Only when people begin to lose their jobs and their homes is public opinion really aroused, and then it is far too late for any immediate remedy.

Jefferson's dream has certainly not become true for our generation. He thought we would be all right as a country as long as most of us were farmers and small landowners, but today the nation is farmed by big machines and about 4% of the population, and many of the small and medium sized farmers are in trouble. It is notable that the most articulate and intelligent reformers of the present are calling, not just for better methods of farming, but for the return to a vital small community life. This is still a dream, but it may be the one most likely to come true as the only alternative to both economic and cultural collapse. Pessimists think that the collapse will come first, while optimists hope it can be mitigated by common sense. But very nearly all agree that the kind of change we need can only be born from trouble, probably a lot of trouble.

A quarter of a century ago, a scholar in one of our California colleges remarked sardonically that "the purpose of the American nation/state today is to become obsolete." In explanation, he added:

A modern nation is a large group of people who have forgotten the purpose of life. Insofar as these people can share in a 'national' purpose, it is nefarious, involving massive retaliation and public hatred and tribal religion. National leaders behave like juvenile delinquents.

If we go back much further in our history, to 1798, we find a Philadelphian, Samuel H. Smith, in an essay on education, declaring that, with the right sort of education Americans would develop virtues that would cause them to view "the whole world as a single family," without thinking of other peoples as connected with "any particular time, person or place," and would lift "the mind to an elevation infinitely superior to the sensation of individual regard, superior to the ardent feelings of patriotism." Smith said this in his proposal of a national system of education for the United States. In it he looked beyond the limitations of all creeds and sects, and approval of the plan by the American Philosophical Society may be taken as evidence of the liberal spirit of its members and the serious thinkers of the time. Smith was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, the editor of a magazine called *New World*, and he later founded *The National Intelligencer*. His opinions, according to Allen O. Hansen, author of *Liberalism & American Education in the 18th Century* (1926), and his theme were "not born of one mind thinking in isolation, but of the minds of the leading statesmen and scholars comprehended in the American Philosophical Society." It seems worth while to note in particular that in a sense he looked beyond the nation to the development of a world community, and regarded

the nations as an instrument that would serve in bringing about that ideal.

In these days of fierce and hideously militarized nationalism, it seems well to remember that there have been moments in our history when such vision was clearly and widely expressed and was sometimes even embodied in law, as in the treaties concluded by George Washington as President.

Henry David Thoreau's "patriotism" hardly extended beyond the domain of Walden. He could regard as his "country" only the region he lived in, loved, and understood. He regarded the nation's government as something of an annoyance, with which one had to be patient much of the time and on occasion rebel against. He was, you could say, a whole-hearted bioregionalist more than a century before a substantial number of his country-men/women saw the essential point of this outlook. He said in *Civil Disobedience*:

If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them. All machines have their friction; and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil to make a stir about it. But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army....

If injustice is a part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth — certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong I condemn.

As for adopting the ways which the state has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to.

Here, fully conscious and developed is what present-day scholars call the post-national consciousness, which seems to be possible, as one commentator has said, only for "an amateur and a person of no importance." It seems clear that those who

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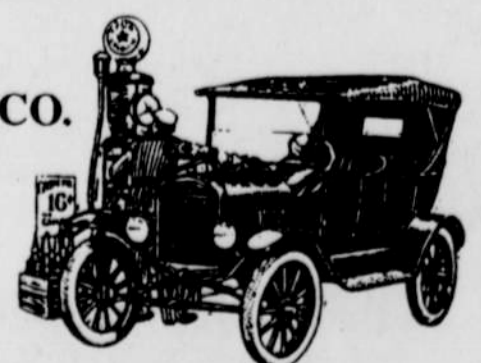
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