

1665 and 1954*

By SAMUEL A. STOFFER

In his address before the 1954 meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, President Samuel Stouffer described some of the ways in which public opinion analysts are helping to combat the forces which currently threaten freedom and democracy. To continue serving the needs of their society and to contribute most of our understanding of a complex world, President Stouffer believes social scientists must take a long range view of history and work hard at improving their instruments of measurement.

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IN THE year 1665 two thirds of the population of London, including the royal court, fled to the country to escape the Great Plague. Seventy thousand died, nearly half of them in one fearful month. Inmates of an infected house were shut up and doomed behind the mark of a red cross on the front door, with the legend, "God have mercy upon us!"

By royal command, the college of physicians was called upon for advice and prescriptions. That their learned efforts were futile or even harmful, we know. Why this was so we also know. Medicine was still a practical art without science behind it.

Harvey had been dead only eight years. Newton, fleeing himself from the plague when it reached Cambridge, was just beginning to develop his ideas which were to remold the shape of physical science. It was still some years before van Leeuwenhoek in Holland was to report on the strange microorganisms he had seen moving beneath his new-fangled lens. And all of two centuries were to elapse before Pasteur and his contemporaries were to lay the basis for a science of bacteriology.

From contemporary accounts, like Pepys' diary, we can re-live something of the fear and dread which pervaded England in the summer and fall of 1665. And such a vicarious experience is all the easier for us because we too, in the year 1954, know something of fear and dread.

We know that weapons already tested can wipe out urban civilization. We hear of possibilities like the cobalt bomb which might, it is said, destroy all life on the planet. We know that a handful of ruthless men in the Politburo can press a fateful button. We hope that the might and determination of the free world will deter them, but there is always the possibility that they may misunderstand or underestimate our might and determination. Or alternatively that they may even choose some day to

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fall amid the ruins of the world, just as Hitler fell amid the ruins of his empire. We know that the mobilization of our own strength is not an easy matter. Distrust of allies is readily exploited by damagogues in all free nations. Proof of past Communist subversion and espionage within the United States arouses fears that this may be happening now, and that it can erupt into devastating sabotage in case of war. All these fears, real or imagined, are fanned by irresponsible politicians into a flame which could destroy our heritage of civil liberties handed down through long centuries of Anglo-Saxon tradition.

To combat the threats from without and the threats from within, all the resources are needed of people dedicated to freedom and armed with the best in technology. One of these resources is the social sciences, especially as they find technological expression in the tools for the analysis of public opinion.

At the time of the Great Plague, we have observed, the college of physicians and surgeons was called on for advice and prescriptions. Today, amid the call for experts, is there a call for the kind of expertness represented in the membership of the Society here tonight?

Some of the more cynical of you may reply that there has been a call lately—but only to notify another expert that his services are no longer needed or that he has been officially classified as a security risk. Amid the prevailing anti-intellectualism and distrust of experts and specialists in all technical fields nobody is immune from assault.

But even if there are those who instead of calling on the doctors for help would shoot them, I believe that members of AAPOR are doing a most important service in this crisis of civilization. And the same must be said for members of WAPOR, whom we welcome to America to join with us here at Asbury Park.

First, it may be said that never in history have we had a better network of reporting of public opinion in the various nations of the free world. We know with some accuracy what Frenchmen think about us and our policies and what Americans or British think about France and her policies. Our own Government may stifle critically important research such as on the Voice of America, and this loss may be irreplaceable, but polling goes on here and across the seas to illuminate areas of agreement and misunderstanding among allied nations and provide facts which policy makers in the world capitals dare not ignore.

Second, our American public opinion research is putting thermometers in the mouths of successive cross-sections of voters and plotting temperature charts of reactions to the domestic issues of the day. Such research convincingly exposed the shallowness of alleged public support for diversionary measures like the Bricker amendment—and the data were cited

most effectively in the debate on the floor of the Senate. The recent series of published figures on the rise and decline in approval of the vicious tactics of certain right-wing subversives can hardly fail to have registered in the minds of responsible leaders. The very existence of our polling organizations is a prophylaxis against the kind of fear and intimidation which might otherwise arise out of false but unchallenged "illusions of universality."

Third, our research, as its techniques improve and as more and more users are educated by our skillful practitioners in how to interpret its values and limitations, is doing its part to help American business and to keep it strong. The continued strength of the American free enterprise system is an obviously necessary condition, even though not the only condition, for the preservation of the life we hold dear. In market research, in media research, in public relations analysis, our techniques have won wide acceptance. In the field of management, where one deals with complex problems of management development, of management practices, of recruitment and training, and of employee relations and morale—in spite of many notable advances—we are still hardly past the frontier. The need for what we may be able to offer to business in years to come is so great, and the prospects for new advances in this field are so bright, that it is especially fitting that in our program tonight we hear from Mr. Robert Greenleaf, who, coming from the largest industrial organization in the United States, can speak to us out of his long experience in management.

I have mentioned only three out of many ways in which members of AAPOR and WAPOR are bringing their technical skills to bear, directly or indirectly, in these great and anxious days. Far better than the doctors of 1665 are we equipped to serve the needs of 1954.

At the same time, candor requires us to recognize that there are serious limitations to our endeavors, not to be blamed alone on the indifference or antagonism of those who need our services, but inherent in the stage of development of social science theory and techniques.

Between the Great Plague of London and Pasteur two centuries elapsed. Medical knowledge came very slowly and came only as result of interaction between research on specific diseases and research in basic science which had no initial relation to medicine whatever. There may be some who feel that if social science can't help us more today, it is just too bad; so let us not worry about long ranges of future history. Whatever we do must be contributed now. Five years, ten years, fifty years will be too late. All the efforts of all of us should be concentrated on today or there may be no tomorrow. I do not agree.

