

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

'Tell It to Sweeney'

IN 1932 there first appeared in The New York Daily News one of the classic ads, written by a bright Irishman named Leo E. McGivena. It was a house ad for The News, then a struggling newspaper. It was really addressed to the ad profession.

"Tell It To Sweeney — the Stuyvesants Don't Care — Much."

The ad was a shrewd plea to address advertising to the middle class, especially the lower middle class, which was the constituency of the tabloid. The slogan was soon shortened to merely "Tell It To Sweeney."

Forty years later the slogan is better than ever. Slobs with Brooklyn accents do the national TV spots for beer. You can't sell anything, or at least the ad guys think this, unless you've got some kind of female boobey pushing it; or, better yet, a pair of married boobies. Identification. America is like this, pals, whether we up here in Scarsdale think so or not.

And so it is. The Sweeneys of the world are a much aggrieved lot since groups socially beneath them have been asking for their slice of the pie, and getting it. Sweeney is called Archie Bunker these days, and he's angry. His thrust is at the blacks and the poor, to be sure; but he is also heavily hot about the bleeders who espoused such folk and their cause before the days of Mr. Nixon. Hippies turn into bleeders when they grow up, if they don't go on welfare.

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THE MAN who tells it so consummately to Sweeney nowadays is Mr. Nixon. He could hardly do otherwise, since he is so consummately a Sweeney himself. Long before anyone else, Mr. Nixon brilliantly marked out his turf as what someone has called "the representative of the alienated white underdog." I. e., Mr. Sweeney.

There is a view in some quarters that, as a result of Sweeney's resentment of the upper middle class, who have a tendency to tell him rather forcibly how he should live his life, there is growing a kind of religious war which may in the end hurt our country more than white vs. black.

"Toward the upper middle class in America today there is a lot of skepticism, animosity, antagonism, hostility, or whatever you want to call it. The hostility to this class is one of the most serious things this country faces."

So said Futurist Herman Kahn recently. And he added: "We are having a kind of religious war. The upper middle class is forcing its religion — call it secular humanism — on the middle class, which is basically nationalistic and fundamentalist. The result is that the middle class has begun to feel it has lost its country."

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THE WORD to note here is "forcing." The elitists are telling the Sweeneys how many children they can have, if any; what sort of movies they can witness, most of them dirty by Sweeney's standards; that the murder of unborn children is okay, and even should be encouraged, and that spitting on the flag is a perfectly sound way of showing opposition to the war.

Take the matter of pornography. I happen to think it is one of the great non-issues of all time; but that doesn't prevent it from being a pretty burning one to Sweeney. Sweeney didn't really give a hoot what people read or looked at until the elitist began pushing what he calls smut, until you couldn't go to the mailbox without getting a dirty solicitation, or into your friendly neighborhood movie house without having your good fundamentalist sexual sensibilities violated. SOMEBODY, Sweeney reasoned quite sensibly, was forcing that junk on him.

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SO THE grievance is real. I understand it fully. While I feel the criminalizing of consensual behavior between adults is a social mistake that must be undone, I do not think anybody has the right to offend the moral sensibilities of another even if, in the end, this means censorship. You can argue: Sweeney should stay in bed, if he doesn't want to be offended. Sweeney doesn't see it that way, and he's right.