

*A different year,
a different time*

Nineteen Twenty-Five

Anthony Harrigan

INSCRIBED ON ONE of Paul Gauguin's paintings were the ultimate personal questions: "Where do I come from? Who am I? Where am I going?" We all ponder those questions in life, and any approach to answers involves consideration of the beginning of our journey through life. My journey began in the year 1925, one of the high points of excitement in the American adventure. The second quarter of the twentieth century found the United States, a nation of 113 million, in a condition of unparalleled prosperity, or so it seemed to people in Eastern cities who rode the wave of the prosperity that characterized the beginning of President Calvin Coolidge's first full term in office. James Grant, chronicler of the life of Bernard M. Baruch, the Wall Street giant, reminds us that the Dow Jones Industrial Average had fluctuated between 50 and 100 in the years from 1906 to 1924, and then soared to 157 in 1925. This was what Grant called the "seismic bull market" of 1925. Indeed the Coolidge years — 1924 to 1928 — constituted four of the most prosperous years in the history of the United States. As William Allen White wrote in *A Pilgrim in Babylon*, when Coolidge began his term "the tide of the American industrial and commercial boom of the twenties was almost at its full." In the autumn of 1925, when I came into the world at the Women's Hospital in New York City, that peculiar phe-

nomenon of the 1920s — the Florida land boom — was at its height.

As Frederick Lewis Allen wrote in *Only Yesterday*, the Florida land boom was "the most delirious fever of real estate speculation" to attack the United States in 90 years. Twenty-five thousand real estate agents sold house lots or acreage in Miami in 1925. In Lawrence Greene's phrase, it was "The Era of Wonderful Nonsense." In the seven years since the end of World War I, American society had undergone an extraordinary transformation. Prohibition, which was supposed to achieve a moral miracle, had a pernicious effect on public morality and the public order, producing crime on a scale hitherto unknown. The verities of the simpler, pre-war age were eroded by a new mood of sophistication and permissiveness. Change was accomplished by a new literature and by mechanical innovation such as the use of the automobile on a tremendous scale, which offered a new mobility. It was a kind of premature modernity that characterized America in this period of change, a modernity for which the country wasn't prepared. Arresting technical advances were made without the American people having a clear idea as to where they were going, where the technology and communications were carrying them. Old social constraints were being scrapped, and nothing

well-thought-out was being substituted for them. Ethical adjustments were necessary, but often not made. The speculative fever of 1925 mirrored runaway change within American society. Within a few years, the nation would pay dearly for a period of mindlessness and excess. The most intelligent people didn't understand the real state of the country or what was happening. A Yale economist would forecast an ongoing boom. The dominant elements in American society and government failed to perceive the huge gaps in the fabric of American prosperity.

In 1925, to be sure, the American people didn't have the instruments that Americans of the 1980s have for appraising the state of their country's present or for peering into the future. Economic and social forecasting was in its infancy, and the media lacked access to specialists capable of analyzing trends. Indeed data wasn't available on the scale Americans are accustomed to in the late twentieth century. Today, Americans expect to have a real time picture of the condition of the country; analysis is instantaneous. This was an unknown phenomenon in 1925. In addition, Americans in the 1920s didn't begin to understand the processes of modernity. They saw them as rather limited. Those Americans who lived in cities, and even those who lived in the countryside and who owned a Model T automobile, were aware of changing times. The city dweller thought he was in a new age, as he was indeed. But Americans of the mid-twenties had no inkling of the extent to which technology would change their lives. They had no notion of the coming wonder drugs or the incredible changes in transportation that would result from the full evolution of the air age. They didn't dream of the technological devices that we take for granted in the 1980s or the social changes that would accompany or result from technological innovation. For example, they didn't understand that the great age of European immigration was drawing to an end and that the servant would disappear from American households. Businessmen didn't imagine that unionism would rise to

great power in the next decade and diminish in later decades. Today, people have a very fully developed sense of the possibilities of technological and social change, an awareness that didn't exist in the year I was born. That awareness is a distinct byproduct of more modern times. Indeed, given the slow pace of change in the past, one realizes that such awareness never existed before very recent decades. Now, of course, we live in a blizzard of change and are accustomed to it; we expect it; we can't imagine a world without rapid change. Thus a very basic condition of life has been altered beyond measure in less than 60 years.

