



Pete Hamill

HUMBUG

The tinsel is climbing the faces of the department stores. Santa Clauses are patrolling the street corners, panhandling for God or Good Causes. Millions of tons of junk are heading for market: plastic toys that break after one use, things that you assemble from incomprehensible diagrams, and which always have a part missing, electric toys that use batteries made only in Greenland. Angles, hustles, chisels: the whole debased sleazy act is upon us again. Christmas? Humbug.

I feel sorry for the kids, because they must think this is a world populated by greedy scavengers and buccaneers. These kids are pumped up every year with the Christmas myth, all the Santa Claus stuff, all the TV commercials and the jingles that are supposed to make you buy all these products. And the kids then learn right away that the stuff is junk: badly made, cravenly merchandised, examples of a tinhorn, expiring culture. And yet it goes on.

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Maybe it's time to be rid of it altogether. It's been said before, but what on earth does all this commercial shilling have to do with Jesus Christ, a poor Jew who asked men to love each other, and was crucified for his trouble? What does it have to do with joy, or brotherhood, or the possibility of forgiveness? Nothing at all; nothing.

So many of the country's prominent Christian clergymen are currently in disgrace; they were attending the prayer breakfasts with the Nixon mob during all those months when Nixon's

bombers were killing Asians and Nixon's associates were trying to kill the Constitution. There isn't one of them who could take a half-hour on TV and ask for the moral restructuring of this society, a restructuring that must be accompanied by the impeachment and indictment of Nixon himself. Not without risking peals of laughter.

For 10 years, we have had a moral crisis in this country that has been unprecedented, but the prominent Christian clergymen took a pass: Yes, Daniel Berrigan, Phil Berrigan, Martin Luther King and a few others went to jail in protest, or to martyr's graves; but Billy Graham kept his business going; Norman Vincent Peale murmured in silence and performed weddings for the nobility; Cardinal Cooke uttered banalities. The big religious leaders, in the crunch, sided with Caesar; the country is still paying for their lack of Christianity.

This year, of all years, the whole sleazy mess called "Christmas" should be abolished, or at least suspended. The Christians ran the Nixon White House, after all; great Christians like John Ehrlichman, lecturing us about the personal lives of Congressmen, sniffing around them like some tinhorn Elmer Gantry. And what was Ehrlichman really doing? Helping direct the greatest moral perversion of this country's government in our history. Nixon came on with a lot of lectures, but what he was actually doing was criminal. He spoke the state of grace; he practiced what used to be called sin.

The result is that this Christmas seems like a massive act of self-deception. It is inconceivable that the churches will urge their parishioners to join together in prayer that we might be freed of the presence of Nixon and his boys. Instead, we will be asked to love each other, in a country where successive Presidents have split us into hateful factions. We must listen to the pious language of hope, when despair is our certain portion.

And instead we have a Christmas that is dedicated to the proposition that anyone can sell anything, if the package is pretty enough. The toys and gifts, this slew of crappy junk, these Hong Kong and Orchard St. rejects, are the best that America now seems capable of worshipping. Nixon has put out the lights; the price of everything is going up as fast as the profitmakers can drive them; the richest country on earth is reeling with shortages; there is talk of rationing gasoline, and food cannot be far behind.

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Meanwhile, the poor still shiver in places where they have never tasted 68 degrees. Kids are having their minds stunted, because they are filled with starch and junk, instead of real food. The rats are feasting, while the wind blows through Brownsville and the South Bronx. All over this city, the junkies will still be junkies on the day after Christmas; the schools will still be in trouble; the air will still be poisoned; the losers will still be living with their loss.

In New York, on Christmas, the suicide rate goes up. The poor are made more angry, because they have been taught to want what society will not deliver. The churches will be filled with incense and piety. But there will be no love. Only greed, smugness, lying, hatred, bitterness, violence. Christmas? Humbug.