WHAT'S WRONG WITH AMERICA: FIVE PROPOSALS

NORMAN MAILER

In 1992, Mailer's agent, Scott Meredith, was asked if Mailer would participate in "The Rediscover America Project," a Time *advertising supplement paid for by the Chrysler Corporation. The idea was that the supplement would extol Chrysler products while publishing "ideas you don't want to hear" from a variety of writers. NM's pointed critique of advertising probably did not sit well with the project's editor, but this is neither here nor there as the project was abandoned when Chrysler withdrew its support. Thanks to Mrs. Norris Church Mailer for allowing its first appearance in print in* The Mailer Review.

—J. Michael Lennon

AT TEN THOUSAND FEET IN THE AIR, a hatch opens in the tail of a cargo plane and a car drives out into space. Before it plummets to earth, a parachute opens, and the vehicle floats down, lands on all four wheels, and drives away, It has been a sensational one-minute piece of film, Nonetheless, I cannot remember whether it was Ford, General Motors, or Chrysler who paid for the ad, and then it doesn't matter, Anyone who has ever rented a car knows there is no easy way to distinguish between Galaxies, Tauruses, and Caprices. They all have little parts that fall off when you drive, What if the megamillions put into advertising went instead into improving the artifact? Could we rely then on machines that lasted a little longer?

Advertising may have become the one American art form that we can no longer afford. In less than a century, it has moved from notifying the general public that a new product is available, to the all-out seduction of the con-

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sumer by massive injections (massively expensive) of high-tech video and layout. Far at the other end of the equation, that becomes equal to saying that the stuff we manufacture today is just not as good as once it was. Quality is now secondary. The aim of the advertiser is to divert the buyer from the integrity (or lack of it) in the product to the panache of the corporate name. The emphasis is on the surface—the product had damn well better look good.

The cost of this is incalculable. Our pride in what we make diminishes. The inner knowledge we all possess that advertising is mendacity, eats at the desire to make superior products. Our belief that there is value in what we do with our working lives also dissipates. Our concern has shifted from craftsmanship to cosmetics.

I would like to see Congressional legislation that would reward any business enterprise ready to make so good a product that it would prove capable of selling by word of mouth rather than by manipulation of the consumer. That is equal to saying: Why don't we tax corporations in direct relation to how much they budget for advertising and promotion?

Should this incentive take hold, the loss of revenue in the media and in the advertising industry over the next few decades will, no matter how enormous, prove smaller than the gain of living once more in an economy that functions with skill and dedication. The alternative is to keep on polishing the service while the guts of American enterprise rot within. Who will be the first Kamikaze Congressman or high-dive Senator who will dare to give us a shot at becoming competitive with the Japanese?

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Serving in the Army was the worst experience of my life, and the most valuable. It left me considerably more modest about my middle-class virtues and vastly more respectful of the average man. I am sympathetic, therefore, to William Buckley's idea of a national work force, but I would go further. Let the draft be compulsory if one chooses to serve no more than one year. If one volunteers for two, one can select the nature of one's work. One can be a guard in prison, a counselor to the homeless, a road and bridge builder, a forester, a subway guard like the Guardian Angels—the list of difficult and necessary jobs that can use young people is endless. It is not impossible that we will become in the process a more democratic, compassionate and knowledgeable republic.

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Most young men and women who are on drugs get there because it provides them with an inner life that makes their existence supportable. To maintain that inner life, they lie, cheat, steal, mug, and generally ravage the civil body. Intolerable ghetto conditions are not going to disappear any more quickly than the need for an inner life. So the addiction of young people to drugs is likely to continue. Marijuana, while as prone to encouraging one's vices as alcohol, does, unlike other drugs, enable one to work, live, love, and be reasonably decent to one's fellow man. It is also inexpensive. One can afford it on a forty-hour-a-week salary. Ergo, legalize marijuana, and increase the penalties for cocaine, heroin, crack, LSD, and all the other white powders.

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Put the copper penny in a museum. It probably costs five times more in time and money than it is worth. If the average grocery store clerk earns six dollars an hour, that comes to one cent every ten seconds. The time spent in counting the pennies in the change can take up those ten seconds, lengthens the time spent on line at checkout counters, and deludes us into thinking the penny has value. I do not even speak of the coining process, but how expensive is it to make a penny, wrap it, ship it to banks, audit it, and so on? Surely, the process comes to more than one cent per penny. Moreover, it deludes us into thinking we are back in our childhood when in fact we are in a nonstop sliding inflation. Abolishing the penny would, therefore, jolt our sense of the real a little closer to reality—a mental adjustment every American can use after our eight lost years with the Pied Piper who led us children down the road to the economic bog. Let the last of the copper pennies carry Ronald Reagan's face. He can be commemorated for leaching out their last vestige of value.

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Let's have a law that makes it illegal to sue doctors for malpractice. Medicare and Medicaid will be vastly less expensive once doctors don't have to pay prodigious amounts for insurance.