I say less than 60 years ago. But how long ago was 1925? Those of us who were born in 1925 don't necessarily think of ourselves as very old. To be 60 in Shakespeare's time was to be ancient, but in the late twentieth century the life span has increased tremendously. For many people, retirement from work doesn't come until one is 70. On the other hand, consider the buildings that date from 1925. Many of them seem positively ancient, relics from another age. Time, then, is relative. Stone, concrete and steel may age very rapidly, with architectural forms becoming dated in the matter of a few decades, whereas creatures of flesh and blood may transition across very different eras, adapting and adjusting with the years and, in many respects, retaining aspects of youth. This isn't always the case, of course, for we all know people who in their manner of speech, attitudes, attire or otherwise, seem to be fixed in one decade. The human mind, we should recall, enables us to find roots in a variety of decades, generations, and even centuries. The modern man and woman, as a result of reading and study, need not be entirely cut off from the classical world and its vision of life.

Whether we are looking at the world 60, 600, or 2,500 years ago, we need eyes that penetrate to the essential spirit of an era in human life. To understand a society, we need to comprehend what it was that it could not imagine or foresee. The

Romans, in republican times, never conceived of revolution into the empire. And in the early empire there was no conception of the seriousness of the threat on the imperial frontiers. Or consider modern times: When the major European powers went to war in 1914, it never crossed the minds of the leaders that the conflict would destroy ancient monarchies and produce the most terrible revolution in history — the Russian revolution. We are prisoners, then, of an inadequate imagination. For all our forecasting and analyzing capabilities in the 1980s, we still, most probably, will fail to anticipate changes of colossal significance. This is simply part of man's general fallibility.

What my father's generation failed to discern was the distress that co-existed in America in 1925 alongside the post-war prosperity to be found in certain urban areas. The most affluent Americans in the Northeast and Middle West gave little thought to the fact or the implication of the fact that one-fifth of their countrymen, in the Southern states, were in distress, with only the most minimal change from the immediate post-Civil War era. They didn't appreciate the fact that severe poverty afflicted many people in industrial centers, where the most recent groups of immigrants lived under rude conditions so that envy and hostility to the established order became a pent-up force. The affluent city people certainly didn't choose to pay any attention to the plight of the farmers of the West who were getting deeper and deeper into debt and the danger of foreclosure, and where the soil was often despoiled. William Allen White wrote that "Western grain lands were showing a constantly decreasing yield per acre. Pastures were shriveling and forests disappearing. . . . Great floods, uncontrolled, were tearing their disastrous way through the valleys." There were many other alarming scenes and features, which went equally unnoticed by those who had the power to effect change. Mortgage burdens were increasing. Tenantry was on the rise. Migratory labor was to be seen in areas where it had been unknown in

the past. And, of course, banking was out of control across the country, with deposits recklessly endangered.

This was a time when the average wage in textile mills in the South was \$10 to \$14 a week, though it should be understood that rent for a home in a mill village might average \$1 per room per week. Construction crews for new mill villages in 1925 would have received around 20 cents an hour. Women in the mills worked 10½ hours, and men 12½ hours. This should not be seen in terms of an industrial horror story, for the mill jobs and life in a mill village represented emancipation from miserable small farms where life was precarious indeed. The overall quality of life was very low, however, as compared to that of the middle class in the Northeast.

The country had known bad times before. It had suffered depressions and emerged from them, shaken but able to enjoy a revival. Almost no one grasped the strength of the gathering storm in the mid-1920s. Few realized that there was a gathering storm on the horizon. Even the most prudent of Wall Street operators — Bernard M. Baruch, for example — didn't discern hurricane weather ahead for the country, though his most recent biographer, James Grant, mentions that from time to time he was seized with doubt as to the soaring market. He wasn't wiped out in the Crash because of a superior wisdom, but because of a superior economic position. He hadn't borrowed on margin in order to purchase stocks. He suffered losses, but not on a ruinous scale.

