

THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE

By SCOTT NEARING

UNITED STATES political leaders and publicists often refer to the defense and preservation of "the American way of life" and advocate its extension to other parts of the world. Before Columbus sailed the Atlantic, the Americas were inhabited by red men. During the past five centuries, millions of white Europeans have crossed the Atlantic and established the pattern of living to which U. S. political leaders and publicists so frequently refer.

South of the Rio Grande, the European culture pattern has become generally dominant. In the United States and Canada, it has replaced and all but obliterated the culture pattern of the American Indians. This article aims to describe some of the prominent features of the life pattern that is accepted, followed and boasted about in North America.

AN AMERICAN INDIAN described the migration of Europeans to his country in three sentences: "White man come to America. Indian have all the land; white man have Bible. Now white man have the land; Indian have Bible."

Through four and a half centuries, millions of Europeans and thousands of Africans and Asians have moved into the Americas. The Africans were brought as chattel slaves; many of the Asians were contract laborers. The Europeans came as conquerors—Bible in one hand, gun in the other and a whisky flask in the hip pocket. The early Spanish and French adventurers were accompanied by priests. The first Dutch and British settlers in North America were ardent Christians. The Puritans went to New England and the Quakers to Pennsylvania in order to set up communities where they might worship as they chose. To build and maintain homes they needed land. Some land they

bought; most of it they seized. In the United States alone, since the foundation of the present government in 1789, 110 wars have been fought against the Indians—most of these wars arising out of the struggle over land.

Europeans brought more than Bibles, guns and "firewater" to North America. They brought European culture. Crafts, techniques, language, customs, political and social institutions, all crossed the Atlantic with the European migrants and occupied a continent rich in natural resources. Wild life filled the waters and roamed the forests and plains. Much of the country was heavily timbered. The soil was fertile. The climate was well adapted to European agriculture. Almost all the important minerals were available. With minor exceptions, these resources were untouched. The Indians, who lived mostly on the wild life, had used little of the land and few of the minerals. After killing or driving off the Indians, the Europeans found themselves masters of a richly endowed, virgin continent.

The new occupants of North America began living on their capital—killing off the wild life, cutting down the forests, cropping the land until its productiveness was exhausted, abandoning the impoverished soil and moving to new farms, extracting the irreplaceable coal, oil and metals. In the early years, this rape of the continent was conducted with hand tools. During the past century, machines have replaced the cruder implements and the exhaustion of natural resources has been steadily accelerated.

Four factors were evolving the new America—(1) Technology and (2) a matured, skilled labor force, both imported from Europe; (3) a great quantity and variety of natural resources, and (4) a medley of ideas and ideals which comprised the objectives and practices of the life pattern transplanted from Europe to North America. These factors resulted in rapid and far-reaching changes in the American way of life.

I Animal power was replaced by wind, water, steam and electricity and the volume of energy at the disposal of the population was greatly increased.

- 2** Hand craft and the domestic workshop gave way to division of labor, automatic machinery, mass production, mass marketing, the factory, the trust or cartel, the department store, chain merchandising, railway, telephone and radio networks and other forms of coordinated technology and management.
- 3** Small businesses were swallowed up by big businesses as the local, individual, competitive economy evolved into centralized, corporate, monopoly economy.
- 4** Frontier, village and town, with their basis in hunting and fishing, pastoral and agricultural occupations, developed into commercial and industrial cities, with their bases in manufacturing, mining, transportation, banking, insurance, merchandizing, diversion, amusement, education. In this process, the self-employed hunter, herder, farmer, craftsman and merchant dwindled from majority to minority. In their places were the wage and salary workers in factories and offices, the expanded professional groups and the new technological intelligentsia.
- 5** Wealth and income increased in quantity and were concentrated, first, in the hands of rich individuals and later in business corporations.
- 6** The owners and managers of this new concentrated wealth were able to buy whatever was for sale at home and abroad. At home, in addition to new businesses, they bought newspapers and radio chains and dominated schools, universities and churches. Abroad they bought resources, utilities and industries and dominated the governments of weaker countries.
- 7** Through the years from 1870 to the present, the control of U. S. political and social institutions passed into the hands of the same self-perpetuating oligarchy which operated mines, factories, railroads and banks. Big businessmen and their satellites, whose lives were dedicated to the competitive

struggle to monopolize wealth and concentrate power, thus became the makers of U. S. policy.

THE THIRTEEN INDEPENDENT British colonies scattered along the Atlantic seaboard, with a population of some four millions, which organized the United States of America in 1789, have become a federation of forty-eight states, spanning the continent, with a population of 145 million, an advanced technology, a vast productive capacity, the world's largest navy, a stockpile of atom bombs and a desire stirring in the breasts of an ambitious profit-and-power-seeking oligarchy to control, exploit and police the world.

The United States has come to its maturity. The country of President Truman and Secretary of State Marshall is as different from the country of Washington and Jefferson as a mature man is from the school boy.

It is impossible to speak of "the American way of life" as though it were unalterable. Like every other social pattern, the life of the United States is undergoing ceaseless changes, which have been greatly accelerated by the inventions and discoveries of the past hundred years.

