The State of the City

> "It is a miracle that New York works at all. The whole thing is implausible. . . .The subterranean system of telephone cables, power lines, steam pipes, gas mains, and sewer pipes is reason enough to abandon the island. . . . By rights New York should have destroyed itself long ago, from panic or fire or rioting or failure of some vital supply line. . . ."
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> *E. B. White, "Here Is New York," 1955.*

Millions have viewed this implausible metropolis—the Empire City or the 51st State—with similar awe, admiration and concern. Its services are often erratic. Its littered streets are cratered with potholes; its traffic a chronic tangle; its access routes twice daily clogged to desperation. A handful of disgruntled bridge tenders can cut the city's lifeline; a fire at a vulnerable point can silence hundreds of thousands of telephones. Not long ago a study found an alarming proportion of its inhabitants to be on the brink of mental exhaustion and disorientation.

It is perhaps because New York has always been at once implausible and indomitable that its problems are often regarded as either too monumental or not serious enough to be met head-on with rational proposals for change. But at a time when urban America is in deep trouble—its vitality undermined by recession, unemployment and inflation—the future of the nation's first city can no longer be left to the chance of muddling through.

We believe that there is compelling cause for concern over the city's present extraordinary dilemma; but we also are convinced both of the city's inherent strengths and of its crucial place in the nation's affairs. In the days ahead, we will in these columns analyze the State of the City, try to define its problems and point to options for a less haphazard course toward the future.

The Capital of America

Such an appraisal must begin with the recognition that New York is not an ordinary metropolis. America's only truly cosmopolitan city is the capital of culture and the arts. It is the center of communications and commerce. Its very streets have become symbolic—Broadway (and off-Broadway, too) for the world of theater; Wall Street as the focal point of banking and finance; Seventh Avenue for the creation and manufacture of American fashions; Madison Avenue as the synonym for commercial and subliminal tastemaking; Park Avenue and Fifth Avenue for elegance.

New York is the city of Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera and Lincoln Center, the great museums and the little galleries, Olmsted's grand design of Central Park. It is a city of architectural triumph (as well as disaster). It is host to the United Nations. Even though it lacks the automatic authority other capitals derive from being seats of national government, New York is nevertheless America's London or Paris. In its many guises, New York retains still the indefinable qualities that led Walt Whitman to call it "the most effective medicine my soul has yet partaken."

Twenty years ago, John Steinbeck, after observing that this city's politics "are used to frighten children," had to concede that "all of everything is concentrated here, population, theater, art, writing, publishing, importing, business, murder, mugging, luxury, poverty." And so it is today.

It would be misleading to suggest that bigness alone distinguishes New York from America's other cities. The sheer mass of everything changes not only the dimension but the fundamental nature of its problems. For example, of all Americans who daily use public transportation to ride to work, 40 per cent are carried by the buses and subways within New York's five boroughs. New York's safety requires a police and fire-fighting force roughly equal to two army divisions. The university systems of only seven states enroll more students than the giant City University of New York. More than one million children attend its 900 schools.

Yet as much as it is a metropolis, New York is a conglomerate of provincial neighborhoods, each fiercely protective of its own rights and character. These enclaves contribute signally to making the city livable; but they are also staging areas of friction and conflict. In periods of unrest, as populations shift and the newly arrived trespass on their predecessors' established turf, latent hostilities may easily erupt into ethnic, religious or racial strife.

Such periodic unrest is irrevocably part of the life of a city that has always been the nation's gateway for immigrants from abroad and the magnet to migrants from domestic regions of poverty. Wave after human wave has swept into New York—the refugees from persecution and famine and the despondent victims of a shrinking agrarian frontier and of racial injustice in the South.

City of Hope

Time and again, the city has reeled under such pounding as it struggled to absorb the new populations. Time and again, the old order and set patterns seemed threatened. Such is the case today as the city's ethnic composition undergoes dramatic change—as the children of the non-white minorities in fact have become the majority of the schools' enrollment, as middle-class families move out of the city into the surrounding suburbs.

The city's problems are rendered all the more complex by being locked into a tightly confined geographic area. Extreme poverty and great wealth coexist in close proximity. New York is the home of some of the nation's most prestigious private schools; yet 600,000 children are on welfare and 30,000 are under municipal foster care. Luxury and deprivation are often separated only by the width of a city street. New York is the site of the most sophisticated medical research universities; yet its municipal hospitals struggle daily to deliver emergency services in the teeming ghettos.

