

AMERICA IN PERSPECTIVE

WHEN I opened my mailbox three weeks ago I found a letter from the New Jersey College for Women, Rutgers University, asking me to attend their Third Annual International Conference Weekend, "America in Perspective." There would be addresses by Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, and Dr. Richard B. Snyder, Associate Professor of Political Science at Princeton University. The seventy foreign students who had been invited would take part in a series of panel discussions on various aspects of American society.

We left Philadelphia by car on Friday afternoon, drove up through the old cobbled streets of Germantown, and across the Delaware River into New Jersey at Washington Crossing, the spot which is celebrated in Trumbull's famous Civil War painting. In the country corn crops were being harvested and snow-drift fences erected, and ploughed paddocks were showing green with winter feed.

We stopped at Princeton and spent an hour wandering around the little university town with its bicycles and its streets lined with oaks and sycamores. We stared at the new ivy-covered tower of Graduate Hall, which is said to be an exact Gothic replica of one of the Oxford Colleges, and went into the ultra-modern Firestone Library, equipped with sound-proof booths, concealed lighting, and glass walls. To most people that was America, business efficiency and synthetic culture.

It was dark when we arrived at Rutgers, and after our hostesses had taken us to supper we walked across to hear Dr. Snyder's opening address in the Voorhees Chapel, which had been donated to the Women's College on condition that every student should worship in it at least once a week. Dr. Snyder,

by PHILLIP WILSON

who is editor of the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, and co-author of *The Roots of Political Behaviour*, *American Foreign Policy*, and *American Democracy in Theory and Practice*, was to speak on "American Society and the International Crisis." His first words showed that he was going to give it to us straight from the shoulder: "A gathering of this kind is one of the few places where we can talk freely today about basic problems which concern all of us."

HOW do other peoples of the world see the United States? he asked. He listed eleven basic American values: (1) Achievement and Success, a tendency to equate personal excellence with competitive occupational success; (2) Action, Efficiency and Practicality, a belief in getting things done; (3) Change and Progress, which showed up in the characteristic American restlessness; (4) Equality of Rights and Opportunity; (5) Freedom—but it was freedom "from" rather than freedom "for" or freedom "to," and this led to an emphasis on rights rather than duties; (6) Individualism, a core belief in the worth and value of the individual; (7) Humanitarianism, which was expressed typically in organised charities; (8) Moral Orientation, in which Americans tended to judge things by the ethical standards of right and wrong; (9) Democratic Politics; (10) Patriotism, which took the two forms of loyalty to symbols and loyalty to ideals; (11) An emphasis on Material Comforts, which came from America's equalitarianism and its great natural resources.

AT present, he said, these values were in such conflict that it was difficult for people outside America to see the country in a true perspective. "Which America is it that impresses the world? The generous and humanitarian America or the America which is impatient with inefficiency? The highly moral America or the sharp-dealing America? The America which stands for equality, or that which doesn't distribute equally its ERP aid?"

"Is there a cultural bias in our outlook on the rest of the world?" he asked. "Don't we, because of our emphasis on efficiency and practicality, tend to look down on the contemplative ritualistic cultures of Europe and Asia? Don't we, because of our drive for action, tend to make short-term solutions which may not be the right ones?" How could America explain itself to other countries, especially Asia, or understand them, when it had practically no trained foreign service personnel, and in American universities

there were only sixty students studying any other than a Western culture?

Dr. Snyder drew attention to the unusual situation which had arisen in contemporary America. "This America of ours," he said, "this great, complex, and dynamic society, is showing signs of becoming a mass society. There is evidence of a loss of the sense of personality and of belonging, a loss of face-to-face relationships which shows itself in periodic dislocations of family and community life. We tend to express the common patterns of American life in such an impersonal way that free and personal discussion has declined and sources of information have become limited. Diversity of opinion tends to contract, and this leads to cynicism and scepticism. Tolerance exists only in the economic sphere. We stamp conformity upon ourselves. The pressure of conformity makes us withdraw controversial items from conversation. An enormous anxiety potential is being generated in the American people.

"Have we mobilised—through our acceptance of standardised opinions such as those flowing from the mass media of press and radio—a potential irrational force which makes us in reaction desire for a leader, for a pseudo-personal relationship?" he asked. "Our unity is based on symbols, but we now find that these symbols don't mean a great deal. In a recent *Voice of America* broadcast President Truman used the phrase 'peace with justice.' What does this mean to foreigners? Because of our reliance on symbols we have permitted such a thing as McCarthyism, which is action done in the name of a symbol but yet diametrically opposed to that symbol."

