

Siricas and Jaworskis: Honor

By Leopold Tyrmand

NEW CANAAN, Conn. — The year 1973, among its startling events, will be remembered as a time that people with such names as Sirica and Jaworski became guardians of the American ethos. Until then, this function remained strictly reserved for men with such names as Marshall, Holmes, Hughes — that is, names as well-defined as Black and White.

Well before 1973, Frankfurter and Goldberg appeared, and the name But with the arrival of the Siricas and Jaworskis on the national scene, there is a feeling that something new has been introduced, that not everything will remain as before.

Honor, for instance. Judge John J. Sirica said that this word had brought him into action, and the nation knows the results of that action. It thus

means that for him honor has a concrete and dynamic meaning, unlike for President Nixon, who sees in it a military noun that helps describe not-too-successful outcomes. Mr. Nixon can hardly be blamed; he is a WASP and WASPs have never had much reverence for honor.

The WASP *Weltanschauung* is, in brief, a fusion of the Puritan ethic with eighteenth-century rationalism. Duty, reason, utilitarian good sense, decency, social functionality, material accomplishment—that's what counts.

Although honor was still much in vogue among the Founding Fathers, already by their time it was considered an old-fashioned value, a feudal superstition.

Consequently, during the nearly 200 years of WASP command of American history, it would be difficult to detect anything that was committed, or done, for the sake of honor. Many would say

that that is exactly what has made America great, and there is much to it.

But for the Italian or Polish peasants from whom most of today's John John J. Siricas and Leon Jaworskis descend, honor has always been a moral quality of awesome significance. They came here from ossified societies in which the feudal concept of honor, once an emblem of aristocracy and nobility, expanded in minds and souls and came to mean something more than a cause for duels.

It acquired a profound relevance to human dignity, to humanness itself.

A Polish national figure was supposed to say that no less than God entrusted him with the Poles' honor, and this cliché of a cavalry hero somehow found its way down to the most cherished feelings of the Polish masses. In vernacular Polish, "to honor" means precisely to acknowledge the personal worthiness of even the hum-

The Italian sense of honor even earlier was transmitted from society's pinnacle to its lower depths, where it became tantamount to the most pre-

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cious moral and social values.

An Italian honors rather than just respects his father, and this has not changed during the Italian experience in America. In film melodramas that seek to picture the Italian-American version of crime, honor is conceived as supreme loyalty, a bond of the highest spiritual order between people.

What dishonors an Italian family, regardless of its social level, may look humorous in current sophisticated and permissive cultures, but for millenia it formed a tragedy-ridden tissue of emotions and social cohesiveness.

There is no reason to suspect that individually a Sirica or a Jaworski is anything other than a product of the American social and moral mold designed and perfected by the WASPs. The Siricas and Jaworskis are born into American ideology, mores and postures that make them fit very well with the Stars and Stripes in the corners of their offices.

That they finally penetrated the club membership of the custodians of American values may only attest to

the prosperity of American pluralism.

But it also may mean more: In time, when some of the WASPs abandon their own values, or help more general ones disintegrate, a social and moral vacuum will be created that must be filled. There will be room for new infusions, which may come from new ideas and experimentation, from atavism and tradition.

Thus, everything boils down to this: How much of the Siricas is still in a Sirica, or of the Jaworskis in a Jaworski, who from American birth have inhaled the moral fragrances of habeas corpus, John Locke's philosophy, the executive-legislative-judicial concept of power, Lincolnian honesty and Yankee pragmatism, mixed up with the moral flavors of New York's Little Italy or Hamtramck, Mich?

And what difference to the American ethos can such a mixture make? Quite a difference, and an excellent one.

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