

EXCURSUS I

James Finn on Looking Back, Hoping Forward

Almost everyone was thrown off balance by the 1960's. We except those who were immobilized by fear or apathy and those who continued undisturbed in a trajectory fueled by perilous self-confidence. While the exceptions are not statistically insignificant, they did not determine the mood or feeling that coursed through this land as the sixties came to an end.

Even those who were public participants during those years find it difficult to recall the heady, often hysterical temper of the time. Those were years in which the rhetoric of apocalypse filled the air, and the sighted goal was utopia or doomsday. Years in which people on opposite sides of a great ideological divide agreed that the United States had great responsibility for the political and economic shape of the world. Years in which acquaintances announced that they had been radicalized as casually as their fathers and grandfathers said the family car had been Simonized. Revolution was publicly discussed as a real possibility, and people urgently debated whether we were undergoing a social crisis or a deeper crisis of civilization.

Times are different now. In the mid-seventies the country seems more concerned with the traditional issues of jobs, savings, profits, inflation, taxes, energy, and productivity. A shrinking of the economy has been accompanied by a shrinking or near-total collapse of the heightened rhetoric. The great rhetoricians of law 'n order, Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon, have been pushed off center stage; continuing disclosures show that "incorruptibles" such as J. Edgar Hoover not only had clay feet but that they were comfortably placed in a great deal of unsavory mud; some young radicals have withdrawn to seek personal salvation under the dubious leadership of gurus such as the Maharaj-ji; Jerry Rubin, one of the clown princes of revolution, sixties style, has recently joined the Communist Party (bless the union).

Why recall such times and such persons today? Because some of the leaders and some of the issues of that time are with us still. Hubert Humphrey, who appeared to have been politically eviscerated in 1968, now outpolls candidates more actively seeking the Democratic Presidential nomination. And Eldridge Cleaver, a Black Panther leader who fled this country in 1968, explains in the *New York Times* why he wants to return to the United States. The appeal of Hubert Humphrey today is that he is saying the old, familiar things, addressing himself to continuing, familiar issues. The interest in Eldridge Cleaver, where it exists, is

that he is saying things that are in sharp contrast to the Cleaver of the sixties.

Cleaver is a man who put his undoubted critical and literary talent in the service of unreflective and vituperative attacks on "the system" during that time. Free on \$50,000 bail for a parole violation to which he pleaded not guilty, he fled the U.S. to live in Cuba, Algeria, and France. In his Op Ed column in the *New York Times* (November 18) he still displays a faith in the future that was one of the attractive aspects of his earlier self: "A fabulous new era of progress is opening up to the world, and coping with all of the problems unleashed by Watergate has opened up a creative era for American democracy." But the newer, more sobered Cleaver is now predominant.

With all of its faults, the American political system is the freest and most democratic in the world. The system needs to be improved, with democracy spread to all areas of life, particularly the economic. All of these changes must be conducted through our established institutions, and people with grievances must find political methods for obtaining redress.

Each generation subjects the world it inherits to severe criticism. I think that my generation has been more critical than most, and for good reason. At the same time, at the end of the critical process, we should arrive at some conclusions. We should have discovered which values are worth conserving. It is the beginning of another fight, the fight to defend those values from the blind excesses of our fellows who are still caught up in the critical process.

The first part of this declaration is unexceptionable, and most of those who trouble to read Cleaver seriously will say that it's too bad he's such a slow learner. Of course the political and social problems should be "conducted through established institutions." But the second half remains problematic. Our society is still uncertain about "which values are worth conserving," especially when there are values in conflict. What was revealed to us in the sixties is that many of the unvoiced, tacit, and shared assumptions on the basis of which human beings guide their conduct, assumptions that provide the framework within which they consider political and social issues—that these assumptions were eroded or no longer existent among the American people. The sixties forced many people to ask what values sustained their society and their own lives. These questions are still posed and the answers are not yet in. We cannot look to politicians or to the political order to answer these questions. They must come from a different order and different leaders.

A prayer for the seventies. May the American people, as they look back on two hundred years and forward with uncertainty, get the leaders they deserve—and may they deserve great leaders.