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CPYRGHT

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Notes fro

America

H. H. COOPER

Notes from the Fifties

We used to laugh ourselves sick. It was the age of the sincere sell and Ike's press conferences, verbatim in *The New York Times*, were a basic text. Within the obscure rooms of triple clearance, in old Tempo Que, informed and helpless, we survived the decade.

All employees were given a badge to wear at all times in the building. On it were your picture—in colour—and your serial number. You wore it on a chain around your neck. I suppose some people felt better wearing the badge, more secure, safer in the guidance of authority. I never quite got used to it. Ashamed for my children to know I had to wear it, I would make light of it when they glimpsed it at home.

For the greater part of my career we were housed in the temporary buildings of World War II. They were surrounded of course by security fences with guards at each entrance. To spend our working life in these Tempos must have given us a sense of not belonging to the established order. But was any other institution more intimately bound to the mid-century structure? Those dusty corridors, beat up walls and leaking roofs gave us a sense of impermanence, of devil-may-care

abandon. Stability was in the great polished stone thoroughfares of Treasury, State, Commerce.

God only knows what my small boys thought as they waited in the car for me on those days when my wife drove in for me. One day the older, who had begun at school, said, 'What are we, Dad—Jews or something?'

* * *

Robert Oppenheimer used to tell of a lady who had a bad dream. She woke up to a frightful figure standing at the foot of her bed. It was red-eyed, bearded, armed with pistols and knives. 'Good heavens,' she cried, 'what shall I do now?'

'Madam,' the Figure replied, 'It is *your* dream.'

The dream was of Treason. The country might be undone. Patriots sprang forward. We did our work in the still centre of the psychic storm.

* * *

The lie detector arrived early in the Fifties. It had a softer name, the polygraph, and it moved in with caution. At first only volunteers would be polygraphed: of course a number of the eager and curious volunteered. Presently it became clear that everybody in certain sensitive assignments was expected to volunteer. Then the polygraph test was quietly made obligatory for all special clearances. A year or so later we had reached the stage where all

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new employees could safely be required to take it, signing a paper that it was voluntary. Finally, all of us had been given the polygraph, and we were programmed to be checked again every five years.

A few homosexuals resigned after coming out of the mechanical confessional. During the period when only special clearances required the polygraph I was hesitant to suggest certain people for the clearance, being afraid they might turn out to be homosexual.

The lie detector room was small and cosy, the atmosphere quiet, very quiet, and friendly, as the soft-spoken operator explained the procedure. The hosepipe sort of piece went around the chest to measure the rate of breathing. There was something else for the blood pressure. Another connection took care of the body temperature and sweat. Before hitching you into this equipment the operator asked you to review the list of questions he was going to put to you. If there were any to which you felt you could not adequately respond with a simple yes or no you were invited to discuss a rephrasing of the question so that you would feel justified in answering in this simple manner.

It did not occur to me then that our conversation was being recorded on silent tape. Nor did I realize that one's reply to a question was almost meaningless. The machine registers the body's reply. There was a rather tiresome discussion of some such question as, 'Do you have any

sympathy with Communism?' I said that any effort towards human social improvement must evoke some sympathy no matter how clumsy, etc, etc.

What puzzled me was the context established in the lay confessional. Clearly, you would register the symptoms of guilt only if you felt guilty. Now on some of the questions I lied but felt no guilt. Such a question as, 'Have you ever divulged any classified information to unauthorized persons' was peculiar in that I could say no and quietly pass. Yet I had, strictly considered, let out little bits of classified information to certain friends and to my wife of course. But in the context and atmosphere of the confessional I felt that what was being sought was not this sort of thing. I remained tranquil and registered innocent.

When I was linked up and the norm established by asking my name and address the operator rubbed his hands together in a quick little gesture of happiness, murmuring, 'A good clear register. . . .' He had a nice bedside manner, with a touch like that of a deferential barber. Eventually he tossed in an unexpected query, such as, 'Have you ever done anything you are ashamed of?' I said at once: 'Frequently.' He smiled as if he had played a little joke. My body remained tranquil. It seemed to know what the operator was looking for.

