The Contrarious Temper

People of Paradox, by Michael Kammen, *New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1972. 316 pp. $8.95.*

AMERICA IS A NATION of paradoxes. It is ironic but true that Americans are at once religious and secularistic, spiritual-minded and materialistic, highly principled and pragmatic, puritanical and hedonistic, peace-loving and warmongering, utopian and deeply cynical. James Russell Lowell pointed to this phenomenon when he sardonically observed:

> A strange hybrid, indeed, did circumstances beget, here in the New World, upon the Puritan stock, and the earth never before saw such mystic-practicalism, such niggard-geniality, such calculating fanaticism, such cast-iron-enthusiasm, such sour-faced humor, such close-fisted generosity.

How do we explain such paradoxes? Why are we a nation of contradictions? *People of Paradox* is Michael Kammen's attempt to answer such questions.

Although his work is "an inquiry concerning the origins of American civilization," Mr. Kammen, professor of history at Cornell, refers in his book to the reflections of two astute foreign observers of the American scene who have persuasively depicted the paradoxes in American life: Alexis de Tocqueville and James Bryce. Tocqueville recognized that individualism and idealism were somehow just as characteristic of the American character as conformity and materialism; he discerned two paradoxical tendencies in our deification of the principle of equality: "the one leading the mind of every man to untried thoughts, the other inclined to prohibit him from thinking at all." Tocqueville confessed to having been surprised by two aspects of the American character in 1831: "the mutability of the greater part of human actions, and the singular stability of certain principles."

Like the estimable author of *Democracy in America,* James Bryce, the perceptive Englishman who visited this country half a century after Tocqueville, recognized the tensions that still existed in American life. He observed that while Americans were shrewd and tough-minded, they also were naive and tender-minded, that while they were rootless and atomistic, they also had intense longings for community. "Although the atoms are in constant motion," Bryce sardonically observed, "they have a strong attraction for one another." And despite their inclination to change mood and place so readily, Americans, he found, were tremendously influenced by the power of habit, tenacity and tradition. He concluded that, "it may seem a paradox to add that the Americans are a 'conservative people.' "

Heavily influenced by the observations of Bryce and Tocqueville, Professor Kammen likewise sees America as a nation of paradoxes with "racial discrimination, civic corruption, and violence" being just as much in the American tradition as "equality, morality, and the rule of law." He remarks that, "Americans tend to be more smug and complacent than other peoples, yet more self-critical too, and conscience-stricken." America's moral dualism couples "passionate concern for private, material prosperity with a propensity for periodic public moral renewal and religious enthusiasm. By constantly breaking with the past and conforming to transitory norms and fashions, the American seems to be both anti-traditionalist and highly conformist." But more than that, Americans are trapped by another moral dualism: "the conflict between high ethical standards and the ethos of the market place." For while Americans can, surely, be enormously generous, at the same time they often allow a "dog eat dog" attitude to permeate their social, political and economic activities.

Clearly, then, we are a people of paradox, and it seems important to discover why this is so. The author discerns a number of causes. He points to, among other things, the process of uprooting and migration. Many colonists migrated here to escape anxieties at home, but in so doing "they activated others and created some anew, such as the tension between inherited ideas and environmental realities, which demanded some sort of accommodation." And because we are a nation of immigrants, of divergent origins, ethnic diversity, and social heterogeneity we have produced "discomforting strains."

Furthermore, our ideals and principles have been so elevated that "we often have been unable to live by them consistently or realize even an approximation of them." Much, indeed, has been expected of our nation: "greater freedom, opportunity, and bounty than was ever offered man in all of known history." These are expectations impossible to fulfill completely—or even consistently—given what we know about human nature. It should not be surprising that frustration and self-loathing result

when we find ourselves unable to live up to such lofty aims.

Another source of our paradoxes, Kammen contends, is that we have had to reconcile rugged individualism with conformity, and so "have developed a curious amalgam, a collective individualism," one that submerges the self for "the good of the masses." But collective individualism is but one of the many contradictory tendencies in our national character. For there are also "the conservative liberalism of our political life, the pragmatic idealism of our cerebral life, the emotional rationalism of our spiritual life, and the godly materialism of our acquisitive life."

Many of the early colonies were established by Calvinists who contended that in and of himself man could do precious little to save his own soul, and that in gaining the world he would lose his soul in the process. But Americans, argues Kammen, "have behaved ever since as though he who strives shall indeed gain the world, and save his soul in the bargain." Kammen thinks the Founding Fathers afford a good case in point. In thinking about politics and society, the Founders, he tells us, "proceeded from paradoxical premises." They knew that "men were greedy, corrupt, and self-interested by nature; and that therefore the science of politics consisted in creating a government strong enough to control such dangerous passions." Yet, "they also recognized that strong government was itself a threat to liberty, and that therefore the art of politics consisted in setting effective limits upon governmental authority."

