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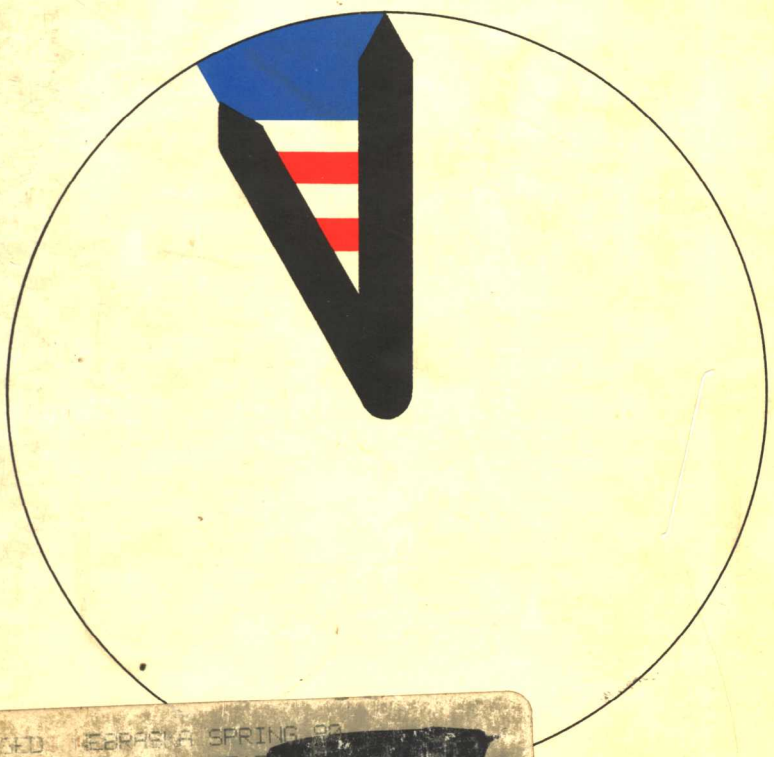
# Andrew Hacker

# The End of the American Era



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# 1: The End of the American Era

EVERY NATION has a history.

And as a nation may trace its origins to some era in the past, so will its history suffuse the present and make a claim on its future. But these years of nationhood are always a bounded epoch: just as such an interlude has its beginnings, so must that time come eventually to its end.

Only a few decades remain to complete the era America will have known as a nation. For the United States has been embarked on its time of decline since the closing days of the Second World War.

Numerous commentators have hailed the freedoms and opportunities gained since that time, while as many others have deplored the injustice and irrationality prevailing throughout this period. Yet what has gone unnoticed is

that these very tendencies can also be symptoms of a nation's deterioration and decay.

The United States is now a freer and more democratic society than at any time in its history. For by democracy I mean a temper of the mind and spirit rather than a political or economic condition. Ordinary people in this country now have a higher estimate of their endowments and broader conceptions of their entitlements than ever before. Virtually every American possesses a self-esteem hitherto reserved for a privileged or talented few. Black or white, poor or prosperous, society's successes and not a few of its failures are infected with the idea that they are equal to any or all with whom they may choose to compare themselves. If the democratic spirit may be measured by how high a valuation people place on themselves, America's claim to being a democracy should be clear and uncontested.

The extension of the democratic spirit is in largest measure the product of a continuing and accelerating technology, which in recent years has created new occupations, higher incomes, and expanded opportunities. The machines of this generation have fashioned a condition of life wherein new millions of Americans have been able to achieve self-respect and persuade themselves of their own importance. Material prosperity encourages new expectations, for as individuals advance in employment, they feel entitled to privileges never previously considered their due.

And as the nation's technology has grown more sophisticated, the more deeply have Americans been penetrated

by the democratic temper. The lure of higher incomes and more interesting occupations each year draws millions of citizens away from rural towns and urban neighborhoods in which they understood who they were and where they belonged. Most Americans in the past were aware that their place was at the margin of society: young people forbore to judge their elders; the poor, indigenous as well as immigrant, remained relatively subdued; and those of other than Caucasian origins were apprised of their inferior humanity.

But controls of this order can survive only when authority is acknowledged and aspirations are circumscribed. Habits of deference have been all but destroyed by the promise of greater freedom, comfort, and variation. Yet the very fact of being freed from traditional controls brings a transformation in human character; and the rapid liberation of so many Americans carries serious —and unanticipated—consequences for the society as a whole.

With the artifacts of prosperity so readily at hand, private activities become all the more enjoyable, weakening any tendency to undergo sacrifices for social ends. Whether the desideratum is material possessions or the less tangible symbols of enhanced status, the right to comforts and pleasures is conceded to all who can afford them.

If every nation has a history, so has each nation its course to run, its age of ascendancy, and its time of decline. Most experience at least one epoch of exhilarating self-confidence when the country seems embarked on a

mission carrying a moral for humanity. But, long or short, every such epoch must come to an end.

