

# The Old Rat Race

Brace yourself.

Here are some very angry words.

They are long overdue, and

they just may be aimed at YOU . . .

By HOWARD UPTON

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE American Male, circa 1957? I've been looking into the matter and I find that his critics are pretty well agreed. He is a fantastically stupid oaf. With only one brief life to live, he is spending it, not in the pursuit of happiness, but in the pursuit of the district managership of the Federated Iron Fittings Company, Incorporated.

He has sold himself out—totally, hopelessly, tragically. As he gropes his awkward way through a short visit on this delightful planet, he manages to miss out on 99 percent of the things that make life exciting and satisfying and worth while. With magnificent mountains to be climbed and serenely beautiful lakes to be sailed, what does he do? He spends his precious early years developing such shoddy skills as are delineated in the Great Book from which he draws inspiration and sustenance: *How to Become a Tremendously Successful Sales Executive*. With millions of lonely women languishing in their loveliness, he spends his evenings working out a correspondence course in *Hard-Goods Distribution, Principles of*. While blue waters lap at sun-washed beaches from Acapulco to Nice, demanding his presence, he is busy at his desk, figuring out a sales approach which will sack up that big double-threaded pipe order in Houston.

The twentieth-century male has, in brief, been hoodwinked by the triple evils of the American Way of Life: Conformity, Security and the Hundred-Dollar Bill. His vigor is expended in assaulting the monthly Sales Quota. His shimmering dreams are soiled and shattered in the Planning Conference on Management Responsibility. His immortal soul is desecrated at the Annual Sales Meeting, when the promotions are handed out.

With his life still barely salvageable, he gets word that the district manager in the Pittsburgh office is going to retire next year. Instinctively now, he senses that with a little of that old push, boy, and perhaps a couple of knives buried deep in the right backs, he just might grab off this gaudy symbol of on-the-way-upness for himself, taking with it such heady trappings as a \$35,000 house and a company-paid membership in the Trembling Pines Golf and Country Club. The debilitating process is then complete. He is done for. All that remains for him is to spend the hollow, waning years inspiring other young commercial vassals to sell Federated's quality line of iron fittings, and to make sure the annuity papers are in order.

At the end, if his perception and values have not been totally mangled, he has a few melancholy moments in which to reflect wistfully upon what might have been.

This thumb-nail sketch of the modern American Male may sound slightly familiar. It should. It more or less summarizes a theme you encounter often these days in books, magazine articles, TV shows and movies. That theme, reduced to its barest terms, is this: When a man gets involved in modern business he becomes enmeshed in a complex net from which there is no escape. In struggling to escape—and he knows he must—he only becomes more tightly entangled. Eventually he surrenders. Thereafter, he loses his perception. He misses the "important things in life." He also becomes cynical and conniving; subsequently, he rationalizes these traits as being "part of the game." A little at a time, he shucks off his early dreams, which, of course, were pure and shining. He concludes that going after the Big Job is, after all, the most important objective to which he can set his life—or rather, the only objective available to him.

That is the theme. It describes a situation popularly referred to as the Old Rat Race. It has been repeated so often that people are beginning to believe it.

Note that this was not the theme of *Babbitt*. George F. Babbitt, created by Sinclair Lewis a generation ago, was a flabby, frightened boor, crude and insensitive. But he was not cynical; he never thought of himself as being trapped in the net of business. On the contrary, he liked being a businessman. It did not occur to old George, however pathetic he may have been in other respects, that business was anything but a glorious end in itself.

But a new prototype businessman has been pushed onto the stage since the end of World War II. He was first—and, perhaps, best—personified by Charles Gray, the central figure in John P. Marquand's *Point of No Return*. Charley Gray was no Philistine. He was intelligent and perceptive. In his code of values, money and position and membership in the best country club in town did not add up to the 100 percent Full Life. Yet, as he found himself carried along in the relentless currents at the Stuyvesant Bank, moving perilously near a vice presidency, he discovered himself powerless to resist the currents. What if the vice presidency of a bank, Charley concluded, was not a worth-while altar upon which to lay one's life: what was one to do? A man, after all, had some responsibility to his family. He couldn't just walk away from a secure, respectable job, as did the French painter Paul Gauguin, and go off to contemplate the placid beauties of Tahiti.

Tom Rath was confronted with the same dilemma in Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. John Keats' recent book, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, is less a diatribe against the soul-wrenching monotony of life in present-day housing developments than a polemic essay against the willingness of the modern male to sell himself to business at the expense of all else.

Louis Kronenberger, long-time drama critic of *Time* magazine, takes an even more morose view of the situation in his book, *Company Manners*. "Selling out," he says, "argues a period of idealism or integrity, a moment, however botched, of moral

crisis. But this new breed experiences no such crisis; there is no struggle; they don't sell out at forty, they sign up at twenty-two."

In addition to these and other books, there have been countless magazine articles in which the same subject has been exploited. The good dramatic shows on TV have not neglected frequently to portray the awful predicament of the young man, pulled mercilessly between his early ambitions on the one hand, and the necessity of giving himself over to the corporation on the other—with the corporation usually winning out.

Nor have the movies defaulted in the field. The other night, while watching a ten-year-old film on television, I heard Henry Fonda explain to Gene Tierney why he had been putting aside, for the purchase of a small seagoing boat, half his sixty-five-dollar-a-week salary as a junior accountant: "Look, do you think I want to spend the rest of my life sitting in a swivel chair in a New York office?" His clear implication was that he must liberate himself from the office, quickly and completely, before it was too late.

What this all comes down to is that the modern male, unless he is illiterate, cannot avoid the nagging notion that there is something terribly wrong with his involvement in business and with his life. Even the fellow who enjoys his work at Federated Fittings and who likes living in Suburban Acres senses that somehow he is prostituting himself. When he meets a college professor or a writer or a Bohemian, he feels a little uncomfortable and apologetic. It is not surprising that frustration has become the universal illness of our age.

Against this dismal background the time has come for someone—anyone—to raise his voice in defense of the Old Rat Race. I hastily clear my throat. Let us begin by admitting there is an overtone of truth in the melancholy portrait which has been drawn of the American Male. Recognizing that truth should cause no trouble or conflict. The difficulty comes when we are so blinded by the glimmering nugget of truth in the mountain of rubbish that we buy the whole mountain.

Likewise, it is one thing for a man to recognize the annoyances and inadequacies of his mode of existence. But it is something else, is it not, for him to assume that these defects render the whole fabric of his life worthless? Is it not also juvenile for him to identify certain similarities between himself and the morose characters who inhabit a fictionalized suburbia, and then to assume that he is totally, as they, trapped in the same net?

LIFE HAS NEVER BEEN, for anyone anywhere, a serene uninterrupted flow of ecstasy. Happiness comes, at best, in infrequent periods of contentment or bursts of triumph. And it comes just as often, I strongly suspect, to the residents of Stamford, Connecticut, as it does to the beachcombers of Capri.

In the next place, please observe, things are—and always have been—pretty tough all over. A trainee in the accounting department at General Electric may be frustrated indeed with the prospect of spending eight hours a day, five days a week, for the next several years, preparing payroll problems for an electronic computer. You may sympathize with him. At the same time, however, note that millions upon millions of other men throughout the world would gladly donate ten years of their life for the simple privilege of trading places with the fellow.

Distress is relative. Human anguish, which has never been in short supply, comes in a variety of forms. Boredom is one of them. A gnawing sense of futility is another. But the list does not end there. Hunger, fear, poverty, cruelty and abject despair are other forms of human anguish. The American system of social and economic activity, with its incessant emphasis on competition and the importance of money, certainly invokes a feeling of futility in us now and then. Even so, the system holds these other forms of human agony to a tolerable minimum.

