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## Enough of Pessimism

The Bicentennial year is an appropriate time for comparisons between earlier times and now. In terms of knowledge, education, affluence, and health the contrast is great; there has been substantial progress. However, in terms of leadership and morale, the opposite is true. The people of those times were rich but we are poor. They had leaders of stature, breadth, and vision, who in keeping with the spirit of the times, faced the future with faith and optimism. In comparison to a Franklin or a Jefferson, our leaders and would-be leaders seem only ordinary. Caught up in the excitement of the present, they rarely look beyond the next election.

Who among the present-day politicians can come close to matching Franklin's enthusiasm, foresight, and knowledge of the world around him? These qualities were exemplified when he wrote in 1780: "It is impossible to imagine the height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the power of man over matter. We may perhaps learn to deprive large masses of their gravity, and give them absolute levity, for the sake of easy transport. Agriculture may diminish its labour and double its produce; all diseases may by sure means be prevented or cured. . . ."

And who among our politicians comes close to the breadth of a Jefferson who, though a successful lawyer, was an avid student of nature, a talented botanist and paleontologist with a deep interest in all the other sciences. What politician today would have either the imagination or the convinced insight to make a statement matching Jefferson's, "knowledge is power, knowledge is safety, knowledge is happiness."

Our poverty goes beyond a lack of leadership. It extends to a malaise of the spirit of our people. Indeed such is the pathology that, even if the Messiah should appear, he or she would either go unrecognized or, if recognized, would soon be chopped down to size. At the same time this country has turned its back on optimism and is becoming a nation of pessimists.

During most of the country's history, perhaps its greatest assets were its faith in progress, its can-do spirit. Sometimes exuberance was overdone but better than the opposite, as any experienced scientist can testify. The research worker who is convinced ahead of time that experiments will be fruitless seldom is proved wrong in that judgment. It is the optimists who achieve.

In this country optimism was at its peak early during times of great poverty, hardship, and amid unmerciful ravages of disease. But Franklin's optimism was justified by events. Great increases in knowledge and enormous improvements in agriculture, medicine, and technology liberated many humans from much of the drudgery and pain that had previously been their lot. But the behavior of humans is weird and wonderful. Far from feeling gratitude toward benefactors or admiring the great edifice of knowledge that makes their comforts possible, they have now turned sour and their attitudes are reflected by their chosen representatives.

Part of their feeling toward science may be due to another factor. Shortly after World War II, public opinion accorded science a high place in the scheme of things. For nearly 20 years science was exalted in the press, by the public, and by politicians. Expectations were aroused that could not be fulfilled. A swing of the pendulum was inevitable and it has been going on for about 10 years. The public has the impression that scientists, engineers, and physicians are not delivering the perfect performance that should be expected of them. At the same time relatively small side effects of new technology and medicine have appeared. In view of the insatiable need of the mass media for stories, the seriousness of these effects has been greatly exaggerated. The backward swing of the pendulum has also been abetted by some scientists who have been leaders in creating more problems and more pessimism than the facts justified.

Pessimism is a kind of sickness that debilitates the individual and the country. One would not advocate that we become a nation of Panglosses. However, enough of pessimism. It leads nowhere but to paralysis and decay.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON