

The All-Consuming Lifestyle

America's routines are rooted in the psychology of a disposable society

By Irene Virag

IT happened, as it always does, without anyone in the Sigmann family even noticing. At six in the morning, Deneen Sigmann was half asleep in her fourbedroom ranch in Holbrook when she opened her first pack of Salem Lights and threw the cellophane wrapper into the trash. It floated as silently as an autumn leaf into the 30-gallon plastic bag that lines the brown Rubbermaid garbage can in the kitchen. The wrapper joined the previous day's newspaper, a used Brillo pad, a mound of leftover ziti, an empty shampoo bottle, a crumpled bag of potato chips, a broken glass, a banana peel, a plastic yogurt container, four packets of Sweet 'N Low and a half-full can of beef stew for dogs.

Deneen Sigmann lit a cigarette and headed into the bathroom. As she left the kitchen, her children were fixing their own breakfasts. Twelve-year-old Jennifer poured the last of the Cheerios into a bowl and threw the box away. Sixteen-year-old Tom tore open two individually wrapped store-bought fudge brownies. He ate the cakes, wiped his mouth with a paper towel and tossed a wad of paper packaging into the Hefty Cinch-Sak. Eight-year-old Cathy finished the Count Chocula cereal and the milk – then shoved the cardboard box and the one-gallon plastic jug into the bulging garbage bag.

When Deneen Sigmann returned to the kitchen, the garbage can was close to overflowing. Waltie, Deneen's 21-year-old son, had made a brown-bag lunch – four slices of stale white bread and the plastic wrap from the bologna were added to the can. Deneen drank her fourth cup of black coffee, then dumped the grounds. She emptied an ashtray – a cigarette butt stuck in a glob of spaghetti sauce that had been discarded the night before, and the ashes from two packs of Salems descended like a fine snow that hides the litter underneath.

Before leaving for work, Walter Sigmann, Deneen's husband, stuck his hand into the bag and shoved the contents deeper into the Rubbermaid can. He crushed cereal boxes and milk containers. He squished the pasta into the cherry-vanilla yogurt. He made room for more garbage.

Later that weekday evening, sometime between the after-dinner cleanup and bedtime, Walter Sigmann pulled the 30-gallon Hefty Cinch-Sak out of the Rubbermaid trash can. He carried it outside and plopped it down in front of the garage next to three equally stuffed bags, one of which had been ripped open by a hungry dog or maybe a raccoon. An onion and an apple core lay on the driveway.

By Sunday, six bags blocked the garage door. Walter Sigmann piled the week's worth of garbage into his van. He drove five miles to the Brookhaven Town landfill and waited on line 45 minutes to pay a \$2 entry fee. He added his bags to the vast wasteland.

When Walter Sigmann returned home, a clean 30-gallon plastic bag lined the trash can in the kitchen. Deneen sat at the table smoking a cigarette, cutting quilted fabric to fashion into Christmas stockings. Walter ate a piece of store-bought peach pie and clipped coupons. A few minutes later, Deneen emptied another ashtray and Walter got rid of the Sunday newspaper.

It was happening again, as it always does, without anyone in the Sigmann family noticing.

The way it happens in most American homes, where the disposal of personal trash is as much a part of daily life as eating and drinking. It is a matter of habit. And habits can be hard to break. When it comes to garbage, America's routines are rooted in the psychology of a disposable society that seems as if it were designed to keep us from solving the mess. A society dedicated to plastic and paper and prepared foods, to the carryout and the convenient, to disposable diapers and dishes, throwaway razors and roasting pans. A society that gorges on fast-food burgers served in Styrofoam – a nonbiodegradable petrochemical plastic product that stays forever in landfills or produces toxic fumes when burned.

A culture of consumption reflected in statistics – the United States produces almost 230 million tons of garbage a year. It has twice as many people as Japan but produces nearly four times as much trash.

A culture of planned obsolescence in which very little is built to last a lifetime and it is more practical to add broken clocks and calculators and can openers to the nation's landfills than to repair them.

"We see what's around us today, everything we have, and we believe it's God-given," says William Rathje, an anthropologist at the University of Arizona who has studied tons of American garbage during the past 14 years. "We believe that somehow God or IBM or somebody is going to come up with a solution and we're not going to have to change our behavior. "

Rathje's ongoing study of Tucson's trash – known simply as The Garbage Project – reveals that waste is imprinted in the national psyche. "The first bag I ever opened had a whole T-bone steak in it, fully cooked and wrapped in a paper towel," he recalls.

