

What's Wrong with America

by Norman Mailer

At ten thousand feet in the air, a hatch opens in the tail of a cargo plane and a car drives out into space. Before it plummets to earth, a parachute opens, and the vehicle floats down, lands on all four wheels, and drives away. It has been a sensational one-minute piece of film. Nonetheless, I cannot remember whether it was Ford, General Motors, or Chrysler who paid for the ad, and then it doesn't matter. Anyone who has ever rented a car knows there is no easy way to distinguish between Galaxies, Tauruses, and Caprices. They all have little parts that fall off when you drive. What if the mega-millions put into advertising went instead into improving the artifact? Could we rely then on machines that lasted a little longer?

Advertising may have become the one American art form that we can no longer afford. In less than a century, it has moved

from notifying the general public that a new product is available, to the all-out seduction of the consumer by massive injections (massively expensive) of high-tech video and layout. Far at the other end of the equation, that becomes equal to saying that the stuff we manufacture today is just not as good as once it was. Quality is now secondary. The aim of the advertiser is to divert the buyer from the integrity (or lack of it) in the product to the panache of the corporate name. The emphasis is on the surface--the product had damn well better look good.

The cost of this is incalculable. Our pride in what we make diminishes. The inner knowledge we all possess that advertising is mendacity, eats at the desire to make superior products. Our belief that there is value in what we do with our working lives also dissipates. Our concern has shifted from craftsmanship to cosmetics.

I would like to see Congressional legislation that would reward any business enterprise ready to make so good a product that it would prove capable of selling by word of mouth rather than by manipulation of the consumer. That is equal to saying: Why don't we tax corporations in direct relation to how much they budget for advertising and promotion?

Should this incentive take hold, the loss of revenue in the media and in the advertising industry over the next few decades will, no matter how enormous, prove smaller than the gain of living once more in an economy that functions with skill and dedication. The alternative is to keep on polishing the surface while the guts of American enterprise rot within. Who will be the first kamikaze Congressman or high-dive Senator who will dare to give us a shot at becoming competitive with the Japanese?

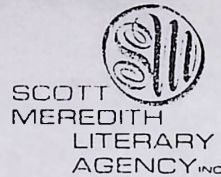
Serving in the Army was the worst experience of my life, and the most valuable. It left me considerably more modest about my middle-class virtues and vastly more respectful of the average man. I am sympathetic, therefore, to William Buckley's idea of a national work force, but I would go further. Let the draft be compulsory if one chooses to serve no more than one year. If one volunteers for two, one can select the nature of one's work. One can be a guard in prison, a counselor to the homeless, a road and bridge builder, a forester, a subway guard like the Guardian Angels--the list of difficult and necessary jobs that can use young people is endless. It is not impossible that we will become in the process a more democratic, compassionate and knowledgeable republic.

Most young men and women who are on drugs get there because it provides them with an inner life that makes their existence supportable. To maintain that inner life, they lie, cheat, steal, mug, and generally ravage the civil body. Intolerable ghetto conditions are not going to disappear any more quickly than the need for an inner life. So the addiction of young people to drugs is likely to continue. Marijuana, while as prone to encouraging one's vices as alcohol, does, unlike other drugs, enable one to work, live, love, and be reasonably decent to one's fellow man. It is also inexpensive. One can afford it on a forty-hour-a-week salary. Ergo, legalize marijuana, and increase the penalties for cocaine, heroin, crack, LSD, and all the other white powders.

Put the copper penny in a museum. It probably costs five times more in time and money than it is worth. If the average grocery store clerk earns six dollars an hour, that comes to one cent every ten seconds. The time spent in counting the pennies in the change can take up those ten seconds, lengthens the time spent on line at checkout counters, and deludes us into thinking the penny has value. I do not even speak of the coining process, but how expensive is it to make a penny, wrap it, ship it to banks, audit it, and so on? Surely, the process comes to more than one cent per penny. Moreover, it deludes us into thinking we are back in our childhood when in fact we are in a non-stop sliding inflation. Abolishing the penny would, therefore, jolt our sense of the real a little closer to reality--a mental adjustment every American can use after our eight lost years with the Pied Piper who led us children down the road to the economic bog. Let the last of the copper pennies carry Ronald Reagan's face. He can be commemorated for leaching out their last vestige of value.