Why? In spite of all the important things we can do with the tools

we now have, it would be presumptuous to over-estimate the decisiveness of our efforts in the present crisis, with the tools we now have. What can we lose by having some faith in a longer future and expressing that faith by working also toward the long-range fulfilment of the potentialities of social science? Why should not some of us even be encouraged, like Newton, to turn away from the plague and dream of the theory of gravitation?

Psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, and even economics, are still in their infancy. The few thousand research studies a year published in all these fields are a mere handful as compared with the researches indexed annually in physics, biology, and chemistry. Some of us grossly under-estimate the time and sweat and money required to test an hypothesis in social science. We admire a recent book on experiments in communication by Hovland and Janis, but somehow fail to realize that such solid scientific books are almost unique in social science, and also that not one but fifty such books would be needed before we can have a theory of communications from which we can make safe and predictable applications to many of the common problems which recur in daily life.

We know something about attitudes and opinions as related to an individual's needs of conforming to the norms of reference groups in which he plays a role. But a vast amount of intensive and extensive research, by experiments in small groups, by panel studies, and by large scale surveys will be needed before we can codify tested theories suitable for general practical application. These are only a couple out of many illustrations which might be offered.

Granted the arduousness of the task, one still can hope that we do not have to wait for two centuries. I think that we can speed up the process if we take a leaf from the history of modern medicine.

One of the most important lessons is that the development of modern medicine and the sciences underlying it would have been impossible without an astonishing variety of instruments of measurement, like the thermometer, the compound microscope, and the electron microscope, the X-ray and the Geiger counter. Gadgets have played a far more important role in the history of science than philosophers of science like to recognize. And note that many of these gadgets were invented by technicians who were not themselves scientists.

In our own field, social scientists owe more, if anything, to the practitioners of public opinion research for improvements of instruments like questionnaires and techniques of interviewing and sampling than the practitioners owe to social scientists. True, our instruments are crude, but they are improving.

For example, it was less than ten years ago that one of our national polling organizations asked a cross section of the American public, shortly before the close of the war with Japan, "What should we do with Hirohito?" According to figures reported in Cantril's compendium, *Public Opinion*, two-thirds of the public had an opinion on the subject. Half of those with an opinion would execute him, a third would exile him, and the remainder had scattered opinions. Only 5 per cent with an opinion would keep him and use him as a symbol. Yet when we did keep him and use him, not a whimper of protest was audible from the American public. We know now that if we are to avoid pitfalls like this in our research—let me call it the Hirohito effect—we must understand a good many things about intensity of opinion, personal involvement, and the like. Today's questionnaire survey is likely to express this increased sophistication. We still do not have fully tested theories which will point to all the relevant measurements needed. Guttman's theory of principal components, which, incidentally, was first developed in a practical operating situation in the War Department, and which has been elaborated in a subsequent practical operating situation in Israel, proposes one of several promising approaches to this problem. But it will be only after a good many years and a good many hundred studies before we have demonstrably fool-proof techniques.

Another encouraging sign is the increasing extent to which practitioners are publishing their experience with new research techniques. For this, AAPOR and the *Public Opinion Quarterly* can take considerable credit. Of course, the substantive findings of much research done for the government and industry must of necessity be confidential. But much more could be and should be in the public domain. Even though some of the content is confidential, much of the data might yield important publishable by-products. When some of my colleagues and I were tinkering with a gadget we called the H-technique, we needed to try it out on data which would provide wide-scale replications. We could not afford to collect such data on our modest academic budget, nor did we need to. A corporation which had just collected 25,000 questionnaires for its confidential use possessed ready-made punch cards which gave us a chance to make a methodological study at negligible cost.

In the development of techniques, in the acquisition of experience in a growing variety of real life situations, and in the formulation of problems crying for basic research, those who are practitioners in public opinion research are helping directly in the stimulation and development of social science. Indirectly, they help in another way, just as the practitioners in the field of medicine help in the development of the natural sciences. The practical need to control disease has the indirect effect of

channeling millions of dollars into basic research which may have nothing directly to do with disease. Who can say that a microscopic study of cell growth, even in plants, may not open a new vista on the theory of cell structure and function and provide a new clue to the kind of cell growth involved in cancer? Except for the hope of ultimate engineering achievements, the money available to pure science would probably be the merest trickle. The same, I venture to think, may be true in social science.

If the practical needs of society are to be served by social science, and if social science in turn is to be stimulated directly and indirectly in its development by the practitioners, there must be a bridge over which they pass, in both directions. One such bridge, carrying two-way traffic, is the American Association of Public Opinion Research. No totalitarian state has tolerated, or ever could tolerate, such a bridge. It is one of democracy's unique contributions to communication and mutual understanding in this complex world.

And, as I have said, it is built on faith—faith that somehow in these anxious days there will be enough wisdom to hold off the forces of darkness which imperil our ancient liberties.

But ours is not a mere passive faith. It is a faith invigorated by awareness that our professional services as public opinion analysts are actively helping, if ever so little, to counteract the Malenkovs and the McCarthys. We are not passing with averted faces by the plague-ridden door with its legend, "God have mercy upon us." We are helping open the door and dispel some of the lethal bacteria with our instruments of truth.

We must be modest. Only a span of time carrying far into the future will see the kind of theory and techniques which we wish we had. But we are working toward that goal at the same time as we do our best in the here and now.

If it is our lot to be living in one of the most critical decades in the history of the world, it is also our proud privilege to try to be worthy of the responsibilities thereby entrusted to us. We will not fail that trust.