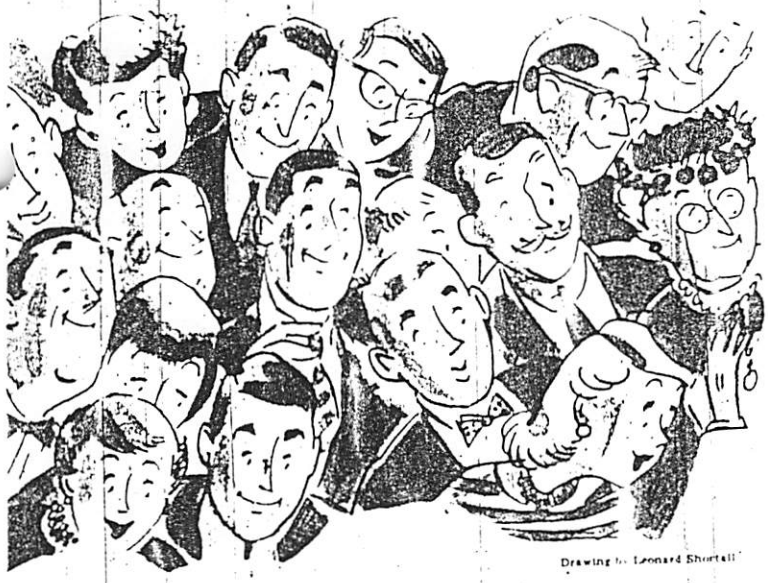
Survey of Our National Phenomena



Drawing by Leonard Shortall

By DELMORE SCHWARTZ

THE public's intense interest in a person, a pastime or an idea is one of the most familiar and important occurrences in American life. For weeks, for months, sometimes for years, one person or thing is a topic of conversation, a seed-bed of jokes, an object of passionate curiosity or of some other emotion that preoccupies the public mind. When this happens, we have what can properly be called a national phenomenon.

At the moment Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe have returned to the limelight of public attention. Each of these screen stars has been a national phenomenon for some time, but other national phenomena took public attention until the announcement of Miss Kelly's engagement to the Prince of Monaco and the news that Miss Monroe would co-star with Sir Laurence Olivier.

GRACE KELLY—Her well-bred heroines have made ladies' interest in sex quite proper.

It is characteristic that both stars have moved in an international direction. This is often true of American national phenomena, and often enough they come from abroad. A few short months ago the Princess Margaret romance was in the foreground of public attention.

Over the years the origin of a national phenomenon has been of every variety and kind, native and foreign. Sometimes it is a new word game such as Scrabble or crossword puzzles; sometimes a new crooner, a new cartoon, a new gangster or a new kind of eccentric. Any complete list for the past thirty years would have to include baby sitters, flag-pole sitters, child stars, boy wonders, quiz kids, channel swimmers and the kings and queens of Europe, as well as great scientists and thinkers.

MARILYN MONROE—Her delight in being genuinely attractive adds zest to her allure.

IT is actually more often a person than a thing which engrosses the public sufficiently to achieve the stature of a national phenomenon. And the attempt to explain why one person, rather than another one with many of the same traits, attracts the public leads to speculations which are interesting even when they can hardly be regarded as conclusive. If the attempt to explain a national phenomenon is a guessing game more often than not, it can be, like most games, illuminating and valuable, whether one is right or wrong.

Marilyn Monroe is a good example of the difficulty in explaining why a personality becomes a national phenomenon. None of the customary reasons for an actress' success and fame explain very much when applied to Miss Monroe.

She is a very pretty girl, of course, but there are a great many pretty girls who can not, no matter how hard they try, attract the same kind of attention. She has a very winning personality, but this explains very little compared with the impact of Tallulah Bankhead and Martha Raye. She is often a good actress, better by far than she is usually credited with being, but this does not account for her success as it does for the triumphs of Audrey Hepburn and Julie Harris. The most obvious explanation—the open display of sexual attractiveness—is also unconvincing in itself. Miss Monroe does not exactly conceal her person, as Gypsy Rose Lee and Sally Rand among others, have outstripped (no other word is exact). Miss Monroe by Mae West and Gwen Verdon have dramatized sexual awareness with a knowingness and explicitness entirely beyond Miss Monroe.