One of Rathje's findings would anger starving people around the world – Americans waste 15 percent of all solid food they buy. The project also showed that middle-income families throw away more food than their upper or lower-income counterparts, that wealthy people buy inexpensive foods for themselves but expensive foods for their pets, that a bag of garbage loaded with frozen food packaging is likely to be just as stuffed with rotten vegetables and spoiled fruit and that the length of the stem cut off fresh asparagus increases with income levels. The study also documents the country's growing consumption of plastic – between 1980 and 1985 there was a 40 percent increase in castoff plastics.

On a more personal scale, the Sigmanns' Cinch-Sak reflects a similar culture. Walter and Deneen both work – he is a delivery person for a wholesale stationery company; she is a billing clerk at Brookhaven Memorial Hospital – and their garbage reflects their busy schedules. It is littered with the cardboard cartons from frozen fish fillets and instant oatmeal, mushroom soup and macaroni and cheese dinners – and with stale bagels and cinnamon buns, cooked pasta and moldy cheese, raw chicken cutlets and seasoned bread crumbs, half a head of lettuce and liverwurst.

All these things find their way into the family's garbage can in the course of an ordinary day, but like most Americans, Deneen and Walter Sigmann usually don't notice the bulging plastic bag until it is overflowing. And even then, they don't consider its contents. The advertising slogan for Hefty Cinch-Sak echoes the collective state of unconcern – "Never touch garbage again. " Wrap it up and give it away. Out of sight, out of mind.

The commercial catch phrase is perhaps a new national credo, the American way of garbage as described by Deneen Sigmann: "I don't want to see the stuff or touch it or think about it. I don't have time to worry about garbage – just get it out of here. "

It has been this way for centuries.

Long before plastic liners and rubber cans, the streets were America's dump. When New York City was still New Amsterdam, the government passed a law prohibiting citizens from dumping rubbish, filth and dead animals into the streets. But later, colonists still threw their garbage out the door for the pigs to eat. In the 1800s, cows and dogs roamed the dusty streets and dead horses were as common as kerosene lamps. A century before the Islip garbage barge put to sea in search of a home, street cleaners in New York City loaded refuse on scows, dumped it at the mouth of the harbor and hoped the tide would take it away.

Garbage was the reality that belied the romantic notions of the past. Nobody wrote songs about the trash all around the town. Mamie O'Rourke and her boyfriend would have stumbled over horse dung and fish heads if they tried to trip the light fantastic on the sidewalks of the real Old New York.

East Side as well as West Side, the thoroughfares were piled so high with rubbish that the editor of the Evening Post, in the spring of 1831, compared the filth in the main avenues to the Alps and the Andes. A few years later, the Daily Times decried the dead rats and garbage "undergoing a process of fermentation in a pool of stagnant putrid liquid" in the gutters of Grand Street.

In 1837, the metropolis spent \$1,200 to remove 347 dead horses, 1,182 dogs, 3,091 cats and nine cows from the roads. Not only were manure piles a major problem but the Deneen Sigmans of the past – without galvanized garbage cans and plastic bags – dumped potato parings and other kitchen slop into the street. Privy tubs and cesspools overflowed into the gutters, creating clouds of flies and a sickening stench.

Although itinerant ragpickers called chiffoniers scavenged through the refuse, the most visible sanitation crews were four footed – loose pigs cleaned up the garbage. But they also created their own. The city was caught in a vicious cycle – as long as garbage was tossed in the streets, the hogs flourished, and as long as hogs roamed the streets, it was much simpler to throw garbage into the gutters. Newspapers railed against the roaming legions of 10,000 hogs. As always, change came slowly. Cleanups were inspired only by crisis – the threat of yellow fever or cholera, an upcoming election – and the zeal to sweep up the streets dissipated as soon as the epidemic ended or the campaign was won.

The 19th-Century pig problem illustrated a constant conundrum of garbage disposal, one demonstrated today by the controversy surrounding landfills and incinerators: Solutions bring their own problems. Eventually, thousands of pigs were rounded up and destroyed. But the hog cleanup was a blow to the poor, who could afford to keep pigs only because the streets were paved with feed. There was more garbage in the public view. And the resulting increase in offal caused the contractor who collected it to demand a pay raise from \$9,000 to \$12,000 a year.

It wasn't until the latter half of the century that most of the pigs had been removed from the streets and human crews took over. More sophisticated steps were still to come – the first U.S. garbage incinerator on Governors Island in 1885 and even a short-lived attempt at recycling near the end of the century that saw New Yorkers putting rubbish, food wastes and ash in separate receptacles. Whether it was burned, separated, eaten by pigs or taken to sea, the garbage kept piling up. In Manhattan at the turn of the century, an average of 612 tons of garbage was collected daily. Each American contributed 300-1,200 pounds of ash, 100-180 pounds of food waste and 50-100 pounds of rubbish yearly – a total of less than 1,500 pounds. Today, each American creates about 1,900 pounds of garbage a year.

