THE TWILIGHT OF CAPITALISM*

By Robert S. Browne

I. Introduction

That the United States economy is in an unprecedented period of upheaval and that American society itself is undergoing an unparalleled degree of instability and tension can hardly be disputed. The bleakness of other eras, the bitterness of the abolitionist and Civil War periods or the despair of the depression years, for example, would certainly rival this claim, but even they do not measure up to the realities of the moment.

Symptoms of the economy's sickness are manifest, some of them recent and others of such considerable vintage as to be virtually permanent features of the economy. Consider, for example, the annual payment of nearly $4 billion in subsidies to farmers to compensate them for not growing food; the payment of $13 billion a year to persons who are unable to earn enough to permit them to survive at a minimum level of subsistence; the ever-increasing difficulties of getting housing constructed at a rate which even equals the rate of attrition of existing housing, to say nothing of reducing the quarter-of-a-century-old shortage of decent housing; the continuing disclosures revealing the manner in which our environment, our persons, indeed our very food, water, and air supply, have been knowingly poisoned by the "responsible" business sector of our society.

The disintegration of the American economic and social system is reflected in the high and rising crime rate, the widespread addiction to dope, and the unprecedented numbers of employable males who have dropped out of the labor market and no longer seek work. And widespread crime is always to be interpreted as an into

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indication of severe dissatisfaction with the way the system is operating, a dissatisfaction which leads to contempt for the governing authorities and all they represent.

If there is built into the system, or if a significant number of individuals believe that there is built into the system, a failure mechanism — a system of obstacles and rewards which will somehow assure the success of one group while frustrating another — then it is only a matter of time until the frustrated class will begin to ignore the old accepted rules and will devise its own ethics and procedures. Alternatively, it may withdraw from the game entirely, whether by tripping on drugs or alcohol, by creating counter-economies, or by living outside the system via "hustles" of various sorts. These reactions are understandable, in fact rational, if one becomes convinced that the system is stacked against him and that there is no real route for bringing meaningful change into it. When the President calls for a return to the traditional American virtues of hard work, thrift, and self-discipline as a means of "getting ahead," he is apparently unaware of how his words sound to many of his listeners.

II. Public Efforts To Control The System Fail

Bitter experience has demonstrated that the politicians and bureaucrats who assume responsibility for "making the system work" are generally part of the problem rather than part of the solution. The long and inglorious history of most of our state and federal regulatory commissions is an eloquent example. In most cases, the public commissions set up to protect the interests of the consumer and the general taxpayer have rather quickly become tools used by and for the exclusive benefit of the vested interests they were designed to regulate. The state public utility commissions, the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Federal Trade Commission — all come to mind in this connection. The agricultural subsidy programs, originally designed to protect the income of America's farmers, have become, in effect, instruments to destroy those farmers by primarily benefiting the corporate agricultural establishment and a few of the larger growers.

Indeed, in the case of the agricultural subsidy program, the harmful effects have been wide-spread while the benefits have accrued to a remarkably limited class of people. By tying the subsidy payment to land ownership rather than to land use, the program compensated the landlord for leaving his land idle while making no provision for giving stipends to the farm laborers and sharecroppers whom the program inevitably rendered surplus. The result was to displace the small farmer as well as hundreds of thousands of illiterate, unskilled farm laborers and to force them