

America the Beautiful?

President Johnson's message on beauty, both natural and man-made, draws the issue sharply. Is this country going to be America the beautiful or God's own junk yard?

The outcome is in doubt. As of now, the United States is losing to the forces of ugliness. There are fewer good-looking new buildings being constructed in most cities than there are handsome old landmarks being torn down. The suburban sprawl produces vast groups of identical little houses which look as if they were all stamped out of a monstrous machine by a mindless idiot.

The nation once had clean and beautiful rivers, but they are rarities today. The problem of impure air is as close as the next breath you take. It spares nothing and no one. Against these and other forms of ugliness, the President has now issued an inspiring order of battle.

Mr. Johnson proposes to continue and to extend in many useful ways the protection of woodlands, wildlife and natural beauty begun sixty years ago under Theodore Roosevelt. He also calls for "a new conservation" that will encompass our man-made urban environment. He is probably the first President to tell Americans they should "salvage the beauty and charm of our cities." The steps he urges in this direction are modest, but he has promised to recommend additional measures in a forthcoming message.

The central weakness in the national effort to combat ugliness is that the problems are so diverse and many sided. What is everybody's business too often becomes nobody's business. For that very reason, the most important fact about the President's message is that he sent it at all.

In so doing, he has provided the public with a proper sense of underlying coherence in the diffuse struggle to create beauty in our man-made environment and to defend it in our natural environment. By defining Government's responsibility, he stimulates a new awareness of the responsibilities of individuals and interest groups. The White House Conference on Natural Beauty which he has scheduled for May will also help in the long and arduous effort to rescue the physical appearance of this country from the mess that man has been making of it.