My father was the beneficiary of the good times, and 1925 was a very good year for him. Things would improve, and he would retain the optimism of other investors, right up to the very end when the market collapsed in 1929. His health was still good. He was doing well in his profession. He even considered buying a plantation in South Carolina — Castle Hill. He had his music, both his own piano playing and instruction and attendance at the opera and recitals. He and my mother had made one trip to Europe after the war and

were planning another trip, which would take place in 1927, when we all sailed to England aboard the *Minnetonka*. He was a member of the Players Club in 1925, of which his father was a founding member, having joined in 1922. Life offered a wide open vista in 1925.

The mood of 1925 is gone from the mind of all but those who are in their eighties. Unquestionably, however, the atmosphere was utterly different from that of recent decades. The popular press was full of cheap sensation. The country fastened on such events as the entrapment of Floyd Collins, who died in a cave in Kentucky in 1925. Nineteen twenty-five also was the year of the Scopes "Monkey Trial" in the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, a trial which testified to the very incomplete modernization of America in that year. It also was a time when urban life was safe to a degree unknown in these vastly more sophisticated times. Edmund Wilson and F. Scott Fitzgerald could take a subway at night to Coney Island and then walk uptown to the Plaza from Greenwich Village in lower New York City.

In appraising the qualities of the year 1925, it is necessary to bear in mind that the country was much less densely populated than it is today. It was a country of 113 million people as against 230 million plus in 1985. There were some extraordinarily densely populated slum areas of New York City and other major metropolitan centers, but, in the main, America wasn't a crowded place. Many more Americans lived on farms or in small towns. Though the United States was moving into the automobile age in a hurry, road communications were very limited. In most parts of the country, the roads were un paved. The country was only slowly acquiring a network of asphalt highways. Americans were responding to the challenge of the open road, however. My parents, for example, bought a large Cole touring car in 1925 — a car with a canvas top that folded down and had isinglass side curtains one put up when it rained. They took their friends and relatives on motor trips in summer and fall

through the Adirondack Mountain region of New York State. Serious long-distance travel for well-off Americans meant train travel in comfortable Pullman cars. As the Pullmans roared through the country, there were two distinct worlds — inside and outside the glass windows of the trains. To an American of limited means in a small town, the express speeding past the depot offered a glimpse into a fabulous and distant world. Today we are much less two countries than we were 50 years ago. There isn't a profound, enormous qualitative difference between the life of Americans at different income levels.

The style of 1925 also is worth pondering. It contained a number of different ingredients. If we think of 1925, we turn to images of bobbed hair and short skirts for women, and other manifestations of the flapper generation. Many elements of design in everything from printing to automobiles began to take on the clean, austere lines associated with a modernism that had its roots in the experimentation of the first decade of the century. At the same time, however, there was an interest in florid designs and models from the past, as in the emergence of a highly theatrical Palm Beach Spanish style in home construction. And neo-classic and neo-Gothic motifs continued to be featured in banks and office buildings. The affluence and low labor costs of the time made possible the use of ornamentation on a scale that would prove to be impossible a generation later. One wonders, then, what is the significance of the mix of styles prevalent in 1925. The pattern, as I see it, suggests the incomplete or premature modernity that I referred to earlier.