The United States is now about to join other nations of the world which were once prepossessing and are now little more than plots of bounded terrain. Like them, the United States will continue to be inhabited by human life; however, Americans will no longer possess that spirit which transforms a people into a citizenry and turns territory into a nation. There eventually arrives a time when a preoccupation with private concerns deflects a population from public obligations. The share of energy devoted to common concerns gradually diminishes, and a willingness to be governed is less evident.

America's terminal hour has arrived at a time when most Americans still see their nation as vigorous in potential and youthful in spirit. Few are prepared to consider the possibility that their country will never again experience the stature it has so recently known. The assumption of unending ascendancy, with its premise that man has the capacity to order his destiny, makes it all but impossible to suggest that the American interlude of nationhood will end. The very thought that America's history is no more than a finite interval has been repressed by a people persuaded of their exemption from the pitfalls which have fated other societies.

Time runs at an ever quickening tempo. If two centuries seem too brief an interval for the rise and decline of a great nation, a single generation on contemporary calendars is now the equivalent of several such epochs in the past. The era of America's nationhood has passed too rapidly for comprehension: a period of grace is usually

granted wherein a society may prepare itself for difficult days to come. But even this hour of reflection has been denied in the American instance.

A nation's decline may be under way even as its power and prosperity seem at their greatest. During the very decades when the material superstructure of a people rises to new and prepossessing heights, the faults within its foundations may remain unnoticed. Moreover, social deterioration should not be seen as the product of wrong-headed policies or inadequate information. On the contrary, the erosion of controls and the rise of self-interest are historical conditions, resulting not from deliberate decisions but rather from new combinations of unanticipated circumstances.

A declining nation can continue to pursue its overseas involvements, using conscripted or mercenary manpower in efforts to carve out spheres of influence and areas of domination. Such attempts at hegemony may persist in the face of internal disruptions and despite the widening reluctance of citizens to serve and sacrifice. Thus, loss of confidence at home may be followed by a residual period during which a nation can continue exercising its might in the global arena. Power is deployed even if purpose is absent; men may be fielded even though morale is missing. The growing unpopularity of the Vietnam involvement resulted chiefly because many Americans began to sense that their nation no longer had a lesson to impart. Nevertheless, before this century is finished, the United States may find itself embarked on similar interventions—even if they, like Viet-

nam, are wars without will.

The very dangers and discomforts of American life result from removing controls that once limited the minds and movements of those now unsettled by current conditions. Tensions and frustrations are bound to arise when 200 million human beings demand rights and privileges never intended for popular distribution. It is too late in our history to restore order or re-establish authority: the American temperament has passed the point where self-interest can subordinate itself to citizenship. Calls for enlightened attitudes and concerted action will continue, but with little ultimate effect. Our history shaped our character, and that history will now run its course.

# 2: *Two Hundred Million Egos*

THE SPAN of a single generation has witnessed the emergence of a new American people. Lofted to new eminences by an exploding technology and stirred by the democratic spirit to new attitudes, tens of millions of quite ordinary individuals have undergone a transformation more profound than any the world has hitherto known. America is the first nation in history to have succeeded in bestowing material comfort and moral equality throughout the majority of a population. How did this happen? What will its consequences be?

Equality is primarily an attitude of mind, an outlook encouraged by widespread prosperity. The average American feels fully entitled to glance at his fellow citizens and proclaim to any or all of them, "You are no

better than I am." Nor is this boast entirely a matter of wishful thinking. The vast majority of the American people have risen far above economic and psychological privation: they have experienced advances in physical comfort and palpable changes in their social condition. This accomplishment is felt by each to be a personal achievement, a due reward for persevering effort. The new American looks upon himself first, then casts his eye to those around him. The judgment he makes of himself is favorable; he can find no reason for diffidence or shame.

The postwar years are far more than a convenient textbook chapter. The generation which has come to fruition in this era differs from all of its near and distant predecessors. Indeed, what has happened in postwar America has unsettled the lives of those born in earlier decades and molded a new character for citizens of the new generation. Every American has been affected: all wear the imprint of an epoch filled with excitement, uncertainty, and the suspicion that they are part of the end of an era.

The great catalyst was the Second World War, an event marking the end of the Depression, of unemployment, of the attitudes of pessimism and despair. The war gave new lives and expectations to the American people, who began to create heightened conceptions of themselves and of their rights and role in the nation. The war was a good thing. If its manifest purpose was to defeat America's enemies, its more enduring by-product was a population with a sense of individual dignity and pride. The price America paid for this leap forward was small

compared with the losses suffered by other nations and peoples: fewer than 400,000 Americans were killed. The counterbalancing gains, by any reckoning, were immense.

