

The American Yawp Reader



Richard Nixon on the American Standard of Living (1959)

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As Cold War tensions eased, exhibitions allowed for Americans and Soviets to survey the other's culture and way of life. In 1959, the Russians held an exhibition in New York, and the Americans in Moscow. A videotaped discussion between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the so-called "Kitchen Debate," won Richard Nixon acclaim at home for his articulate defense of the American standard of living. In the following extract from July 24, 1959, Nixon opened the American Exhibition in Moscow.

I am honored on behalf of President Eisenhower to open this American Exhibition in Moscow. ... Among the questions which some might raise with regard to our Exhibition are these: To what extent does this Exhibition accurately present life in the United States as it really is? Can only the wealthy people afford the things exhibited here? What about the inequality, the injustice, the other weaknesses which are supposed to be inevitable in a Capitalist society?

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Let us start with some of the things in this Exhibit. You will see a house, a car, a television set — each the newest and most modern of its type we can produce. But can only the rich in the United States afford such things? If this were the case we would have to include in our definition of rich the millions of America's wage earners.

Let us take, for example, our 16 million factory workers. The average weekly wage of a factory worker in America is \$90.54. With this income he can buy and afford to own a house, a television

set, and a car in the price range of those you will see in this Exhibit. What is more, the great majority of American wage earners have done exactly that.

Putting it another way, there are 44 million families in the United States. Twenty-five million of these families live in houses or apartments that have as much or more floor space than the one you see in this Exhibit. Thirty-one million families own their own homes and the land on which they are built. America's 44 million families own a total of 56 million cars, 50 million television sets and 143 million radio sets. And they buy an average of 9 dresses and suits and 14 pairs of shoes per family per year.

Why do I cite these figures? ... [W]hat these statistics do dramatically demonstrate is this: That the United States, the world's largest capitalist country, has from the standpoint of distribution of wealth come closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society.

As our revered Abraham Lincoln said "...We do not propose any war upon capital; we do wish to allow the humblest man an equal chance to get rich with everybody else."

The 67 million American wage earners are not the down-trodden masses depicted by the critics of capitalism in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. They hold their heads high as they proudly enjoy the highest standard of living of any people in the world's history.

The caricature of capitalism as a predatory, monopolist dominated society, is as hopelessly out of date, as far as the United States is concerned, as a wooden plow.

This does not mean that we have solved all of our problems. Many of you have heard about the problem of unemployment in the United States. What is not so well known is that the average period that these unemployed were out of work even during our recent recession was less than three months. And during that period the unemployed had an average income from unemployment insurance funds of \$131.49 per month. The day has passed in the United States when the unemployed were left to shift for themselves.

The same can be said for the aged, the sick, and others who are unable to earn enough to provide an adequate standard of living. An expanded program of Social Security combined with other government and private programs provides aid and assistance for those who are unable to care for them-

selves. For example, the average retired couple on Social Security in the United States receives an income of \$116 per month apart from the additional amounts they receive from private pensions and savings accounts.

What about the strikes which take place in our economy the latest example of which is the steel strike which is going on? The answer is that here we have a firsthand example of how a free economy works. The workers right to join with other workers in a union and to bargain collectively with management is recognized and protected by law. No man or woman in the United States can be forced to work for wages he considers to be inadequate or under conditions he believes are unsatisfactory.

Another problem which causes us concern is that of racial discrimination in our country. We are making great progress in solving this problem but we shall never be satisfied until we make the American ideal of equality of opportunity a reality for every citizen regardless of his race, creed or color.

We have other problems in our society but we are confident that for us our system of government provides the best means for solving them.

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The Soviet Exhibition in New York and the American Exhibition which we open tonight are dramatic examples of what a great future lies in store for all of us if we can devote the tremendous energies of our peoples and the resources of our countries to the ways of peace rather than the ways of war.

The last half of the twentieth century can be the darkest or the brightest page in the history of civilization. The decision is in our hands to make. The genius of the men who produced the magnificent achievements represented by these two Exhibitions can be directed either to the destruction of civilization or to the creation of the best life that men have ever enjoyed on this earth.

[Source: *Bulletin* (The Department of State) XLI (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office: August 17, 1959), 227-236. Available online via *The Internet Archive* (https://archive.org/details/departmentofstat411959unit_0).]

John F. Kennedy on the Separation of Church and State (1960) →