We have some distorted values in this country. Our tastes can be tawdry, our advertising vulgar, our behavior, at times, idiotic. Granted. But when a man can spend eight hours a day in an air-conditioned office for approximately 220 days out of each 365, and manage in the process to provide himself and his family with food, a house, medical care, entertainment and other creature comforts, he has reached a plateau of human existence beyond the most extravagant dreams of other times and places. If you doubt this, check the United States immigration quotas.

One man's rat race is another man's paradise.

All right, you say. So what if the Old Rat Race is not so glum as depicted? So what if the American accountant trainee is better off than an impoverished Bolivian shepherd? There are still more noble and gratifying ways in which to spend one's life than in riding commuter buses and selling plumbing fixtures or writing advertising copy.

Perhaps. But let us look closely.

Take the man—any man—who is dissatisfied with the way things are going for

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him now. His very soul aches he tells you, to do something with his life other than pursue the district managership and ultimately possess the biggest car in the neighborhood. What about this fellow?

Well, if he does not like his present mode of existence, it is entirely fair to ask what alternative he would select for himself. Given the opportunity of withdrawing from the Old Rat Race, what, precisely, would he do?

The chances are he will be rather vague in his initial reply. He might, in an off-hand way, mention travel: Mexico, Sweden, France, the Caribbean. Or he might mention something nebulous about getting away from the traffic, the hypocrisy of business, the endless commuting, the scrounging to pay month-end bills. But don't let him stop there. You know what he wants to get away from. But where does he want to go? Pin him down.

If he tells you, well, what he would really like is, well, you know, a really nice home with maybe a thirty-foot pool in the back yard and, oh, let's say, a good chunk of money stashed away, and, well, a nice boat up on the lake, and the kids' education paid for and— If he tells you this, or something similar to it, do not accept his

answer. He does not propose to escape from the Old Rat Race at all. He merely wishes to hurry through it; to take a short cut. He desires the ultimate rewards of a system which he ostensibly despises, but he does not wish to earn the rewards by conforming to the rules of the system.

Suppose, on the other hand, the fellow tells you he has something more specific in mind, such as—

Going back to his old home town and publishing the weekly newspaper.

Moving to Florida and opening up a little camera shop.

Getting a job in the Foreign Service.

Writing a novel.

Running for Congress.

Becoming a professional cellist.

Now these are all perfectly valid alternatives to the Old Rat Race. They are also, I would say, commendable goals. But his protest will be that they are unobtainable:

"What can I do? I've got nine years with the company now, you know. I can't just quit. The way things are, if I missed even one pay check we'd be sunk. Car payments to meet. The boy's teeth need braces. Furniture to pay for. I tell you I would like nothing better than to get out of that damned office and this damned housing development and open up a nice little cabinet shop, say in San Mateo. That's what I really like to do, you know. Work with my hands. Make things out of wood. But what can I do?"

What can he do? It is very simple. He can, if he wishes, quit his job, sell his house, ignore the fact that little Johnny may have crooked teeth when he grows up, move his family to a modest place in San Mateo and, by George, open up a little cabinet shop. That's what he can do!

But wait, you say. Won't that be pretty rough?

It will indeed!

AND NOW, OF COURSE, we are approaching the core of this whole matter. The alternatives to the Old Rat Race can be rough, relatively speaking. In fact, they usually are. But note that the alternatives are available. Other men choose them every day. The fact that most of us reject them does not mean there is no escape. What it does mean is this: we conclude that being in the Old Rat Race, with all its defects, is preferable to being out of it.

In this world, which is a good deal less than perfect, the mature man is the one who takes such opportunities and talents as he finds available to him and does with

them what he can. If he makes a decision, for example, not to open a cabinet shop in San Mateo, he is simply recognizing reality. Most human difficulties and conflicts stem from a failure to accept reality, or, more accurately, they stem from a tendency to quibble with reality. The fellow who acknowledges to himself that in his own time and circumstances, he can make the best use of his opportunities and talents by selling toilet seats to the wholesale trade is not being ignoble. He is merely exercising his intelligence.

