

# SPEAKING OUT

## Take a good, hard look at Providence, folks

By CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

I HAVE just returned to the richest country in the world and should be impressed by the affluence about me, but I am not. And I ask myself if I see the same things that a visiting tourist would see on first entering the country. Well, judge for yourself:

First impressions — and they do have validity — are those of massive size: When one travels about the country one feels it, but especially is this true as one sails into New York Harbor and sees the Verrazano Bridge, the longest in the world; the twin buildings of the World Trade Center, each 110 stories high; and finally, the magnificent Manhattan skyline. The sheer size of New York is both awesome and frightening and, from a distance, beautiful. But what is behind the facade?

Let us take a look at Providence, a not atypical American city. What are the first sights that hit you, those visual characteristics that one gets accustomed to after living here for awhile and then no longer sees because they become an accepted fact of life?

The general impression, and this is true of so many of our cities, is a negative one. The city roads are a disgrace; in driving more than 20,000 miles in England, I never experienced anything as bad. I suppose this might be explained partly by the colder winters here which break up the roadways, but also to be considered

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are the massive, gas-guzzling monsters which use the roads and whose excessive weight helps break them down faster than the small cars of Europe. There is also an apparent lack of commitment to do anything to improve the situation. And the drivers who use these roads are certainly in a class by themselves!

As a concession to this wheels-oriented society we have also destroyed too many scenic areas with

gigantic, flashing, neon-lighted signs which inform us that gasoline, hamburgers, rugs, and booze are for sale.

There is the noise, from cars and planes, which makes ordinary conversation difficult, destroying our serenity.

Our houses are big, but too many show signs of neglect and general untidiness. In this richest country there is the obvious irony that so much poverty exists and is so shockingly

noticeable as one drives through our capital city.

And there is the dirt. One can rationalize by saying that this is the result of old age; yet London is nearly 2,000 years old and much cleaner, so this excuse won't do.

Finally, as I look at people in the streets, in shops, and in restaurants, there is the obesity. Even though the ubiquitous commercials forever remind that this or that food won't add pounds to our weight, we still overindulge; to the extent that, on average, we, as individuals, eat eight per cent more food now than we did 12 years ago! This overindulgence also manifests itself in tape recorders, color TVs, and a whole mass of gadgets that we feel compelled to buy. Does this tell us something about ourselves; that in our concern for our own individual freedoms and desires we have sacrificed those attitudes and things that make life more pleasant for all of us?

Yes, it is good to be back where a person has opportunity, can earn good wages, and live well in a comfortable suburban home. But this is not evident as we first see the heart of any society, its cities. So before I settle in and get acclimated to the ugly facts of American city life, I want to remind myself and others of the work that needs to be done. □

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