

No Kiss, No Prayer

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 — Went downtown the night the war ended wearing a peppermint-striped, ice-cream-cone-shaped party hat and carrying a genuine Klaxon noisemaker and looking for pretty girls to hug and kiss in deliriums of joyous celebration, as the fancier newspapers used to say in the better old days.

Always did that whenever a war ended. Soon as a war ended, downtown we'd all go to enjoy the deliriums. Mexican War, Civil War, Teddy's War, World Wars by the numbers—made no difference. That final war's-end hugging and kissing was one of the little, but mighty satisfying things we always looked forward to once a war started. Like tearing up the men's room at the saloon the night the home team won the Series.

Downtown the night the war ended, standing on the corner of the busiest street in the single greatest and most awesome metropolis ever built as a testament to big-time humanity, peppermint-striped party hat set at a flirty hugging-and-kissing angle, Klaxon at the ready—get the picture?

And nobody else there!

Oh, a cop and now and then a sullen looking life's loser chasing an overloaded bus, and an occasional passing woman executive who sent out glares promising she would bust the teeth of any sexist who assaulted her with the word "lady."

Said "Hey, you!" to a life's loser, "where's the celebration of war's end?"

Insulting fellow he was. "Pops," said this insulting life's loser, for whom even the buses refused to stop, such was their contempt, "Pops, ain't you heard the news? We two-thirds of the way to the 21st century. Ain't nobody believe that old bull-loney about war ending no more. Can't kid Americans like that these near-21st-century days. We all been to school these days. Damn smart people."

Asked cop if he could translate this noise into English. Head to head, cop and citizen gasped and squawked until after many a dissonant double negative and slum-brawl expletive, the cop said, "I getcher."

He says, says the cop, that the war ain't over, and he knows for sure it ain't over, because he heard on the television that the war was over, and he knows that anything he hears on television is nothing but a vicious slander or an outright lie, so the war must still be on if the television says it's over.

"None of the three of us, officer, is going to get hugged and kissed if

OBSERVER

any sizable number of people is as damp to the prospect of joy as this illiterate cynic. Why don't you and I, officer, start the hoopla?"

"Old fella," says the cop, "you're a silly cootish old gullible farce figure. To believe that war's-end scene! Shame on you, you wooly old would-be Klaxon clacker!"

As for himself, said the cop, he could not believe anything the Government said, and as he had heard it said by Government officials themselves that the war was over, he very naturally assumed they were lying and the war was still on.

Middle-aged couple depressed about passing 30, inflation, stock market, today's youth, decline in morals and lack of respect for old values passed by with hooded peeks of people fearful everybody within a five-mile radius knows they have just been to see an X-rated movie. Signaling cop for questioning, they questioned, listened, snorted, laughed, left.

"They say you're a deluded old grandfather who's celebrated one war's end too many," said the cop. "Asking me why you're standing here with funny hat and Klaxon, incensed they were at my reply that you came expecting massed deliriums of joyous celebration, garnished with hugging and kissing, on account of reports of a war's ending. 'War?' asks he, 'ending?' asks she. 'What war?' ask they. 'Vietnam', says I. 'We have spent ten years,' say they, 'persuading ourselves that there is no Vietnam war, and if there is no war, how could it possibly have an ending?' They were so disturbed they would have had me run you in for disturbing the sleep had you so much as made a move to kiss or hug either of them."

Onto a dim, evil bus, dropping the ice-cream-cone-shaped hat in a gutter, and so homeward. Nobody on that bus spoke to anybody else on that bus. Celebration was in that dim, evil light beyond recall by memory. Passengers had been too long too busy surviving, which takes all the gaiety out of a man, but especially a woman, after awhile, to say nothing of what it does to the impulse to celebratory gratitude.

Had there been a war, after all? There had been something, all right. Something. Something there was that turned us into a people who know we can't believe anybody anymore, including ourselves.

This was just about the saddest war's ending a man ever went to.
