

## The If-ful Thinker

What this country does not need in these days of depression or recession or just plain rotten times is wishful thinkers and wistful thinkers. What is desperately needed is if-ful thinkers.

Wishful thinking is believing that when a man, about to become President, swears to uphold the Constitution, he will grow in stature when he assumes the awesome power of that office.

Wistful thinking is fantasizing that when the next President to assume the awesome power of that office swears to uphold the Constitution, she will grow in stature.

These two thought processes are non-constructive, non-productive. When you mentally run down the list of Presidents who "grew" in office, the mind skips from Washington to Lincoln to FDR to Truman. Four out of 38—practically a 10-to-1 shot. Don't bet on it.

The if-ful thinker, when he "ifs" a posture, is pragmatic, an activist who points up a lesson to be learned from our former mistakes.

"If," says the if-ful thinker, "the next President will think of the Constitution as a four-year lease on the office of landlord, signed by us tenants in order to form a more perfect condominium, with inalienable rights to request our super to give us more heat in the winter, more air-conditioning in the summer, and to

repair our broken window on the world, and do it all without a rent rise, that President will be said to have grown in stature."

As our country drifts aimlessly up the creek, the if-ful thinker may be the paddle we're without. He differs from wishful and wistful thinkers on every one of our calamities.

Wishful thinking is the art of self-hypnosis, wherein one is convinced that a good fairy will soon fly non-stop across the land, in the non-smoking section, and with a wave of her wand will suddenly restore our life of overabundance.

Wistful thinkers, a melancholy form of wishful thinkers, look forward to the coming of the tooth fairy, who, they recall, once placed a quarter under the pillow when a tooth fell out and who, they now wistfully wish, will soon return and leave two quarters per tooth.

The if-ful thinker says if all those economists in Washington immediately did something constructive about inflation and unemployment, instead of telling us every day that we have to "bite the bullet," they wouldn't sound like politicians shooting off their mouths.

Now, let's take Cambodia. Why not? The Cambodians have taken us for millions of dollars. The wishful thinker holds that we must send them money because America has never turned her back on an ally. (Chiang Kai-shek would have been surprised to read that.)

The wistful thinker in New York says,

"Why send all those millions to Cambodia, that war-ravaged hole in the ground, when we have our own hole in the ground—the subway system?"

That's okay thinking, but it's non-productive and begs the question. The if-ful thinker digs deeper. He points out that if we had learned our lesson in South Vietnam, where we honorably won the war but forgot to end it, and changed the address of the war from South Vietnam to Cambodia, we shouldn't have been sending more millions to President Lon Nol to keep the war game going only till the rainy season, which begins next month. War is the only game that is called on account of rain, outside of those in Wrigley Field and the other non-astrodomed baseball stadiums.

At one point, a Senate committee voted to cut President Ford's Cambodia money from \$222 million to \$125 million. As prices of war go, \$125 million seems a more reasonable sum. But nobody promised that a half-price war would cut in half the number killed.

It seems to this if-ful thinker that if we were bent, as our government put it, on saving the good name of Lon Nol, couldn't we have saved it by his resigning the office? Especially since the good name of Lon Nol is a palindrome—it reads the same, coming or going.

ON A PERSONAL NOTE, this if-ful thinker quotes in part a letter dated December 6, received and read with some anguish. A letter which, if the writer had shown more concern and some slight regard, would never have been sent. It's signed by the president of one of New York's most prestigious hospitals. I quote:

December 6, 1974

Dear Mrs. Ace:

As a recent patient you have seen how our hospital serves its community by providing a full range of medical services, . . . offering a high level of nursing service together with physical amenities, enabling the hospital to treat the patient as a person, rather than a number. . . . We are appealing to former patients like yourself to contribute to the hospital's Capital Improvement Fund. . . . Your contribution will be fully tax deductible. . . .

If he hadn't sent the letter, I wouldn't have felt obliged to send this reply:

December 8, 1974

Dear Sir:

As a former patient I did notice your high-level nursing service together with its other amenities, and I would dearly like to contribute to your hospital fund. But, you see, on November 11 I died in your hospital.

Maybe we can get together later.

