

States of the Union

SPRING SEEDING

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



TS. ELIOT thought April was the cruelest month because it bred "Lilacs out of dead land" while stirring "Dull roots with spring rain." He promised to show us something even worse: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust."

I spent the first part of April sitting home brooding about dust, rain and other varieties of fallout. Here are some of my notes.

SATURDAY: It's been a raw, unpleas-

ant spring here in Connecticut, with survival time often upstaging arrival time. The tulip and crocus bulbs Diane and I buried along the walkway last fall were born again, right on schedule, only to be instantly bludgeoned to death by the cold, persistent rain.

This morning two Canadian geese, looking plump, well-plumed and unaccountably omniscient, set down upon our pond, climbed ashore and waddled to the edge of our patio, there to await largesse. Diane and I raced to the breadbox, hoping to convert our guests into spring tenants. It's the Passover week, but we fed them English muffins just the same. (Matzoh is not manna for goose necks.) The visitors chomped delicately, honked noisily, then flew away—probably forever. Another false spring.

SUNDAY: "Joy of Easter and Passover Lifts Away Winter Woes," announces the *New York Times* on its front page. It is a brave try, but most of the other stories in today's *Times*—tales of dwindling oil reserves and of burgeoning nuclear hazards—suggest that we are still bogged down in the winter of our discontent. Spring will be a little late this year.

MONDAY: I have been standing at

our livingroom window, keeping a lookout for omniscient geese. Through the rain and mist I try to focus on the large, mysterious world that exists beyond my small, familiar pond. What is the meaning of this odd malaise, this sense of dull roots unrenewed?

It occurs to me that the real energy crisis has nothing to do with fossil fuels. It is taking place not in the ground but in our bones. We have grown slack jaw and forlorn; we watch Walter Cronkite for news of our demise. Who knows why? Perhaps, after all, it's just a petroleum problem. Our habit of pillaging the planet's seedbed—the tribute we earthlings have exacted in oceans of oil and whole Himalayas of coal—may have finally backfired, debauching our own soul-seeds and robbing us of springtime.

All of us, Jimmy Carter included, could use a few days of sunshine, a little solar encouragement. But Carter is no sun king; he acts as chilled as the rest of us. Carter has taken the lid off gas prices without first compelling Congress to impose a windfall profits tax on the big oil companies. Yet if, by some odd chance, Congress should approve such a tax anyway, the dollars would probably go right back to the corporations in the form of energy research funds. "Money," noted Rousseau, "is the seed of money."

TUESDAY: This morning I got a phone call from Bonni McKeown, a woman in Beckley, West Virginia, who is leading a group of locals opposed to reductions in Amtrak service. The group calls itself "Retain the Train," and the train they have in mind is the Cardinal, which runs sulkily each day between Chicago and Washington, D.C., passing through scenic West Virginia in the dead of night. For people in places like Beckley, Crab Orchard and Shady Spring, the Cardinal must do in a pinch; it constitutes the region's entire public transportation system. So residents brave the predawn chill, the shoddy service and the frequent rock slides along the Cardinal's right-of-way. They have no alternative.

But now, Bonni McKeown has told me, the Department of Transportation

A NONAGENARIAN'S ADVICE FOR THE SURVIVAL OF FREEDOM

"To have peace . . . always be prepared and ready for war."

George Washington

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

The enemy of Freedom is Communism in practice. In practice it denies all human rights.

Lenin advised against risking all-out war. If confronted by a strong power, Lenin told his followers, "Go one step backward," i.e. submit, in order to be able to "go two steps forward later." He advised against "risking the fatherland" (Russia) in war.

Lenin promised the Russian leaders everything Russia needed for its development. "The capitalist," he said, "will sell the rope with which to be hanged, for a profit." Hence, the Free World should not sell technology to Russia or to dictatorships elsewhere.

FOR FREEDOM TO SURVIVE, ENERGY MUST BE CONSERVED

Encourage Modest Living. Encourage more public transportation, sharing of automobile rides, minimum use of fuel and electricity at home.

Discourage palatial homes, palatial business offices, large automobiles. Discourage energy-consuming luxury.

IT IS ANIMAL INDULGENCE TO LIVE IN LUXURY WHILE MILLIONS, SOME IN THE FREE WORLD, LACK FOR BREAD.

Luxury living aids Communist propaganda for revolution.

To compensate for the loss of jobs in luxury production, encourage the manufacture of goods for export. Most important, support projects for the conservation of natural resources and for saving cities from becoming slums.

WARNING

I fear that if the Free World does not conserve sufficient energy for both production and consumption, Communism will conquer the whole world.

Dr. Sol Feinstone
Nonagenarian

wants to derail the Cardinal, along with dozens of other passenger trains. If Congress doesn't stand in its way, Amtrak will cancel 12,000 miles of passenger service by October 1. That's 43 per cent of its present schedule.

