

The Deep Roots of Our Decline

By JOHN ATTARIAN

Neoconservatives increasingly blame our problems—maleducation, victimism, criminal behavior, whatever—on the '60s, as if in those years America abruptly plunged from Apollonian civilization to Dionysian chaos. Recently the Journal's editorialists fixed "the date when the U.S., or more precisely when many people within it, began to tip off the emotional tracks" as August 1968: Supposedly our national life unraveled when protesters battled Chicago police and leftist intellectuals condoned them. Nonsense.

Violence of all kinds, and excuses for it, was multiplying well before 1968. More to the point, the Chicago demonstrators—and many murderers, rapists, muggers and rioters—were born in the '40s and early '50s, and raised in the Eisenhower years, supposedly an era of wholesome nuclear families informed by the right values. If we accept the premise of "family values" advocates, that the child is father to the man, then the '60s mayhem proves that something was wrong with millions of American families in the '50s, and that, moreover, the foundations of civilized life were crumbling long before Chicago.

Yes, the '60s saw mass rejection of self-restraint and confining social institutions, but the camel's nose entered America's tent long before.

Even before World War I, many influential intellectuals had rejected the Protestant ethic of self-restraint. American capitalism's shift to mass consumption, already established in the 1920s, undermined that ethic for the whole society. The much-bewailed illegitimacy rate had already more than tripled between 1940 and 1960, from 7.1 per thousand unmarried females of childbearing age to 21.8. Playboy appeared in 1953; presently, Elvis lewdly bucked his pelvis against his guitar to cheers from middle-class audiences; and in 1959, a federal judge ruled that "Lady Chatterley's Lover" wasn't ob-

scene, and that sending it through the mails was legal, opening the door to torrents of fabricated satyriasis.

And the ideas informing the much-maligned '60s leftist intellectuals, Progressive educators, and prophets of permissiveness like Dr. Spock were already well-entrenched. In 1897, when God was in His church, Queen Victoria was on her throne, America was on the gold standard, and (to naive conservatives) all was right with the world, socialism, anarchism and pragmatism were gaining popularity; Darwinism and higher criticism were already undermining religion; Western high culture



J.-J. Rousseau

was rotten with *fin de siècle* Decadence (inspired by, among others, the Marquis de Sade); and John Dewey wrote "My Pedagogic Creed," launching American education on the road to ruin.

Glorification of spontaneity and the "noble savage" unsullied by civilization started not with the '60s but with the Enlightenment, as did the rise of determinism, which rationalizes misconduct and denies personal responsibility. Rebellion against restraint, including self-restraint, was central to the Romantic movement. As for rationalizing crime as "civil disobedience," has the Journal forgotten Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" or his hysterical "A Plea for Captain John Brown," which lauded this murderer as "a superior man," "heroic liberator," "an angel of light"? Did the '60s scribblers do any worse?

The revolt against civilization, self-control and responsibility, then, was already two centuries old in 1968; the poison, intellectually respectable thanks to

Rousseau, Thoreau, Dewey and others, had been in the bloodstream of belief for generations. The '60s were only the culminating practice of what was preached long before.

But subversive intellectuals and cultural influences could not have succeeded unless they were telling people what they wanted to hear. Ultimately, the blame for our lack of "guardrails" lies with flawed human nature. We sinners have our choices. The buck stops with the sinner, not with the tempter.

Moreover, subversives were crashing an open door. Authority flopped at defending the civilization it guarded. So did such idols of neo-conservatism's pantheon as the GOP and, yes, the family.

Authority not only neglected the guardrails, or (like the judge ruling on "Lady Chatterley") actually removed them, it set a disastrous example by crashing them. Lyndon Johnson manipulated us into Vietnam, then lied about it (remember the "credibility gap"?). Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that declaring war was outmoded. So much for our fundamental political "guardrail," the Constitution. Congress and the Supreme Court failed to bring LBJ to heel. Clearly America's ruling circles were already decadent; Vietnam only weighed them, and found them wanting.

Republicans cannot point fingers, for they proved equally poor custodians of guardrails. They failed to uphold civilization with anything beyond rhetoric, much of it appallingly shallow, indicative of

staggering intellectual vacuity, a pathetic unwiftness for the needed battle of beliefs. Two samples suffice. Dwight Eisenhower, in December 1952 (long before the '60s): "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is." Barbara Bush, August 1992: "However you define family, that's what we mean by family values."

And which "family values" dominated the much-lauded '50s? For the first time, entertainment and indulgence of children was an unofficial national priority, from Disneyland and allowances to cars given upon graduation from high school. Intensely materialistic, their own childhoods harrowed by the Depression, fatally equating indulgence with love, too many American parents were as far removed from the Romans who told their sons to return with their shields or on them as the Keystone Cops are from the Coldstream Guards. If their kids got into trouble at school or elsewhere, they typically sided with them and tried to bail them out.

They put comfort over character and raised their children to fit in, be popular, make money, and have fun. Righteousness ran a poor second. If it had not, the lawlessness and hedonism of '60s youth could hardly have been so widespread.

And what do the parents' derelictions say about *their* values, acquired in the '40s, '30s, '20s?

Today's lack of "guardrails" isn't the '60s' fault. No great nation goes to pieces so abruptly as that. The '60s did not cause our moral collapse. They only unmasked it. But the worst aspect of slapdash neoconservatives' penchant for blaming the '60s is that it understates the problem. The assault on the beliefs underpinning civilized life, and the failure to uphold them, have been going on not for 25 years but for centuries. It's later than you think.

Mr. Attarian is a free-lance writer in Ann Arbor, Mich.