The worst thing about the polygraph was that I couldn't make out a conclusive case for my dislike of it. It

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defeated me like a bad joke continued to the point of insanity. It eclipsed the humane and made for a moral sickness. Man aspires now to the condition of the machine, and in America he is pleased by the process of his approximation to that condition.

* * *

1955 They say that Chambers sent an anthology of poems to Hiss in prison, with these lines marked:

Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy, And in the withered field where the farmer ploughs for bread in vain.

Couldn't I take the boat down the Potomac, go over the side, disappear, become legally dead? My family would be better off with my insurance than with my salary.

1956 Today at my prison, the office, a kindly old keeper came in, with notepad, and inquired what weather would I prefer at my window today? They seem to do it with some sort of projector. I thought morning mists would be nice, clearing at mid-morning, with sunny clouds and seagulls later in the day. For tomorrow I plan a steady driving rain against the windows, a cosy day.

1957 A clock ticking in an empty room.

Alone in my office, I lay on the

floor in a trance of misery. There was some risk that a secretary would enter, so I planned to joke about my back. How close I feel to my opposite number, gasping on a rug in a Kremlin office.

Letter to Conrad:

In the morning each day I adjust my space helmet,
Put on a face and depart for the geometrical corridors
Where, beneath the forms of order and reason,
Yeasting ignorance and madness work,
Undoing all that is done.

Castillo Armas shot dead on his ceremonial balcony by one of his own honour guard. The little swash-buckler. A singular scene, it must have been a comical assassination. The Chief of State at attention on his palace balcony, when, as in a daylight dream, one of the guard raises his rifle and kills him, *crack*, in the hot Guatemalan sunlight, and down he goes, his trusty .45 at his belt.

My first passport was dated 1936. Since then I have travelled on military passes, special passports, and diplomatic passports. At this late date, in order to get a passport for my trip I am required to appear in person, after filling out long forms with information abundantly available for years in the files of the Passport Division of the Department of State, in the Navy, the FBI, the CIA, the USIA, Army

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Security, and of course in the AEC. Furthermore, I must sign an oath of allegiance to uphold the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic (e.g. John Foster Dulles?).

So I appeared 'in person' at the Department of State, before a school-teacherish woman concerned about her refinement. She took my oath of allegiance. 'That will be \$2.00,' she said.

Who is it that dreams me in His madness?

The Guardians don't like my view of it as a prison. To prove their point, they let Williams out for a trip around the world, let him have three months of it, inviting him to stay and be happy. The poor devil has come back, saying it was wonderful but he couldn't stay outside. Said it would cost too much.

Guardian, taking me to the window, points to my car in the lot. 'Go on, get in your car, feel free to go where you like; you're no prisoner. Feel free.' (When I got to this point in my play, Jim, who has been in the next room for years, put out a hand in protest, crying feebly.)

Excerpt from my son's statement to his psychiatrist, date 1990:

That was the winter in the late Fifties when my father, who was a slow reader, went through all of Jane Austen and listened to Haydn's London Symphonies, over and over, obsessively. He used to say they were sane. I remember I thought that was a funny word to use.

Cinema

JAMES PRICE

Good Morning, Everybody, this is the Barrow Gang

The success of *Bonnie and Clyde* has been a social event, in the same way that the success of *About de soufflé* and *Rebel Without a Cause* was in each case a social event. Both *About de soufflé* and *Rebel* introduced changes in taste, and had an effect on manners, dress and personal style far wider than that of other movies of their time. And like *Bonnie and Clyde* each released something in their audiences. When the chicken-run of *Rebel* and the casual car-stealing and murder of *About de soufflé* were fed to law-abiding audiences the shock was intense and pleasurable. Audiences identified with James Dean or Jean-Paul Belmondo, and went out of the cinema to re-enact at various removes the Dean or Belmondo style. Precisely the same thing seems to have happened with *Bonnie and Clyde*.

Barbara Griggs pointed out in the *Evening Standard* that Faye Dunaway's clothes and hairstyle are subtly updated and actually wrong for their period, so that for all the film's careful placing of the action in the Depression years an unfashionable style is not allowed to come between the audience and the figures