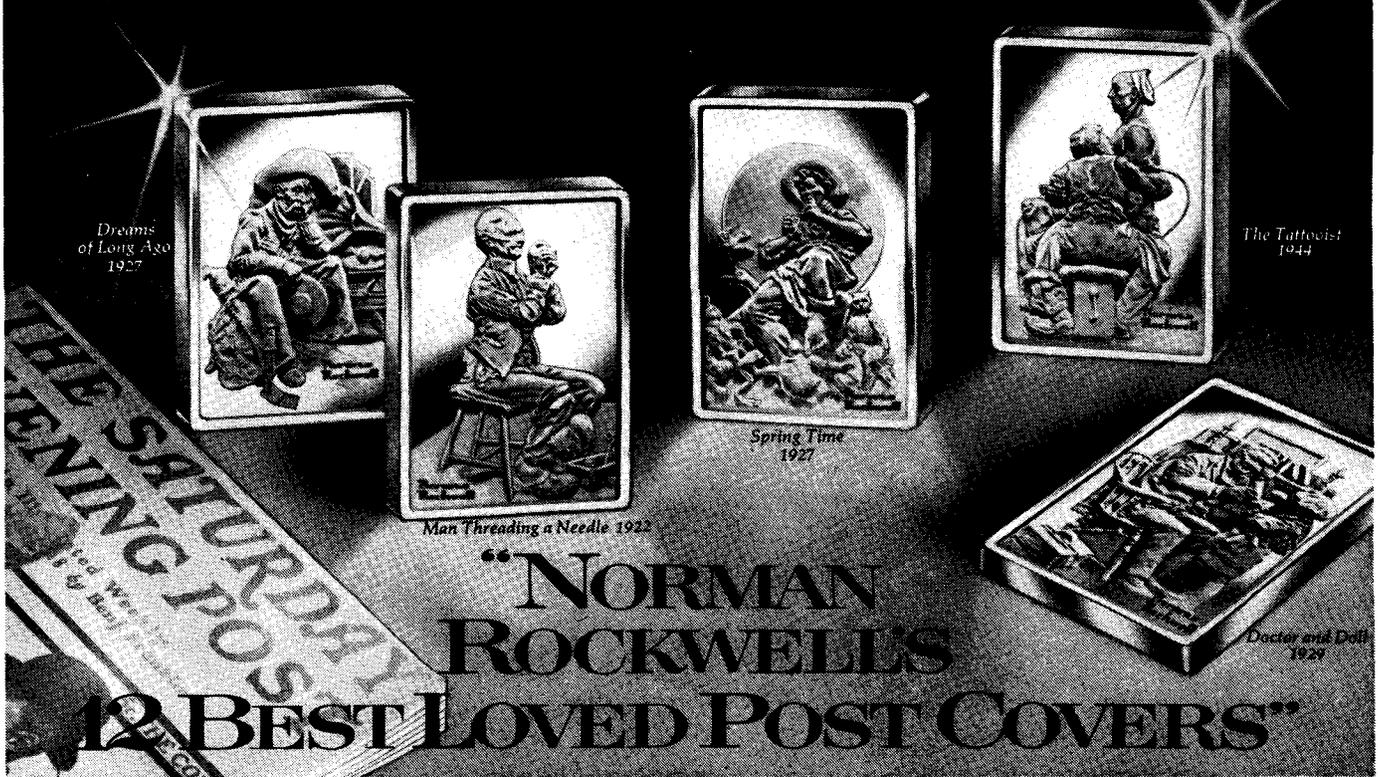
Sincerely, Jane Ace

□



"That was my impersonation of the Red Sea. Next I would like to do my impersonation of The Indian Ocean."