Could the 1920s have had a different end, or was the crack-up inevitable? That's a question I often ask myself in reviewing the life of my family in that period and the life of the nation. America was on a false track, a track that didn't lead to the right place — that's clear. The country couldn't evolve as so many people in the twenties thought it would evolve. The speculative house of cards had to collapse. Penalties had to be paid for a lack of vision. Re-

trenchment would have been costly and difficult. Nevertheless, I am sure that there were other roads into the future that could have been taken if the need to do so had been understood early enough and by enough people. So many adjustments were necessary, psychological, material and ethical. Adjustments were forced by the Crash and the long Depression that followed. The adjustments were incredibly abrupt and cruel. Harsh necessity forced them on American society. Such adjustments are made in a terrible war, but they may be impossible to introduce in the midst of what seems endless prosperity, the best of times, which is what the world seemed like in 1925. One would have needed an astonishing crystal ball to envision what would come in the space of a mere four years. As we know, Americans didn't have the capacity for radical readjustment in the mid- to late 1920s; they didn't conceive of the necessity for change. The dimensions of the nation's underlying and, to many, hidden problems were grasped hardly at all. The nation was unprepared for an economic shock in 1929. It was equally unprepared for a sneak military attack in 1941. One wonders whether we have learned the lesson of unpreparedness in any sense, whether, in an infinitely more aware time, we can grasp the need for swift action against some new danger.

In posing this question, we, in effect, ask whether we can learn from the study of history, personal or national. Certainly, there are unseen barriers in the mind which seem to close off consideration of certain possibilities — or even recognition of the existence of the possibilities. For all the wonders of modern intelligence, information gathering and retrieval, one still has to ask whether the mind is better prepared to explore the unknown, the ranges of experience that lie ahead by a year or ten years. The pig track mentality is still deeply rooted in human beings. One goes round and round again on the same path to touch the same, familiar points of discovery and experience and to pass by the same hidden doors to the future. In-

deed the mass of information available to men and women in the late twentieth century may be a force for confusion rather than enlightenment. There may be too much to absorb, and the mind may be forced back into familiar tracks. The future course of the nation or of Western culture may be too large an area to explore successfully, with a view to discovering clues as to the future. Perhaps the best that one can do is to concentrate on a closer, more familiar world such as one's family and its life experience.

To return to 1925: So many disparate elements went into the mind-set of the United States in 1925. I doubt that I can comprehend all these elements. However, I should be able to comprehend the mind-set of my mother and father and their brothers and sisters. To some extent, I do believe I comprehend their mental framework. The determinants in their lives are clear enough — the attitudes of their parents, the quieter, less populated world of their childhood; their education or the limits and character of their education. These and other elements fused to create a closed universe of experience that they could not go beyond. And I realize, of course, that my personal universe also is closed, though the shape and character of the closure are different.

I am often reminded of the closed universe factor when I consider the classical world in process of change. It is fascinating, for example, to read the occasional mentions by Roman officials or writers in the Imperial Age — Pliny the Younger, for example — of the emerging Christian community, or cult as the Roman leadership saw it. There was no sense of Christianity's potential appeal or power to transform the classical world at a time when the Roman order was in a state of breakdown.

Yet the Roman order, in the second century of the Christian era, was only in the most preliminary stage of deterioration. Save for the growth of the Emperor's power, at the expense of republican institutions, a serious, thoughtful Roman could not have understood what was tak-

ing place. Indeed it is difficult to say when the process of deterioration actually commenced. The Roman, with his sense of *pietas*, or reverence for the institutions of Roman life and the wisdom of the ancients, couldn't begin to understand the appeal Christianity had to people at the fringes of Roman life — to petty artisans and the poor. Even if a Pliny had understood the Christian appeal, what could he have done? It wasn't his duty, in any way, to help usher in another world, another perception of existence, another approach to human relations. There was a natural closure in Pliny's world, as there is in the world of a contemporary American. Yet, as we look at history, one discerns colliding universes, and the collisions often aren't discernible to those who live when the collisions first take place.

Sometimes, of course, the collisions are very direct and harsh, as when the barbarians spilled over into settled Roman towns three hundred years after Pliny died, or when the Crash took place in the United States in 1929 and the economic order of the United States was plunged into crisis. In such situations, the foundations of life are shaken in a furious way. At times, however, the process of shaking begins very slowly and almost imperceptibly.

