

States of the Union

LOOKING FOR AMERICA

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees . . . had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all dreams. . . .

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD,
The Great Gatsby (1925)

O my America! my new-found land.
—JOHN DONNE, *To His Mistress Going to Bed* (1669)

IS IT STILL possible, or helpful, to have a love affair with America? Many have ceased to view this country as a beautiful lady holding a shining torch, seeing it instead as an old hag holding a broom, or a gun. “Do you really think it matters who is elected President?” a friend asked me not long ago. “It’s the system that counts, and the system is evil.” Somewhere over the overarching democratic rainbow my friend had discovered The Wicked Witch of the West.

One gets the feeling that Emma Lazarus’ famous inscription of welcome has been twirled 180 degrees.

Now it is read by *outbound* voyagers, by boatloads of tired and wretched Americans yearning to be free of the national nightmare. Recently I asked a bright college student who was planning a long European journey why he seemed so anxious to leave America. “Because she’s a whore,” he snapped. And his lips curled—so help me—into the omniscient sneer of a cuckold who had “learned all”; it was the look of a man who would never again be duped by a pretty face or the sweet perfume of pretended innocence. O my America! Eau de cologne!

Four writers, all originally from the Midwest or the South, have attempted with varying success to salvage the old siren dream. They are too sophisticated to subscribe to a madonna-whore theory of America, and too soul-scarred to believe that one can go home again. Yet they seem wistful for “the good old days” when all our enemies were wicked and all our wars were righteous; when statesmen were respected and demagogues disdained; when Americans were truly led, and not misled, by their duly elected representatives. Such a time, of course, never

existed except in our heads, as these writers would be the first to concede. What makes them nostalgic is not their sense of history but their sense of innocence betrayed.

Harrison E. Salisbury dreams of a day when *The Many Americas Shall Be One* (W. W. Norton, 204 pp., \$6.50). A skillful and unsentimental newspaperman, Salisbury is perhaps best remembered for his coverage of Soviet affairs and for his revelations a few years ago in the *New York Times* that American bombs were, indeed, killing women and children in Hanoi. He is tough-minded as he surveys the wreckage of the American scene—the cynicism of the Pentagon, the desperation of the Panthers—but like most Americans he is finally optimistic. “Where is hope to be found?” he asks. “It must be found within ourselves; in . . . an understanding of why so many are so disillusioned, so dissatisfied, so tortured. . . .”

He probes his origins, back in Minneapolis before World War I, when people saluted the American flag as a simple act of love: “. . . no posturing, no legionnairisms, no clasping of hand over heart, no

touching up, just holding ourselves as straight at attention as small-boys' spines could do. . . ."

As one might expect, Salisbury believes in personal salvation. "The only thing that will make society run better and the Constitution work better is better people working more honestly. . . . If that sounds old-fashioned—so be it."

For an idea of just how old-fashioned Salisbury sounds, one need only turn to Bill Moyers' *Listening to America* (Harper's Magazine Press, 342 pp., \$7.95). Moyers spent much of the '60s as Lyndon Johnson's youthful adviser and hatchetman. "For ten years I listened to America from a distance," he confesses, only to learn that America was barely audible. So: "In the summer of 1970, carrying a tape recorder and a notebook, I boarded a bus in New York to begin a journey of thirteen thousand miles through America."

The pious Hegira, of course, eventually brings him back to his natal Texas, which he finds full of militant chicanos, discouraged blacks and obdurate whites who, five years after the passage of civil rights legislation Moyers helped to draft, are just as cussed and racist as ever. At a roadside café Moyers discovers black customers being segregated in a back room. He gives the waitress a lesson in Federal law.

"Hey, Charlie," calls the waitress, "this feller says it's against Federal law for us to serve them nigras back there."

"No shit," says Charlie. It seems that no one in the place has heard of the Public Accommodations Act of 1964. "Nobody's told me it's against the law but you," Charlie says to Moyers. "Now what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to hit the road," says Moyers. And he does, traveling on to Little Rock, to Johnsonville, South Carolina, and finally to Washington, D. C. By then his tape recorder has listened neutrally to the complaints of thousands of Americans—rioting

students in Kansas, chauvinistic Legionnaires in Indiana, unemployed engineers on the West Coast. It is The Big Ear kind of journalism that we have come to cherish—a man, a mike and a Babel of tongues.

Unfortunately Moyers does little to sort out the voices or to impose some coherence on his unraveling tape. "I found that most people not only hunger to talk, but also have a story to tell," he concludes somewhat fatuously. "They are not often heard, but they have something to say."

Unlike Salisbury, Moyers suspects the old dream is dead and cannot be revived. Americans, he says, "feel helpless to make their government



HARRISON E. SALISBURY

hear them. They were brought up to believe that each man can make a difference, but they have yet to see the idea proven. . . . There is a myth that the decent thing has almost always prevailed in America when the issues were clearly put to the people. It may not always happen."

