Smiley faces

by Martin E. Marty in the May 9, 2001 issue

A recent obituary leads me to return to a question that now and then shows up in my writing and speaking: what happened during the recent past to change a formerly virtuous America into the chaotic amoral society that presently evokes bleating among virtuecrats who are sure the rest of us are slouching toward Gomorrah?

Each commentator has her or his own idea of what soured American life. We historians stand by, commenting upon and recording their complaints and proposals. I, too, cannot evade my responsibility to do some chronicling and developing of hunches about what led to the fall.

First, when did it happen? Virginia Woolf and Willa Cather thought of their own early 20th-century times as lapsarian. But Americans recovered from those sinful days and successfully outlasted the Great Depression and fought the Good War. Then came the American Century, when we reached the height of virtue—the period labeled “the fifties” or “the Eisenhower era.”

The world was still coherent in 1962. Things had not yet gone to pieces. The center, which William Butler Yeats had seen falling apart in earlier decades, seemed to be holding firm. So say those given to nostalgia for the good old days.

Then came 1963, the year when Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. We all know where that led. Martin Luther King Jr. and Birmingham blacks were getting arrested. Governor George Wallace confronted the National Guard at the University of Alabama. Campus unrest grew. Medgar Evars was shot, as was John F. Kennedy. King gave his “I have a dream” speech in Washington, and we all know how divisive that was.

I will now circle the date and the event that usually get blamed for all the troubles. On June 17, 1963, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled (in *Engel v*. *Vitale*) that prayer in the public schools was unconstitutional. That, said and say many, precipitated the fall. The late Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry summed it up: “They” took God out of

the schools. Whenever I hear people talk about taking God out and needing to put God back in, a kind of grotesque picture comes to my mind: God on a little four-wheeled cart pulled by a string.

So the Supreme Court is blamed for ushering in the bad times, days of drugs, obscenity, pornography, homosexuality, cohabitation, lawlessness, political correctness, affirmative action, multiculturalism, relativism and a host of other blights. But that explanation doesn't work. Look it up: Most schools did not have "school prayer" before the date of that Supreme Court decision.

The late Dan Herr of the Thomas More Association prompted me to look for a more profound disturbance to account for the malaise of our time. He pointed to two phenomena, one visual and one oral.

Back to that obituary: H. R. Ball, who died on April 13, was the ad man credited with having drawn and promoted the yellow smiley face that began to appear everywhere in the '60s. That image was commemorated on a postage stamp in 1999. In 1971, 50 million smiley-face buttons were telling us to be cute, cloying and smiling. And, paradoxically, everybody started snarling and scowling and acting "in your face." At the same time, clerks in supermarkets and everywhere else were instructed to tell us to "have a nice day."

We haven't had one since.

Harvey R. Ball, rest in peace—even though, thanks in part to you, we can't.