The most recurrent criticism of the man in the Rat Race is that he gives too much of himself to his job. Instead of reading "good" books in the evening, he reads trade journals. Instead of playing golf for fun, he plays for contacts. Instead of entertaining friends, he entertains customers.

Again there is an element of truth in this charge. But it should be noted that the satisfaction derived from almost any form of human activity varies in direct ratio to the degree of intensity with which one approaches it. This is true whether the activity is playing tennis, performing surgery, writing a book, making love or selling life insurance. The people who perform best in any human activity are those who "give it all they've got." They are also the ones who derive the most from the activity in the form of human satisfactions.

If a man enjoys his work, whatever it may be, why shouldn't he approach it with intensity? Or with absolute abandon, for that matter? Why should there be anything more elevating in the spectacle of a novelist writing until dawn than in the spectacle of an executive spending the weekend at his desk?

"Trapped in my job? Yes, I suppose I am," a bank trust official told me not long ago. "But don't put it down as tragic. I used to fret when I realized I was working on trust agreements in the evenings while my friends played poker. Then one evening I laid aside my work and went to a poker session. Didn't really enjoy it at all. It occurred to me that I—not anyone else, perhaps, but I—get much more satisfaction out of planning a trust agreement than out of doing many of the things other people consider fun. Well, then, why should I delude myself? If I get a basic pleasure from my work, why shouldn't I be intense about it?"

Why indeed?

One or two other aspects of the American Style Rat Race need to be mentioned.

The first is that it permits an individual wide latitude in choosing just how fast he wants to run. If a man wishes to go after

the Big Job and its rewards, the opportunity is available to him. True, he may sacrifice his family life, his hobbies, his cultural ties and even, perhaps, his health in the process. But the choice is his. On the other hand, if he chooses to "run slow," he is perfectly free to do so in our system. He can cling to a forty-hour week, escape extended business trips and avoid heavy responsibility, if he wishes. The material rewards will not be nearly so great, of course, but the point is that *he* makes the decision. Marquand's Charles Gray was not compelled to go after the vice presidency at the Stuyvesant Bank. He chose to go after it only because he weighed the consequences and concluded that being a vice president was preferable, in his circumstances, to not being one.

Secondly, any advanced order of civilization can accommodate only a minimum number of people who are—to use the accepted term—doing "really worthwhile things." We cannot all paint. We cannot all write. We cannot all lecture. We cannot all spend our lives contemplating beauty. Someone has to manufacture and sell doorknobs, gasoline, toenail clippers, spark plugs, umbrellas, bar stools, picture frames, screw drivers and all the other assorted miscellany which distinguishes our society from that of, let us say, the Eskimo. Without the complex commercial activity which makes these things available, the lives of all of us—poets included—would not only be uncomfortable; they would be deathly dull.

This being true, is it not better for a man to be a reasonably good accountant in his lifetime than to be a mediocre sculptor? Isn't the net contribution—to himself, his family, his society—of a dedicated nuts-and-bolts salesman superior to that of an inept philosopher?

Individual men will, of course, continue to withdraw from the Old Rat Race. Sales managers will resign and become college professors. Corporation lawyers will pull out and write novels. Advertising men will pack their gray flannels and open up *objet d'art* shops in Nassau. Fine! These people deserve our approval.

But those who stay—those who elect to continue in the Old Rat Race—require neither apology nor explanation. They need not rationalize. When you look at the total picture, it is not the militant non-conformist, cultivating a beard and painting seascapes in Sausalite, who is the hero of our age. The real hero is the fellow you see there with the brief case, waiting to catch the night plane to Houston to see what he can do about sacking up that big double-threaded pipe order.