BUT IT IS precisely this myth which, according to Willie Morris, is reality in Yazoo, Mississippi. *Yazoo* (Harper's Magazine Press, 192 pp., \$5.95) is a strange and beautiful book, Proustian in its remembrances and Faustian in its moral insights.

Morris was born and bred in Yazoo—"a good ole Mississippi boy,"

he calls himself—educated to a higher luster in Texas, and baptized under fire on the island of Manhattan. (He recently resigned as editor of *Harper's*.) Two years ago he started making "down home" visits to Yazoo, partly to report on the town's response to a Federal court order calling for instant integration of the high school, and partly, one infers, to get himself together.

The trip seems to have been a success on both counts. First he discovers he still believes in integration, after years of hobnobbing with the chic separatists of New York. "Just what did integration mean? Who cared about it now? Certainly not my



BILL MOYERS

friends in New York. . . . The hard-hat workers, suddenly the modish Forgotten Americans, had become more adept at race-baiting than the Southern rednecks. . . ."

Then, to his delight, he discovers that many people in Yazoo, both black and white, believe in integration, too. There is hope in this, thinks Morris, the sort of hope Martin Luther King and his followers once kindled. "The idealistic spirit which prevailed in some quarters in Yazoo among whites and blacks was the national spirit of six or seven years ago. Black separatism was no more in vogue than recolonization to the Gold Coast, and despite their legendary deprivations, ninety-nine Missis-

issippi blacks in a hundred would spurn the rhetoric of their own militants who would have them believe that integration was now passé, after all we had been through, and that one of the brighter hopes was the apocalypse in blood."

Morris' judgment may be somewhat skewed by sentiment. He really loves Yazoo and most of its people, and whenever he discovers that one of his old basketball buddies or beer-drinking chums is not a through-and-through Klanner, he tends to leap for general joy. He asked his dying grandmother what she thought of black and white children going to school together. "Oh, son," she said,



WILLIE MORRIS

"I just don't know. . . . But I think they'll get along fine, if people'll just let 'em alone."

But nobody in Mississippi, or anywhere else for that matter, is letting the children alone. That is why newly integrated Yazoo High School is now segregated along traditional Northern lines—by social and academic groupings. Yazoo, like Yonkers or Ypsilanti, still has a good distance to go before the many Americas shall be one.

Morris identifies the country with his childhood. And he may be right. "What happens in a small Mississippi town," he says, "with less of a population than three or four apartment complexes on the West Side of

Manhattan Island will be of enduring importance to America. It is people trying: loving, hating, enduring cruelties and perpetrating them, all caught, exacerbated, and dramatized by our brighter and darker impulses." Morris seems to think the brighter impulses will prevail, at least in Mississippi. He's not betting on Manhattan.

THE MANHATTANITE'S view of America is presented by Calvin Trillin, one of the *New Yorker's* many master stylists, with considerable wit and irony in *U. S. Journal* (E. P. Dutton, 314 pp., \$6.50). According to the dust jac-



CALVIN TRILLIN

ket, Trillin spent three years traveling around the country in search of stories that would give "a picture of America at the close of its most turbulent decade." Neither Morris nor Salisbury, both of whom have much to say about the Civil War, would have allowed *his* publisher to call the '60s America's most turbulent decade. Nevertheless, Trillin has chosen his subjects carefully; they reflect familiar agonies.

In Denver he covers a school board election in which the citizenry overwhelmingly repudiates two incumbent integrationists. After the voting, notes Trillin, "Black separatists were said to be treating the election as merely the final frivolous de-

cay before serious talk began on who was to control the schools of each neighborhood." Moreover, "even the integrationist Negroes who supported [the liberal candidates] seemed reluctant to go into details about a program whose premise is that the way to improve the performance of black children is to expose them to white children." Any resemblance between Trillin's Denver and Morris' Yazoo seems strictly coincidental.

Trillin is essentially an ironist, and when he pays the obligatory visit back home, to Kansas City, Missouri, he goes there not to praise it but to bury it. "A lot of Midwesterners who live in the East," he says, "are careful to preserve their Midwestern identity, the great crime for a Midwesterner being not to leave the Midwest but to leave the Midwest and forget where he came from."

He then reminds us that Kansas City is also known as the Heart of America. In the week before he started his tour around the state, he observes "the Heart of America . . . had eight bombings in three days." Later Trillin asks a citizen of Drexel, a small town only an hour from Kansas City, what he thinks of the bombings. The citizen answers with a smile, "Looks like it's pretty good for us. Folks get scared up there, a lot of them are going to move down to Drexel." O my America!

The picture of America one gets from Trillin's bas-relief vignettes is one of nearly unrelieved pettishness, avarice and narcissism. If the same material were strained through Moyers' Big Ear, or even through Morris' sensitive spirit, we would instantly be reduced to despair. But somehow, under the influence of Trillin's legerdemain we are made to feel it is all very funny. The situation is remindful of John Gunther's old distinction between Germany and Austria. "In Germany," he said, things are bad but not terrible. In Austria things are terrible—but not bad."