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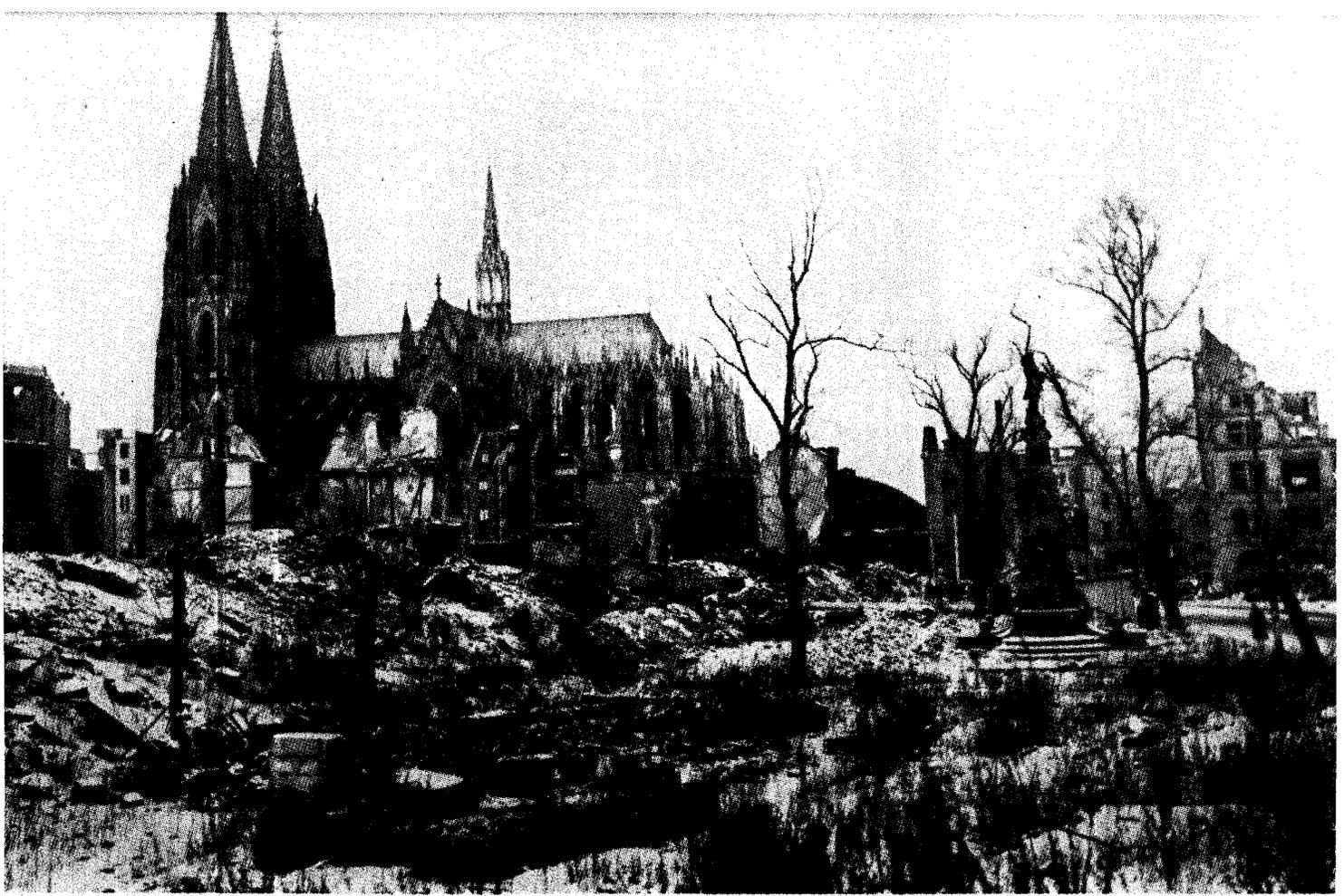
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German Information Center

Cologne 1945—"And today I ask myself. Did that rubble become our children's cultural heritage?"

## Hymn to a New Homeland

**"I am a German!" declares the 1972 Nobel laureate, who has rediscovered his roots "sunk deep in the German language and tradition."**

by Heinrich Böll

Let us think back for a moment on the condition of Europe and Germany in the year 1945. At this pivotal point in history, the teachings that the Nazis had smeared together from blood and earth had brought about the Third Reich's own reversal in a frightful way. The war had left in its wake a world in which entire peoples had been destroyed and the blood of millions more spilled—in 1945 almost half of Europe consisted of displaced persons.

Our fathers—and here I must expressly exclude my own father, who dearly loved to move about from place to place—had always believed a man should live at a single permanent address. Hence they

preserved for us the German saying, Moving one's residence three times is the same as going into bankruptcy.

Yet now, after the war, this "moving" had become a permanent way of living for countless human beings, whether living in camps, waiting rooms, shelters, or destroyed cities. We were all of us displaced—and not only physically. I recall lengthy discussions on whether one should let children grow up in a destroyed city or move to the country with them. Would not the very *sight* of total destruction harm them, not to speak of the fact that in a destroyed city physical well-being itself could hardly be maintained? This question—destroyed city or unharmed village—was a serious matter when one was looking for a bit of ground

under one's feet, looking for a bit of homeland.

My wife and I decided in the end to move to the almost totally destroyed city of Cologne, where there still existed a few recognizable signs of "cultural heritage." And so our children grew up amidst the rubble, and today I ask myself, *Did that rubble become their cultural heritage?*

Only long after our years in Cologne did it occur to me that the rubble made an ideal, though slightly dangerous, playground. Because there in the rubble you could play at both games, *building and destroying*. After all, there were plenty of stones, remnants of walls, and iron beams, and after a few years trees and flowers grew in the ruins. Was it not the right of the new breed of youngsters that

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*One of Germany's most prolific post-war writers, Heinrich Böll won the Nobel Prize in 1972. His most recent novel is The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum.*