Is America Decadent?
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A few years after World War II a caustic European critic observed that America, skipping all intermediate stages, seemed to be moving directly from adolescence to senility. He mainly had American literature in mind, which at that time began to flourish an unprecedented efflorescence of gloom and pessimism. I don't know what this critic would say about America today (in fact, I've forgotten who he was), but I doubt whether he would feel constrained to revise his assessment. If the opposite of senility is youthful vigor, it is rather difficult to see contemporary America as vigorous. Indeed, as the United States celebrates its 200th anniversary, it is hard to resist the idea that here is a nation in a state of advanced decline.

A vigorous nation, one would say, is one that has confidence in itself and its future, working hard, willing to make sacrifices. These are characteristics that are not readily applied to America today. Every major institution of the society has undergone severe crises of confidence in the last decade, the most serious crisis being experienced by the political order on which the society was presumed to be resting. The cultural elite appears to be profoundly alienated from the traditional ethos of the society, and it is successfully diffusing this alienation through the educational and communications systems which it dominates. The business elite seems to be profoundly demoralized, while the politicians brandish mostly rhetoric that was exciting forty or fifty years ago. The birth rate is declining. Crime is dramatically rising. The "Protestant ethic" of hard work and productivity is being challenged by a sharply contrary ethic of self-realization and instant gratification. It is even questionable what proportion of the population would be willing to defend itself if attacked with armed force. Éléments in the society that have a commitment to the old "vigorous" values (the military is one such element) find themselves, understandably, in a psychological stage of siege. The suggestion, then, that America may have reached an age of decadence is not taken out of thin air; it has depressingly empirical referents.

Nevertheless, the idea of decadence has its problems. For one thing, those employing it unavoidably select certain facts over others: Thus, someone arguing against the suggestion that America is decadent could cite the facts of the undiminished