As one young starlet asked, with annoyance and precision: "What has Marilyn got? And how can I get it?"

A large part of the answer lies in Miss Monroe's attitude toward herself. Along with her very evident feminine charms goes a genuine delight in being sexually attractive—an attitude that makes attractiveness seem as natural as sunlight. No amount of conscious art calculated exploitation of beauty could achieve the same effect.

Miss Kelly is a symbol in a very different way. The heroines she plays take the sexual initiative, in a remarkably overt way, but always as perfectly proper young ladies. It is as if no nice girl, when in love, would have otherwise and no well-bred wife would act otherwise toward her husband. Female interest in physical love becomes respectable and proper, as if no one had ever thought it vulgar and immodest in a good woman. The nice girl as coquette or flirt is archaic or coy.

ANNIE OAKLEY—An eloquent dependability with small arms made her immortal.

No one can go to be a national phenomenon by mere effort, love or money. Ambition, talent, the best of intentions or the most sensational of crimes do not suffice very often. They may make a human being a newspaper sensation for a few weeks or win the attention of posterity, but they cannot establish anyone in that special relationship to the public which is a necessary characteristic of a national phenomenon.

THE failure of the effort to make Marion Davies a favorite film star with the public is a good example of how the status of a national phenomenon is often beyond the most lavish expenditures for publicity and film production. A contrary instance, the transformation of John D. Rockefeller Sr.

CAPONE—He gained a sordid and lasting notoriety as king of Chicago's bootleggers.

from a "robber baron" to a leading philanthropist was managed, it is true, by a conscious plan, but it occurred after his active financial career, and it is possible that the dime tips he gave ultimately tickled the public's fancy with an effectiveness which exceeded that of the philanthropic gifts of $146,719,371.22.

A national phenomenon is sometimes a person of genuine genius or eminence; he is often, however, a mediocrity and sometimes the status is thrust upon him for freakish, bizarre, eccentric, questionable or lawless behavior, as in the instances of Jesse James, Annie Oakley, Carry Nation, Al Capone and Frank Costello.

This is one important reason for use of national phenomenon as a phrase. It has an independent meaning even though it sometimes refers to someone who is also a hero or a star, a great inventor, a great author or a notorious criminal. Some of the most gifte

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From flagpole-sitting to Grace Kelly, certain persons and pursuits have seized the public imagination and become overnight sensations. Here's an attempt to find out why.

CARRY NATION—Shattered bottles and an unswerving sense of duty made her famous.

human beings do not achieve the status during their lives, while their less gifted contemporaries do. Horatio Alger's novels gave him a national eminence of a sort, but Henry James—although he yearned for the kind of popularity Dickens enjoyed—was disappointed all his life by the failure of his novels.

The late Frederick Lewis Allen provides a number of illustrations of what a national phenomenon is in "Only Yesterday," his social history of the Nineteen Twenties, a period in which—perhaps because the public was being made more aware of the American scene than ever before—national phenomena appeared in abundance.

Lindbergh is perhaps Mr. Allen's most clear-cut example. Mr. Allen does not in the least underestimate Lindbergh's courage and heroism in flying the Atlantic, but he is also impressed by the fanatical public enthusiasm for the flier, which differed so from the attention attracted by those who performed the same feat soon afterward. Only Lindbergh excited such remarks as The New York Evening World's assertion that his flight was "the greatest feat of a solitary man in the history of the human race." For years to come, one could criticize Coolidge, Hoover, Ford, Bobby Jones and other headliners, but an unfavorable remark about Lindbergh was regarded as blasphemous or obscene.

MR. ALLEN'S convincing explanation is that for years the public had been spiritually starved, deprived of its hopes and ideals. The past had been debunked and the present was continually revealed as sordid or scandalous. Thus, although Mr. Allen does not call Lindbergh a national phenomenon or refer directly to the American Dream, his explanation clearly relates the one to the other as the reason that Lindbergh became an idol overnight. His flight was a swift, indisputable demonstration that the American Dream was still alive, that the courage, initiative and self-reliance of the solitary individual might still accomplish new wonders.