Trains, of course, are remarkably energy-efficient, so it makes no sense for the Carter Administration to preach conservation on the one hand and cut rail service on the other. For West Virginians, on whom Carter is relying to pry loose millions of extra tons of coal, the contradiction is all the more striking. Bonni says, "The government wants to move coal but it won't move people." Surely there is a creative energy shortage in the White House.

WEDNESDAY: Maybe the roots of our malaise lie deeper still. They could be linked to the very seeds of our universe, the atoms and their assorted nuclei, the stuff of all beginnings and all endings. We have been dissecting and sowing those primal kernels for nearly half a century; now we are reaping.

The paper today says nobody trusts nuclear experts any more. Well, it's hard to credit temporal opinions when the stakes are eternal. Besides, our nuclear experts seem to be learning while on the job, which is all right in most professions but not in this one. That hydrogen bubble that suddenly materialized in the Three Mile Island reactor core astonished everyone, laymen and technocrats alike. To this day no one completely understands why it appeared, or why, mercifully, it went away.

I would not want a nuclear scientist for my bookie; their predictions are even less reliable than are Jimmy the Greek's. For years the nuclear clan has been pegging disaster odds at better than a billion to one. "Astronomically improbable" is the way they keep putting it. And after the Pennsylvania tragedy they didn't switch or cover their bets. It may have happened once but it could never happen again, right?

The reason it happened in Middletown, we are told, was "human error." A worker in the plant shut down two valves he should have left open;

another technician misread a crucial gauge; and a third person, without bothering to consult the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), took it upon himself to let off steam, thereby filling Pennsylvania's spring with radioactive isotopes, *i.e.*, nuclear seeds.

The NRC apparently finds solace in its discovery that the errors were merely human. Surely the system can be perfected to overcome flesh-and-blood fallibility. Smarter computers. Slicker lubricants. Louder sirens.

That reminds me of a story I was told recently by a friend of Norwegian descent. It's an ethnic joke about a rusty guillotine. It seems an Englishman, a Frenchman and a Norwegian were brought one by one to their beheadings, and each was allowed to make a pronouncement before the blade dropped. The Englishman shouted, "God save the King"—and was himself saved when the guillotine failed to work. Then the Frenchman shouted, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"—and he, too, was spared by a mechanical malfunction of the guillotine.

Finally, it was the Norwegian's turn. Did he have anything to say before he was beheaded? Yes, he did. "I think," said the Norwegian, staring up at the blade, "that just a tiny drop of oil in the hinge can fix it."

THURSDAY: Sunshine at last.... Blessed solar heat. Two male mallards splash down in the pond and quack for their mates. Who can blame them? Even if it's not raining, it's a good day for ducks.

Eggs are percolating; pregnant women and their children are returning to Middletown. Carter has appointed a commission to look into the whole nuclear mess. Probably nothing will come of it, but it's a good commission. Nobody who was appointed represents the nuclear or utility industry. One member is a housewife who lives near Middletown.

Meanwhile, Ted Kennedy and some of his colleagues in the Senate have vowed to fight for a windfall profits tax till they drop. In the end they may well drop, but the battle itself will educate

people and it may scare the hell out of the oil lobbyists. Things are stirring again; energies are starting to flow.

This morning's mail is sunny, too. A friend has been kind enough to send me an essay about the origins of mankind, written by one Lynn Pollard, who is eight years old and lives in New York. Her essay, titled "How We Got Ourselves," is spring-green throughout.

One day God bumped into Mother Nature. He said, "We are the only humans on earth."

"You are right, I'm lonely," said Mother Nature.

"Will you go out to dinner tonight with me?" said God.

"Yes," said Mother Nature.

"Eight o'clock?" said God.

"Yes," said she. "Where?"

"The Racoon Inn," God answered.

This went on and on for a long time. A whole year passed by.

(A year later):

"Mother Nature, or may I call you Pinellape? Here is the engagement ring I promised you," said God.

"Oh God, thank you so much for the ring!" rejoiced Pinellape.

Soon after they got married. Judge Owl married them.

"Oh God! I'm so thankful that we're married," said Pinellape. "I'm going to have a baby!" she whispered.

"What! Oh boy!" yelled God.

The news was spread and so were cigars.

This is the story of the first baby. This baby had children and the baby had children, so now there are millions of people all over the world.

In this story you learn why women are usually scared to tell their husbands about it if a woman is having a baby, how we have us, and why men give out cigars when they find out about a baby.

FRIDAY: A post-Passover miracle—our geese have returned. They have parked themselves beside our budding euonymus bush (which in October will be a burning scarlet) and are honking happily at Diane, who comes bearing stale bread. I am cheered by these unexpected arrivals; tonight I shall pass out cigars.