

## THE FORGOTTEN WASTELANDS

Judy Cerute, Wisconsin State College, Oshkosh

Many people have been lamenting the "vast television wasteland." But, today my main concern is the forgotten wastelands in such areas as education, politics, newspapers, and literature. In our society the saying that one citizen is as good as another has become a favorite American axiom, supposed to represent the very essence of our Constitution and way of life. But just what do we mean when we utter that trite statement? One surgeon is not as good as another. One plumber is not as good as another. We soon become aware of this fact when we require the attention of either one. Yet, in political and economic matters we appear to have reached the point where knowledge and specialized training count for very little. A newspaper reporter is sent out into the streets to collect the views of passers-by on such a question as "Should the United States defend Formosa?" The answer of the bar-fly who doesn't know where the island is located, or for that matter even that it is an island, appears in the next edition in equal context with that of the college teacher of history!

Now, with the basic concept of democracy--that all men are born free and equal--no decent American can possibly take issue. But, that the opinion of one citizen on a technical subject is just as authoritative as that of another is absurd. And to accept the opinions of all comers as having the same value is surely to encourage a cult of mediocrity.

The current tendency to reduce everybody to the same level is evident today in education. School curriculums are not geared to the abilities of the superior student, but rather to those of the average or below average pupils. Having moved almost unconsciously toward achieving the greatest good for the greatest number, we have neglected that small group of potential leaders through whom human happiness has in the past been attainable and attained.

The forces promoting mediocrity in our schools are both extensive and well known. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, summarizing some of the problems created by these forces says:

Very large numbers of superior students are still not working up to their capacity, not being challenged to their best performances, not pursuing the hard intellectual programs which will develop their talents.

By sacrificing quality for quantity, Excellence for mediocrity, we are also sacrificing and throwing away talent and leaders.

The widespread acceptance in this country of the method of promotion by seniority alone has much the same consequences. In education, a teacher of average ability, once appointed to a school or college staff can be sure of moving up automatically as retirement or death removes his older colleagues; and because of this guarantee, ambition frequently fades. Now the number of faculty members of 45 and older is considerable; yet, to advance a younger but much abler associate ahead of one of these comfortably situated elder professors is virtually impossible unless the elder professor leaves, or becomes a Communist suspect--either one of which he is unlikely to do. Granted, this system does favor many entirely respectable men and women. But, there can be little doubt that it does contribute to a lowering of quality.

In politics, specialized knowledge is far from a requirement. In too many communities aspirants for office stress the fact that they are good, solid family men. And if the result of elections seem to offer an advantage to mediocrity, whose fault is it? Well, a considerable proportion of voters is prepared to accept back-slapping, vague enthusiasm and expressed good intentions as substitutes for talent.

This American distrust of cleverness or quickness of mind was recently noted by a young Korean, a graduate student at Harvard when he said:

The American people want their President to be one of them. They would like to elect to the presidency a man like themselves. They do not want their president to be the "great leader," "hero" or "superman", whose vision, outlook and philosophy are remote from theirs. Instead, they want their President's tastes, outlook and philosophy to be similar to theirs.



Claude M. Feuss, former headmaster at the Philips Academy at Andover, Massachusetts, also noted this American short-sightedness when he said:

It is significant that the number of first rate statesman in the United States of the post-Revolutionary period, when the country had a population of not much over three million was greater than it is today when we have 180 million. One of the reasons, perhaps, is that our generation has reversed the pattern and established a cult, not of genius but of mediocrity, by its approval of conformity and orthodoxy and the kindred, colorless virtues which keep a social organism static.

It's rather startling to realize that many of the leaders of our nation are only mediocre citizens.

We live in an age of the average and even the average isn't as high as it should or could be. Taking a look at today's average newspaper we can see that aside from a few notable exceptions, today's average newspaper is filled with more sex and violence every day than you can find in two weeks of solid televiewing. A comely girl named Lillian Reis goes on trial for burglarly in Pennsylvania and the story is bigger than the Congo crisis. A collection of hoodlum punks called the Gallo mob, is raided and disarmed by the Brooklyn police, and the story pushes the trouble in Laos off the front page.

Take away the advertisements and many papers would be no more than six or seven pages of news. But, is it fair to call chintzy gossip columns, horoscopes, homemaking hints, advice to the lovelorn, comics, crossword puzzles, and inane features like "Are you happily married? Test your vocabulary.", news?

The editorial page which is supposed to guide our thinking has become instead a column of personal prejudice. President Kennedy is trying to avert war while bargaining from strength with the Russians and the New York Daily News, which considers itself far wiser than any elected or appointed official writes, "It won't do any good Mr. Kennedy. They only understand force and power."

The news columns which are supposed to inform have fallen instead into utter confusion. The Cuban invasion, for example, was first reported as a rumor, then as a full scale military operation that was going splendidly, then there were unexpected difficulties but the invasion was irresistible, then Castro had defeated the invaders, and finally it turned out that the United States and the CIA were involved and it was a fiasco in the eyes of the world. Confusion? Obviously. Little wonder that the mediocre newspapers now outnumber the good ones in the United States 25 to one.

In literature one finds it hard to believe that only a generation or so ago we had such giants of the novel as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, and Ernest Hemingway. What do we have today? Well, we have the historical novel, filled with ancient sex; the novel of suburbia filled with teasing, tinselled modern sex; the novel of the South filled with deviated sex; and the novel of the Angry Young Man filled with iconoclastic sex of the infidelity-can-be-fun school. There are no brilliant characterizations or reflections on our life today. There are only feeble pawings at things that are wrong with our society. There are no Babbitts and no Gatsbys. There are no idealized heroes or heroines either. All are made of papier-mache.

If then we have retreated from excellence to mediocrity, what can be done to remedy the situation? One thing is almost self-evident. Widespread mediocrity in key places can be deadening, even destructive to any country. A solution must be found and it can only come from us, the very ones who have allowed this to happen.

I think the answer to our problem is basically very simple. If we are free to be complacent, are we not then also free to speak out against complacency? It merely involves taking a good look at what we have allowed our society to degenerate into and speaking out against it. The initiative, however, must come from our leaders in religion, education, and politics.

Will it ever change? I hope so. It must. In a country as great and as rich in heritage as ours is you can't permanently submerge and subvert 180 million minds. We've come through these barren periods before and we can only hope that our national leadership in religion, education, and statecraft will rise to the occasion and counteract the blight which widespread mediocrity has been casting over our boasted culture.