America's industrial plant was put back to work at full capacity: wartime needs required that production plants be rebuilt, modernized, and that executives and engineers be given free rein to utilize their organizational and technological imagination. Invulnerable to the raids of enemy aircraft, our productive capacities were expanded and improved. The war's end saw a gigantic complex of assembly lines and offices, warehouses and distribution facilities, all primed to serve the postwar society. Indeed, plans for this transition were made even while the war was in progress. Time, personnel, even materials could be spared to prepare for peace. The American economy was never placed on a full wartime footing, and all memories of "shortages" must be viewed in perspective. There was enough to go around for both civilians and the military, for guns and for butter.

Almost fifteen million young men entered the armed services and the great majority found there a better life than they had known as civilians. They ate better, were better clothed, and enjoyed more amenities. If anything, our military establishment was too abundantly provided for: certainly the food, equipment, and accommodations furnished them were far beyond what is necessary to keep a soldier alive and moving. Other nations fielded armies supported by a fraction of our wherewithal and those men fought as well as ours, if not better. But our forces did not consist simply of soldiers: they were

American soldiers, and hence required three-course meals, recreational facilities, comfortable changes of clothing, and more than token pay.

Most of our soldiers, furthermore, were not fulltime warriors. The majority staffed, serviced, supplied, and generally served as coordinating clerks of a military organization. Some did work that was challenging and others did not. But on the whole the war years were, for those in uniform, the best years they had thus far experienced. And it was inevitable that they would want similar comforts once hostilities were terminated. Even those who had had jobs throughout the Depression remembered that it had been a tense, uneasy, and anxious time. The war years, on balance, were happier and more satisfying.

Civilian America also had a good war. Meat was rationed, but families nonetheless had more of it served on their tables than they had had during the 1930's.* Apart from automobiles, virtually everything continued to be produced in abundance: clothing, movies, magazines, candy—indeed, it is difficult to think of more than a handful of commodities that were not available to civilians. (If evidence for this is needed, examine the wartime issues of any newspaper to see the impressive array of goods and services advertised for sale.) The national balance sheet showed that a substantial proportion of our economic output went for war production, but two countervailing facts should not be forgotten: on the one

* During the three-year wartime period, 1942 through 1944, *civilian* consumption of meat was 441 pounds per capita. During the last three years of the Depression, 1937 through 1939, per capita consumption had been 376 pounds.

hand, much of the nation's "war production" actually went to provide a high standard of living for that sizable portion of the population connected with the military effort; on the other hand, the weight of goods allowed for home use compared favorably with what civilians had consumed during the 1930's. The endemic wartime complaints about "shortages" arose from frustration of expectations only recently established.

War industries with their cost-plus contracts paid well, and other employers were compelled to match those scales if only to retain their staffs. There were jobs for all who wanted them, and the fact that people were eagerly sought by a previously hostile job market instilled in them the idea that they were no longer superfluous human beings. The "Black Revolution" of our time can trace its origins back to 1942 when black Americans discovered that Help Wanted advertisements were also addressed to them. The revolution in the family had its beginnings when women went off to work, discovering that life could be varied, interesting, and independent. And the revolution in the nation's topography started as people poured forth from small towns and the countryside to take up the jobs being proffered in the metropolitan areas. By the same token, the movement westward mounted at an accelerated pace as the new life of California ceased being a Hollywood dream and became an attainable reality. Once started, the momentum of these beginnings would never be undone. If the circumstances of war convince a person that he is no longer the manner of being he has previously been, and if events combine to persuade him that he can become the creature he has al-

ways wanted to be, then he will not willingly revert to his former self simply because peace has been declared. There would be no returning to the farm and the small town; there would be no exodus from the major metropolitan areas; there would be no backward movement from the West Coast to the Eastern Seaboard. Nor would the nation's blacks—or its women—voluntarily revert to submissiveness and subordination.

The war also hastened the slow process of ethnic assimilation. Many of the combatants may have borne names of recent European arrivals, but once garbed in their country's uniform they became full Americans. (In an all-too-familiar scene, the sergeant called the recruit-camp roll: "Kowalski, O'Brien, Goldstein, D'Amato, Brown.") The melting pot had been fusing since 1924, when the last significant numbers of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe gained admission to our shores. But the economics of the Depression and the psychology of prejudice had kept Irish, Italians, Poles, and Jews submerged in their ethnic ghettoes. The stories about Stupid Swedes, Avaricious Jews, Criminal Italians, and Drunken Irishmen were publicly told with little regard for the sensibilities of those affected. However, the war saw the end not only of ethnic humor but of many of the characteristics which once gave credence to the jokes. People who in 1941 were regarded as Kikes or Micks or Wops had by 1946 become simply Americans. That half-decade did a work of assimilation that would otherwise have taken at least two generations.

Accompanying the breakdown of ethnic barriers was the upsurge in geographic movement. Not only were