Responding to political corruption in its wards, New York was a pioneer in the establishment of metropolitan government, administered by a professional civil service under the strict rules of an exemplary merit system. But over the years, the system has ossified. To a large extent, the criterion of merit has evaporated, to be replaced by mere seniority and other union-mandated rigidities. Intended to stifle corruption, the system now often stifles its own capacity to innovate and periodically spawns its own corruption.

Responding to its humane instincts, New York earned an early reputation as a liberal city that takes care of its own, thus constantly attracting more of those in need of care and compassion. It is an admirable but costly tradition, reflected in a staggering current expense budget of $11.6 billion and in a total debt burden of nearly $14 billion. At $6.5 billion for salaries, benefits and pensions, the bill for labor devours roughly half of the cost of municipal government. With 400,000 persons on the city payroll, municipal services have begun to dwarf the private sector's total work force.

The National Bellwether

The popular view that "New York is not America" is, like many clichés, largely wrong. In many ways, New York *is* America. What happens in this city is often a preview of the forces that subsequently shape life in cities across the United States. From rising crime rates to declining reading scores, from inflated ranks of public employes to shrinking private employment, New York is the bellwether of urban problems.

The fashions and fads, the decline of confidence in municipal government, the contrast between tax-rich suburbs and the shrinking tax base of the inner cities, the incidence of civic corruption—all invariably become nationwide phenomena soon after the spotlight focuses on them in New York. Within weeks after the first disclosure of the city's nursing home scandals, it became abundantly clear that New York had only pointed an accusing finger at a nationwide disgrace.

Because this city is central to the nation's future, its present depression of treasury and spirit must be diagnosed and corrected. There is room for neither paranoia nor smugness. It would be suicidal to persist in the familiar insularity of mind that routinely rejects solutions simply because they are at odds with established custom or vested interests.

The margin for error and waste has narrowed. High cost and low productivity are eating away at the city's resources and economic strength. As the public debt mounts, the capacity of the tax dollar to deal with current problems shrinks. Paying ever more heavily for unmet bills of the past reduces the options of responding to present needs and of planning for the future.

New York's once proud reputation as a union town is tarnished by labor's sometimes self-destructive inflexibility. The union label, too selfishly construed, becomes a deterrent to commercial development and a cause for friction between the organized work force and some of the ethnic minorities who view the unions as allies of the conservative establishment.

Once a force for progress, the city's metropolitan government is weighed down by a top-heavy bureaucracy. Codes and restrictions, originally designed to improve the quality and integrity of urban management, now stunt growth and invite chicanery and pay-offs. New ideas are either shot down outright or, failing that, soaked up by the sponge-like status quo.

The city stands in danger of losing the proper balance between a capacity to renew its stock of private and public housing, its means of transportation and access, its commercial and industrial development on the one side, and the protection of its environment within the framework of orderly growth on the other. It has ravaged what is potentially one of the world's best waterfronts. It has let its parkland deteriorate, abandoning some of it outright to vandalism and crime.

City of the Future

These errors are not irreversible. But to reverse them calls for a new readiness to raise fundamental questions and subsequently to respond with an open mind, even when the answers are uncomfortable and solutions unorthodox.

One of the basic issues is the way the city's creaking political and governmental machinery and its relationship with an equally unsatisfactory state government can be attuned to modern realities. How, it must be asked, can public and private forces and interests be made to mesh in order to respond to metropolitan as well as local needs? How can New York be taught to plan for its future without creating such billion-dollar misunderstandings as excavations and tunnels to nowhere? How, above all else, will the city prove that the urban civilization from which there is no turning back can be made humane and economically viable?

The city's foremost dilemma may well be its own isolation from the surrounding tri-state suburbia. Although the vast and still growing commuter radius derives from the city much of its economic and cultural strength, New York gets little in return, either in money or in civic support. Many of the options in tackling the city's problems are inseparably linked to the search for ways and means of breaking this metropolitan isolation. Solutions depend increasingly on new strategies toward dismantling the governmental, fiscal and psychological wall between the constricted urban center and the wide suburban rim. If self-interest threatens to block such a turn to regionalism, the ultimate impact of an enfeebled city on its surroundings will be to accelerate the decline of the entire area.

In ensuing days, we will offer on this page a more detailed examination of some of the major problems affecting the city, in an effort to find constructive ways of working out a more promising future for this maddening—and inspiring—metropolis.