The American way of life, today, is the way developed by social evolution and determined in part by those who now make public policy and shape the patterns of private living—the businessmen, their handy-men in technology, advertising, journalism and the learned professions, the leading politicians, the top-ranking militarists. These masters of America have recently been at considerable pains to define what they mean by "the American way of life."

IN 1944, THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of Manufacturers issued a pamphlet on *The Free Enterprise System*. Here are its opening sentences:

"The success of an economic system must be measured by the amount of income it enables a people to produce and by the way that income is shared. The American free-enterprise system made

this country the most productive and most prosperous nation in history."

Earl O. Reeve, President of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, wrote in *Liberty* magazine, January 1948:

"Modern business, in America especially, has made almost a fetish of change and progress . . . It refuses to be fenced in by theory or formula in its search for a greater level of production and sales."

The Cities Service Company, operator of public utilities, inserted an advertisement in *The New York Times* of January 2, 1948, in which it specified thus the characteristics of the American way of life:

"What country has virtually all other countries knocking at its lunch boxes and safety-deposit boxes? What country is expected to help feed most of Europe—and still maintains the world's highest standard of living at home? What country out-produced all other economic systems in World War II, not to mention World War I? What country's monetary system is recognized throughout the globe as the only real yardstick of value today? What economic system has produced for its everyday citizens more automobiles, more bathtubs, more telephones, more hospitals, more schools—more proteins, more fats, more starches—than almost the rest of the world combined? What economic system provides freedom of assembly, freedom from undue search and seizure, freedom to travel, freedom to vote, freedom to worship?"

Burlington Mills, a large textile manufacturing concern, advertised in the January 2, 1948, *New York Times*:

"America has more passenger cars than the rest of the world put together—far more bathubs and many more radios. It's that way with clothes or food or almost any comfort, convenience or necessity you can mention."

These descriptions of the American way of life have certain characteristics in common. (1) They emphasize bigness and "manyness," (2) mainly of commodities, (3) and measure success in terms of

the quantity and variety of material possessions, (4) with passing mention of freedom—particularly freedom of business enterprise.

ONE MUST RAISE TWO QUESTIONS about this description of the American way of life. (1) Is it true for all Americans? (2) Is it peculiar to America? Obviously, the low-income group in the United States, poorly housed and badly fed, and the racial minorities, subject to segregation and discrimination, are not among its beneficiaries. As for its uniqueness, the competitive struggle for wealth and power has been carried on in every commercial culture. It might with equal justification be called the Venetian Way of Life, the Dutch Way of Life, the French Way of Life or the British Way of Life.

White Europeans have taken over the land of North America and have converted its resources into a flood of commodities. The United States is fabulously rich. It also spends more on military preparations than any other nation. Its citizens are surrounded by public enterprises, such as highways, schools and hospitals, and by privately owned gadgets—automobiles, telephones, radios, electric refrigerators. But are bigness and manyness a sound measure of success? What will happen to a nation whose public policy is being made by big businessmen, for whom the main aim is self-enrichment?

THERE IS AN OLD SAYING that men cannot serve God and Mammon. Production and sales, automobiles, telephones and radio sets, economic ascendancy, social convenience and political dominance are all of the tribe of Mammon. The American way of life, as described by its noisiest advocates, is a Mammon way.

Descendants of the early white settlers have made their choice. They journeyed, with their social ideals, to a rich continent. Their ideals have been smothered under the flood of commodities which a mass-production technology has poured over the United States. Godliness met Mammon, front to front, on the North American continent. Mammon has won the first round of the contest. There is no longer a serious question as to whether the Amer-

ican way of life is a way in the service of God or of Mammon. *The issue which confronts the American people today is a simple one—can man serve Mammon and survive?*

The problem has several aspects. (1) Can an economy based on a competitive struggle for profit avoid periodic depressions, which become longer and deeper, until occasional and partial economic paralysis gives way to chronic and complete paralysis? (2) Can a nation whose policy-makers are dedicated to a competitive struggle for profit and power avoid recurring wars, which become progressively more "total," until they develop into permanent war? (3) Can permanent war, waged with the products of the laboratory and the assembly line, avoid self-liquidation? (4) Can a people living under the shadow of chronic depression and permanent war avoid escapism and cynicism? (5) Can human beings devote the major part of their time, energy and attention to production, sales and a multiplicity of things, except at the price of frustration, despair and ultimate self-destruction?

MEASURED IN TERMS of wealth and power, the American way of life is a flamboyant success. Measured in terms of human unfoldment, growth and fulfilment, it is a tragic failure. In reality it is a way, not of life, but of death—the death of creativity, of aspiration and, finally, of hope.

The reason? Man cannot live by automobiles and radio sets alone. When he sets out to serve Mammon, he writes his own death warrant and with it the death warrant of a social pattern built around a competitive struggle for wealth and power. The life-death process may extend over many centuries, or it may be compressed into a few generations, but it is as inexorable as any other cause-and-effect sequence. (*This article, originally written for "The Aryan Path," of Bombay, is here reprinted from "World Events," Winter 1949 issue.*)