A CRISIS in education existed in America today, Dr. Snyder said. In the past eleven months 750 citizens' groups had sprung up which were bringing pressure to bear on schools and universities. Community conflicts had arisen. There were campaigns against certain text-books. Current affairs were being relegated to a minor place on the curriculum. There was a refusal to discuss controversial subjects, especially on the nature of Communism, which he thought it was fundamentally important that Americans should understand. There was an emphasis on the Three R's at the expense of other subjects. Students were trained only to pay attention to the facts, and no attempt was made to interpret the facts or to give any training in the way to interpret them. There was a ritualistic allegiance to the symbols rather than the contents of democracy.

This crisis in education reflected the basic conflict of values in which the whole of American society was caught, and much would depend on how the conflict was solved. It was like having a businessman on an education board and asking him to make a decision of educational importance. Which set of values would he apply? The business values he had learnt to respect—those of competitive success and achievement—or the values inherent in the education system? He left it to his audience to supply the answer.

THE panel discussions the following day agreed to a surprising extent with this analysis of American society.



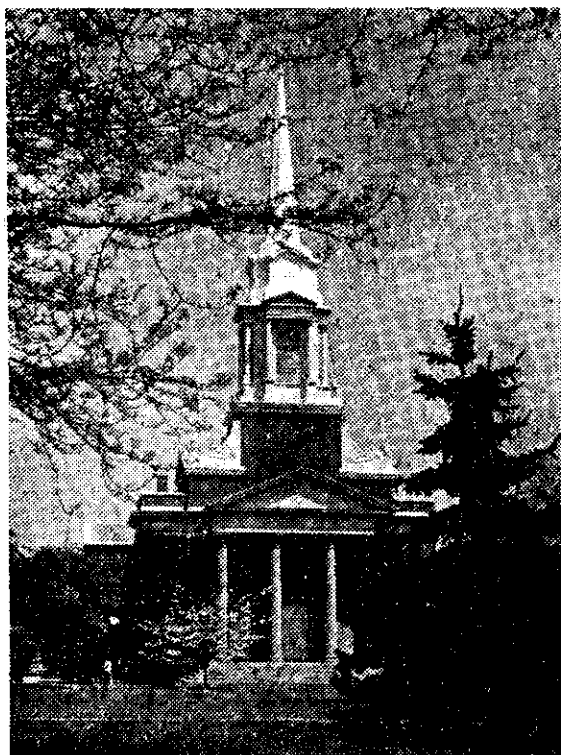
NORMAN COUSINS
"The escape hatches are being sealed off"

The panel on Education confirmed all that he said and went even further in their condemnation of over-specialisation. The panel on Ideology and Loyalty came to the wry conclusion that it was typical of Americans to invite self-scrutiny at such a conference as this ("We want to be liked and we are unsure of what we have to offer"), that there was more freedom in some other parts of the world than in America (England and Scandinavia were given as examples), and that in America today there was an atmosphere of suspicion. The panel on Culture concluded that the best American poetry and drama reached only a small proportion of the people, both at home and abroad, that America exported its worst films while other countries exported only their best.

Each panel consisted of about ten foreign students, and as one of the moderators said, it was largely a question of give and take, the foreigners gave out with criticism, and the Americans in the audiences had to take it. But everyone agreed that it was all wonderfully worth while. The most frequent question I was asked was, "Now tell me truly, have you got any real practical benefit out of the weekend?" "How about you?" I always replied. I had certainly learnt a good deal about America, and if the girls at the College hadn't liked all that we said about them, they had discovered a lot about the different countries that we came from, and they had realised perhaps that every foreigner no longer thinks that the streets of America are paved with gold.

After the social activity which took up a large part of the weekend with dances, receptions and dinners, we went back to the Voorhees Chapel to hear the final address by Norman Cousins. I discovered that he was one of those brilliant young Americans with some talent which throws them to the crest of the competitive wave so that they are famous at thirty. In his first two years with the *Saturday Review of Literature* he boosted its circulation by fifty per cent. He is noted for his outspoken editorials, and he does not hesitate to criticise bitterly.

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VOORHEES CHAPEL: Scene of addresses and discussions