Paradoxically, moreover, many of our Founding Fathers, despite their cynical appraisal of the nature of man, believed strongly in a messianic rôle for America in the world. Professor James Dornan has made some valuable observations regarding this matter. Writing in the Fall, 1970 issue of *The Intercollegiate Review*, Dornan argued that many of the ideological convictions of the Enlightenment passed into American consciousness, "infusing into the intellectual milieu of the time something of the confident belief of the *philosophes* in the imminence of the golden age of peace and harmony. . . ."

But perhaps more importantly, much of colonial thought, as Dornan contended, was marked by an intense belief in "the distinctive quality of the social order which had been established in the New World," and by the view that "America had been selected by Providence Herself to make a profound contribution to the amelioration of the human condition." The Founding Fathers were heavily influenced by such thinking, and thus they directly linked their early vision of our future with a set of high expectations concerning other nations as well: Precisely because America was a new kind of political society, wrote Dornan, the Founding Fathers believed that "she was to become the model society for the universe, and ultimately—in some unspecified way—would be the means of mankind's political redemption, the vehicle for the realization throughout the world of the natural rights of man."

Thus Benjamin Franklin, for example, contended that the American cause is "the cause of all mankind . . . assigned us by Providence." Thomas Paine, who shared this belief, asserted that we had it in our power "to begin the world over again," and, indeed, that America would prove to be "*the Mother Church* of government." Thomas Jefferson is known for his generally optimistic view of the human condition and, especially, of America's position in the world; but some of his statements seem to go at least one step beyond optimism to a messianic view of our rôle in the world. "While we are securing the rights of ourselves and our posterity," he wrote, "we are pointing out the way to struggling nations who wish, like us, to emerge from their tyrannies also." And shortly before relinquishing the office of President, Jefferson asserted:

> The station which we occupy among the nations of the earth is honorable, but

> awful. Trusted with the destinies of this solitary republic of the world, the only monument of human rights, and the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self-government, from hence it is to be lighted up in other regions of the earth, if other regions of the earth shall ever become susceptible of its benign influence. All mankind ought then, with us, to rejoice in its prosperous, and sympathize in its adverse fortunes, as involving everything dear to man.

Even the pessimist John Adams was not immune from viewing America's rôle in the world as a redemptive mission. He thought of the establishment of this republic as "the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." Another political realist, Alexander Hamilton, shared Adams' view, and the usually cynical Hamilton once remarked that America's cause was also "the cause of virtue and mankind." In an essay published in 1784, he wrote:

> The world has its eye upon America. The noble struggle we have made in the cause of liberty has occasioned a kind of revolution in human sentiment. The influence of our example has penetrated the gloomy regions of despotism, and has pointed the way to enquiries which may shake it to its deepest foundation.

Unhappily, we have been unable to live up to the great expectations of the Founding Fathers. And this failure to live up to their lofty aims has resulted in another paradox. As Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote:

> Our age is involved in irony, because so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history.... Our idealists are divorced between those who would renounce the responsibilities of power for the sake of preserving the purity of our soul and those who are ready to cover every ambiguity of good and evil in our actions by a frantic insistence that any measure taken in a good cause must be unequivocally virtuous.

Reviewed by HAVEN BRADFORD GOW

Court vs. Constitution

The Warren Court and the Constitution, by John Denton Carter, *Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, Inc., 1973. 171 pp. $7.95.*

GENERALLY SPEAKING, the United States Supreme Court has adopted a liberal pose, which, in the older and etymologically accurate sense of the term, meant to favor freedom against government. But under the influences of Earl Warren and the New Deal justices it became, as Mr. Carter shows, a wholly reactionary institution, forsaking its constitutional role as an impartial court of justice to convert itself into a political power center in competition with the federal, legislative and executive branches and with the elected state governments. Its decisions tended to concentrate power in the central bureaucracies, thus restricting or diminishing the liberties of the states, of local governments, and of the people. Once the consolidation was achieved, inimical influences could the more easily threaten the entire constitutional structure, since the sensorium of power and policy-making was no longer diffused among the sovereign and independent states.

Mr. Carter tells us that under Chief Justice Warren the Court "was not even concerned with establishing justice but was quite vigilant in granting special privileges to favored minorities and to those elements operating on the fringes of the law or without the law who demanded rights while re-