because of the contingencies of human life). Decadence in any particular place or time is due to particular casual developments which, in principle, are reversible: Just as symbols and values can become "empty", so can they once more be "filled" with meaning.

Nobody can foretell the future, and the social scientist is no exception. What the latter can do, however, it to make certain "if . . . then" statements. It can be said with some assurance that if the erosion processes described in this paper continue for much longer or increase in their intensity, then American society will find itself in a very severe crisis indeed. On the institutional level, especially in the economy and the political order, there would then be increasingly pervasive disintegrations, possibly of cataclysmic proportions. The likelihood of this is only reinforced by the world position of the United States: A further decline in American power would have far-reaching international repercussions, which in turn would act back upon the internal American situation. To escape from this crisis, there is always the possibility of the shift from consensus to coercion. The instrument of such a shift, under modern conditions, is invariably the nation-state. What happens then is that the tottering symbol system is held up by government fiat and, wherever necessary, by the application of government force. It hardly needs saying that such an eventuality would spell the end of democracy.

There remains the possibility of a revival, a regeneration of the beliefs and values upon which American society was originally built. It is the only possibility worth an investment of hope. It cannot be brought about by government fiat—not even in a bicentennial year. Rather, it must come from many institutional sources, from movements of ideas and emotion among broad segments of the American people. It is likely to take political forms, though its sources will also have to be nonpolitical. In view of American history and the underlying traits of American society, it is also likely that the religious institutions would have to play an important role in such a revival.