Yet this example of the rise from obscurity to the limelight, from rags to riches, does not represent the only manifestation of the American Dream. There can be less pleasant but equally typical experiences arising from a given American mood.

The remark attributed to Barnum, "There's a sucker born every minute," and Texas Guinan's greeting to her night-club patrons, "Hello, suckers," indicate that although hope and optimism are the attitudes most attractive to the public, a cynical and hard-boiled attitude toward too much hope and optimism has a characteristic and recurrent appeal also. And in times of extreme crisis, when depression or war seem an unending threat or a termination of the American Dream's promise of life, liberty and happiness, such figures as Huey Long and Gerald L. K. Smith come to the fore.

THIS kind of rationale must not, however, be pursued too far or too lightly. As the pollsters discovered in 1948, it is easy to be wrong about the mood of a nation which includes among its manifold differences, the difference between a native of Maine and a native of Texas. A national mood (on large affairs) and a national phenomenon (in popular interest) may coincide in time, but it is not always possible to relate the one to the other in terms of causation.

With these qualifications in mind, it may be interesting to look further into some of the personalities who now or in the recent past can be called national phenomena. The choices have been made partly to show that the phrase has an independent meaning, although it has not hitherto been formally defined. They have also been made because the examples in question are related to one another as significant of the public's changing attitudes.

To call Willie Mays a national phenomenon, but to say Jackie Robinson is not, is to risk rocking Ebbets Field and enraging all of Brooklyn. Yet the comparison helps show the difference between a baseball player who is a national phenomenon and one who is simply a great star. (Actually, if skill were the only criterion, the first choice would have to be Ted Williams; he is probably the greatest batter since Babe Ruth.)

Robinson was chosen as the first Negro major leaguer because of his courage as well as his ability. Both qualities are evident in his style of play: his daring base-running, his delight in rattling the pitcher and umpire are part of an entirely justified aggressiveness for which ball players are praised. But Robinson, in his pioneering role, was very much a symbol of an oppressed minority, a symbol again—

ROCKEFELLER—His ability to handle millions and the dimes excited the public.

though in a lesser degree—to that presented by the great Negro boxers.

Willie Mays' personality and his accomplishments are in direct contrast. When his cap falls off while he is running the bases, or when he makes the kind of spectacular catch and throw which inspired a sportswriter to say in 1911: "It must be a wonderful thing to be 20 years old and have the reflexes of a mountain lion!", he appears to the public purely as an enchanting and remarkable human being.

THIS explanation has the virtue, at least, of making it seem not incongruous to speak next of President Eisenhower as a national phenomenon. He possessed this status, as many Presidents and military leaders—however eminent—have not, long before his election, because of a personal quality which showed itself as that of a human being who not only does not act or talk like a general, but does not act or talk like a politician.

It is the same attractiveness which is responsible for the fact that, although the dignity of office makes the public speak of President Eisenhower, it has always thought of him as Ike, never as Dwight.

HEMINGWAY—He has outstripped his own heroes to become a gargantuan phenomenon.

LINDBERGH—The shy aviator who crossed alone to Le Bourget proved irresistible.

Adlai Stevenson's emergence as a national phenomenon in 1952 can be summarized in a word: egghead. Whether or not it was suggested by the oval shape of his head, the significant thing was the necessity for a new word, instead of intellectual, "longhair" or "highbrow." Since the college-educated population has more than doubled in forty years, and since so many intellectuals now have crew cuts, "longhair" has lost even its visual meaning; receding hairlines, meanwhile, have taken away any possible imputation in "highbrow."

SOME of Mr. Stevenson's predecessors in national politics were intellectuals. Theodore Roosevelt certainly was one and took pride in being one, but he dramatized himself so successfully as a hero of the great outdoors that when he became President, Mark Hanna said of this patrician, Harvard man and disciple of Henry Adams: "Now that damn' cowboy is in the White House."

