A Revolutionary Age

Introduction

There are periods in history when troubles multiply, change accelerates, and nations enter an era of revolution. Signs abound in this last quarter of the twentieth century that we are nearing such an era. Our economy is in deep trouble; there is a widespread sense of disaffection; intellectuals find fault with our institutions; dishonesty and crime are rampant; and yet, through it all, technological marvels with a potential for both good and evil are being generated at an unprecedented rate. A revolution is in the making. Whether it moves us toward the realization of our hopes or of our fears depends on the wisdom with which we guide it.

I shall be writing in this chapter primarily about the United States, but our land is not unique. Situations with similar revolutionary potential are found throughout the industrialized democracies. Communist nations have their own full share of problems, but their consequences under communist dictatorship could be quite different. In the less technically developed parts of the world, problems are both deep and often seemingly insoluble.

Here in the United States, the growing public disaffection and distrust has been documented in numerous polls. There have been ups and downs depending on economic conditions, on political circumstances such as President Reagan's skilled use of the media, especially television, and on events such as the Vietnam War and the revelation of the secret sale of arms to Iran to raise funds for the Contra revolutionaries in communist Nicaragua. The general trend, however, reflects a worsening situation. A Harris Poll that has been repeated over the past 15 years shows a steady increase in the public's sense of alienation. People increasingly distrust their leaders in both business and in government.

It is encouraging to note accounts in the news media of leading Amer-
icans who see major changes ahead and urge positive steps to cope with them. Television newsman Walter Cronkite, in an address to the 1980 Harvard University graduating class, referred to the "impending revolution" and listed issues that require the urgent attention of the rising generation. Richard Strout, dean of the Washington press corps, in an interview with a leading news magazine, likewise expressed the belief that change is inevitable. He urged the adoption in this country of a parliamentary system. Many leaders have recommended significant but smaller governmental changes. A popular proposal advocated by former President Carter among others, is a single presidential term of six years. Irving Shapiro, former president of the DuPont corporation, has written that "the 1980s will be a period of building new institutions in government and society." In addition to the suggestions concerning possible changes in government, there have been numerous proposals aimed at enhancing the societal benefits of business. It is a hopeful sign that leaders who recognize the magnitude of our problems are also concerned with ways to cope with them. The more one examines the suggestions, however, the more apparent it is that they are either vague or so diverse that an early consensus on solutions is unlikely. It is also reasonable to ask: are they of a scale adequate to cope with the magnitude of the problems we now face?

If, indeed, we are living in a revolutionary age, it may be profitable to seek lessons from an earlier, comparable period in history.

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of extraordinary change in the western world. It was then that the Industrial Revolution took place in Britain and that political or Democratic Revolutions occurred in America and in France. Major changes in religious thought were going on at the same time, though most historians would place the high point of the Reformation, or Protestant Revolution, in the first half of the sixteenth century when Martin Luther and John Calvin broke openly with the Catholic Church. Thus during this rather broad period of time the western world underwent a triple revolution: religious or ethical, industrial, and political.

I suggest that we face today a similar triple revolution that is also likely to extend over a broad period, though with the peaks perhaps less separated. Events move rapidly in today's world. To designate the ethical, industrial, and political components of this new revolutionary wave I shall use, respectively, the terms Rational, Technological, and Environmental.

This chapter will deal with these six revolutions, three in the past and three just beginning.

To avoid ambiguity, it will be well to define the meanings I attach to the term revolution. It is, and here will be, used in three related senses: (1) any major industrial or social change of lasting significance occurring in a short period of time; (2) the overthrow of a government or change of a political system by force; (3) a major change of leadership by whatever means achieved.