Thoughts of the Roman world, as an instructive lesson for modern experience, lead one to consider whether there is such a thing as historical necessity. My reading of history is that change is inevitable, but that no path of change is inevitable. Rome had immense problems within and without — the aggrandizement of imperial power within at the expense of the older, orderly Roman life, and the barbarian pressures on the rim of empire. In order to survive, Rome had to deal with these respective problems. It was unable to do so, and the Roman world was overrun and ceased to exist as a way of life. Christianity, which was peculiarly suited to a world order in retreat, took root amidst the decay of a Roman religion which was intimately related to a strong state and secure social order. In time, of

course, Christianity was melded with such elements of the Roman world that managed to survive the barbarian onslaught. Could Rome, after suffering severe reverses, have moved in a different direction and retained a civic order and religion unaffected by Christianity? That's a question little considered, for such a process did not take place. It is comparable to the question: Could the United States have avoided the Depression and the economic and social changes that came with it? Again, this did not happen. Scant attention is paid to options in history — the options that aren't utilized or even considered very much.

Contemporary life is too much with us for many people to spend much time probing the lost world of the past. Yet the romance of the past is very strong for those who view life in its totality. To concentrate solely on the present or even on the unwritten future is to neglect an enormous amount that is fascinating. I often view photographs of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, of which we have a full pictorial record, and marvel at the America we left behind. I find it strange to glimpse the world of an America which was full of action. Where, I sometimes ask myself, is that world of 1925 into which I was born? I also pose the question: How can so much vitality — elements of which I have childhood memories — have vanished? The world of 1925 is one of the proverbial fields of grain referred to in the Bible; it has come and gone, but not completely gone, for it lives in the memories of those old enough to have glimpsed or sensed parts of it. It lives in the literature, music, art, and architecture of the period. It has added to the American character another layer, as each generation does. For the history-minded, one of the special pleasures of life is to probe those layers of national life and character, and identify each one, layer by layer, exposing to light the special qualities associated with a year, a decade, a century. For the student of history, the analyst of time, no year is wholly lost.

The Road to Serfdom Forty Years Later

Steven Hayward

IT IS A COINCIDENCE that has surely escaped no one that the fortieth anniversary of Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) falls in the year made famous by Orwell's nightmare vision — probably the only year in history to achieve notoriety before it actually occurred. And it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Hayek's work is in good part responsible for preventing Orwell's prophecy from coming to pass. It is all the more remarkable that we commemorate the anniversary of *The Road to Serfdom* when one recalls its ignominious reception. *The New Republic's* Alvin Hansen, for example, wrote that "Hayek's book will not be long lived. There is no substance in it to make it long lived."¹ An editor at a publishing firm dismissed the book as "unfit for publication by a reputable house."² And the University of Chicago's Herman Finer even went as far as to write a hasty and abusive rebuttal, entitled, predictably enough, *The Road to Reaction*. Who could have foreseen, given this shabby treatment, that Hayek would go on to be awarded a Nobel Prize, that he would be saluted by a U.S. President, that *The Road to Serfdom*, defying the anathemas of its critics, would go through many printings. Indeed, Hayek's impressive corpus of writing has established him as perhaps the

greatest philosopher of classical liberalism since Adam Smith.

It was the burden of *The Road to Serfdom* to argue that centralized economic planning — collectivism or socialism — leads inevitably to the loss of freedom and the end of democracy. Hayek boldly suggested that Hitler's rise to power in Germany had been necessarily preceded by the actions of the German socialists who had extinguished the desire for liberty during the Weimar Republic. To build his case Hayek compared Nazi socialism with pre-Nazi socialism and the similar ideas of British socialists — a comparison that was in many cases shocking. For instance, many in Britain agreed with the sentiment that "It goes without saying that only a planned economy can make intelligent use of *all* a people's strength." But the author of these words was Hitler, not some idealistic Fabian. Hayek's forewarning was naturally dismissed as alarmist: "See," his critics could later claim, "Britain didn't become totalitarian after the war!" It is never admitted that Hayek's warning — along with Orwell's more impressionistic warnings, to which Hayek attributed more effect — engendered a more sober outlook.

But *The Road to Serfdom* is much more than a work of prophecy or speculation.