Let's have a law that makes it illegal to sue doctors for malpractise. Medicare and Medicaid will be vastly less expensive once doctors don't have to pay prodigious amounts for insurance.

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August 9, 1982

Mr. Walter Anderson
Parade
750 Third Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Walter:

I'm happy to tell you that Norman Mailer has a terrific idea for a new article for Parade and is ready to start work as soon as you give the okay.

The article will be adapted from a speech Norman will be delivering to the Chubb Society at Harvard in October of this year, so it'll be on your desk in a very short while.

The title, very tentatively, would be TEN RADICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORMING CAPITALISM FROM WITHIN, with suggestions ranging from the slightly tongue-in-cheek-but-if-only-it-were-possible-anyway (such as a corporate income tax graduated in inverse proportion to the amount of advertising a company does, since the worst products are the ones most heavily advertised and therefore the ones most deserving of being taxed) to the serious (reform of the personal income tax so that everyone in the same bracket pays the same flat rate, making cheating on deductions impossible).

Let me know what you think, and I'll look forward to hearing from you.

All the best,

Sincerely,

SCOTT MEREDITH

SM:le

October 9, 1990

Mr. Jack Scovill
The Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc.
843 Third Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10022

Dear Jack:

It was a pleasure talking with you and firming up the assignment for Norman Mailer. Brings back good times and old times.

To confirm our conversation, Norman will write 600 words for us on "Ideas You Don't Want To Hear," as described in the letter I sent to him on September 28 and am enclosing herewith. Norman's article will appear in a special single-advertiser section (Chrysler), which will be published simultaneously in Time, Life, Fortune, Money and People Weekly magazines. We are buying the right to publish the article in those magazines, such right in North America to be an exclusive right of first publication. We will also have the right to republish the article in pamphlets, booklets, promotional materials and other media, provided that any such republication is directly related to the Rediscover America 1492-1992 program. We will expect delivery of the article approximately November 1, but can make adjustments in the deadline if necessary.

For this article, we will pay you, as Norman Mailer's agent, the sum of \$5,000.

I am very much looking forward to reading the article.

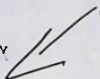
Best regards,

Steve Gelman

STEVE GELMAN
Editor, The Rediscover America Project
Room 755

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FAX FAX FAX 

To: Jack Scovil, The Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc.

From: Steve Gelman, Time Inc.

Here is a copy of my letter to you and my previous letter to Norman.
I'm eager to see what Norman has written. Best regards.

The Time Inc. Magazine Company
Time & Life Building
Rockefeller Center
New York, NY 10020
212-522-1212

September 28, 1990

Mr. Norman Mailer
142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, New York 11201

Dear Norman:

It's been several years since I've been in touch, hoping you'd have time and inclination to take on an assignment, and -- with my good memories of working with you at the old LIFE -- I'd like to try again.

To coincide with the 500th anniversary celebration of Columbus' 1492 voyage to America, Time Inc. is producing a special series of single-advertiser sections to be published quarterly over the next year-and-a-half in TIME, LIFE, FORTUNE, PEOPLE and MONEY. The articles in this series will set forth ideas for improving the nation, taking on themes that range from politics, education and moral values to healthcare, economics and crime. It is our hope that they will add up to a blueprint for America's future and play a part in a "rediscovery" of America. Readers will be asked to respond to the ideas and we will report their opinions in the series. During the summer of 1992 the series will be put together in a special binding and presented to each delegate at the Republican and Democratic Presidential nominating conventions.

I would be most proud if, for this series, you would want to challenge the readers with some ideas that could be put under the heading of "Ideas You Don't Want To Hear." These would be serious, provocative and make readers uncomfortable -- perhaps because they're unorthodox or because they're so blatantly truthful or because they would require personal sacrifice or giving up false faith in a national cliché. There would be no need to go into detail on these ideas; it would be enough to state them, with the briefest of explanation. Probably, there should be no less than five and no more than ten. We'd have room for about 600 words and can pay \$3,000. I'd love to have your ideas for the very first of these sections, which would mean a deadline of this November 1, but I'd wait a long time and schedule it later if that were a factor in your decision.

Thanks, as always, for considering this. If you want to talk, my direct line is 522 3591. For mail, our room number is 755, The Rediscover America Project. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

STEVE GELMAN
Editor, The Rediscover America Project