Mr. Stevenson's candid unselfconsciousness as an intellectual is very different also from Woodrow Wilson's eloquence. Wilson spoke with a solemnity becoming in a professor who resembled not only a stern schoolmaster but a clergyman. Mr. Stevenson's genuine informality and his fondness for a wisecrack are typical of the new breed of intellectuals. Professors are not preoccupied (Continued on Page 59)

FRANK COSTELLO—His televised testimony before a crime committee fascinated millions.

Grandma Moses.

Gerald L. K. Smith.

National Phenomena—A Survey

(*Continued from Page 29*)

rather than absent-minded; intellectuals are no longer impractical cranks and crackpots. The new public attitude becomes clear if you ask this leading question: Which would you rather be, an egghead or a blockhead?"

SIMILARLY, authorship not only has become free of the stigma of eccentricity in recent years, but is now one of the most glamorous of professions. Ernest Hemingway's career, for example, is the complete embodiment of all that makes a writer seem a privileged being. He is a national phenomenon as few Americans have been and as other equally important authors are not. Hemingway is one of his own heroes to the public; he not only talks and acts like them but as one who has *almost* been killed more often than any other well-known person, even surpasses them.

In another field, though still somewhat bookish, there have been, recurrently, the Kinsey studies of sexual behavior. These might conceivably have been made in another era, but it is hard to believe that they would have been available to the public and openly discussed, previous to the social changes and relaxed attitudes which have made divorce, for example, seem at times a painful necessity rather than a social stigma.

The personal quality that makes Professor Kinsey a national phenomenon appears in his books, but is far more evident when he expounds his aims in a conducted tour of his laboratory at Indiana University. He speaks of the most intimate matters, long regarded in silence or embarrassment as scandalous or indecent with the matter-of-factness and openness of Elmer Davis discussing political events. The tone, like Mr. Davis', is that of an old-fashioned liberal, and the motives of compassion and sympathy are as unquestionable as the chief social aim of his work—to provide a scientific basis for a greater degree of tolerance—an aim which is as characteristically American as our faith in facts and figures and the belief that statistics don't lie.

THERE is certainly no direct connection between Professor Kinsey and such stars as Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly except that they have won the intense attention of the same public. Since that public was impressed, rather than scandalized by Professor Kinsey's absolute sincerity and realistic honesty, it may be for related reasons that the public made Miss Monroe and Miss Kelly famous overnight.

When any new national phenomenon appears, demonstrating again that the lightning may strike anyone from Shirley Temple to Grandma

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Moses, or when an attempt to fabricate one fails (proving that you can't fool most of the people most of the time), it is natural to remember Lincoln's maxim and the American Dream as well.

It is perhaps not possible to draw any timeless lessons from all this, but there are certain clues that are worth considering.

For one thing, the mere existence of a national phenomenon indicates a degree of national homogeneity: despite our vast geography, we can

Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey

all share an intense interest in a person or thing, although our individual reactions to it may vary.

Second, a national phenomenon is often the most spontaneous manifestation of the democratic process because it is an expression of the public's moods and aspirations, hopes and fears. Would this not be a fruitful field for inquiry—an attempt to equate a given interest with its contemporary setting? Are our interests the same in times of economic well-being as they are in times of economic hardship? Certainly there were well-defined "crazes" or fads, that sprang up during the depression of the Nineteen Thirties. What is the connection between bread and circuses?

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FINALLY, national phenomena are important perhaps most of all, as a means of communication and knowledge. Each of us is part of the public in one or another way, but it is the emergence of a new national phenomenon which makes the individual aware of the entire public, helps him to know he is part of that public and shows him what he has in common with others and how he differs from them.

Unless we know what preoccupies other human beings and excites their concern and admiration, we can hardly be said to know them; and it is an old truth that when one does not know others, one hardly has any knowledge of oneself. Millions of Americans, otherwise separate from or unknown to one another, communicate their most intimate feelings when the voice of the people is heard in the land discussing the latest national phenomena, the newly risen stars of American life.

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