Then as now, the mass of trash did not go completely unnoticed. In 1907, a conservationist named Austin

Bierbower, writing in a progressive journal, got to the bottom of the heap with an assessment that holds true today: "Nowhere in the world is there such a waste of material as in this country . . . we destroy perhaps as much as we use. Americans have not learned to save and their wastefulness imperils their future. Our resources are fast giving out . . . In passing the alleys of an American city, a foreigner marvels at the quantity of produce in the garbage boxes. "

The curbside cans of today offer equal cause for wonder. If garbage fills our lives, our lives also fill our garbage. The act of throwing something away is so unconscious that most people don't even know what's in their garbage. Unlike the Japanese, who have to sort their refuse carefully, few Americans count how many paper towels are tossed into the trash or worry about where the Q-Tips go.

The result is that all the things we are can be found in our garbage. Garbage reveals the self-delusions of ordinary people, it lays bare the good intentions never carried out. It is something of a repository for truth. "People can lie," Rathje says. "Garbage doesn't lie . . . People will tell you what they do or think they do, or what they want you to think they do. Garbage is the quantifiable result of what they actually did. "

Which is why police officers and private investigators, market researchers and reporters have been known to go through the trash of people they want to find out about. Secrets end up in the garbage – secrets people might not tell their best friends or census-takers, secrets they might not admit even to themselves.

"We don't see garbage as the remnants of our behavior," Rathje explains. "We see it as yucky disgusting stuff that has nothing to do with who we are. But garbage is a vital, important, relevant part of our lives. "

A bag of garbage provides a picture of our personal lifestyles – and it also fits the individual into a societal frame. Rathje found that garbage charts the changes in society: As more women joined the work force, his researchers noticed an increase in takeout and frozen-food containers; as the carry-yourown music craze took hold of America, they observed more AA-batteries, the size used to power Sony Walkman radios. Two of the biggest banes for American landfills reflect two of the biggest boons for society – old phone books, the symbols of our almost universal dependence on the telephone, and worn-out tires, the remnants of our love affair with the automobile.

And a single bag of garbage reflects our jobs, our diets, our health, our hobbies, our habits. Just a quick peek reveals our eccentricities – even our neuroses.

At first glance, Sharon Zane's garbage is a reflection of the hectic schedule of the working mother. A Manhattan-based writer who uses a personal computer, she keeps a plastic trash bag in her West Side apartment exclusively for the paper debris of sentences that didn't work. "By the end of the day I've created a mountain of paper," she says. And by the end of the day, the garbage bag in the study and the garbage bag in the kitchen are combined in an eloquent statement about the demands and dilemmas of the professional woman. On the days when the computer paper is particularly heavy, the bag that goes into the building's garbage compactor is filled with boxes of frozen fish cakes and Tater Tots.

The refuse of Ruth and Bob Magee of Massapequa underscores this retired couple's high-cholesterol diet of whole milk, butter and eggs. The contents of the generic trash bags used by Joy and Harold Christophersen of Holbrook attest to the priorities of consumers who prefer bargains to brand names.

And the trash bags of Manhattanite Marianne Kavanagh are even more illuminating, if not all-encompassing. The bags include such dietary and socio-economic clues as Twinings tea bags, Pepperidge Farm cookie bags,

and the pulp left over from fresh-squeezed orange juice. The sales receipts from Brooks Brothers and Saks are comments on her tastes. What's missing also matters – there are no cigarette butts or liquor bottles.

And how a person parts with what is no longer needed can reflect quirks of personality. Just imagine Felix Unger's garbage can.

Marianne Kavanagh dabs her mouth between sips of capuccino as she confesses the deep, dark secrets that surround her garbage. "I gift wrap everything," she whispers. Marianne Kavanagh puts her teabag in a baggie and ties it up before she throws it away. She tears anything that has her name and address on it into tiny pieces. "Maybe I'm paranoid," she suggests. "Maybe I'm neurotic. No, don't say I'm neurotic." Every night after the 11 o'clock news, Marianne Kavanagh peers out the door of her 28th-floor apartment to make sure no one is in the hallway. She slips her bathrobe on over her nightgown and, if the coast is clear, she hurries to the compactor room with her small bag of garbage. She says she sleeps better knowing the garbage is out of the house.

Eccentricities can border on obsessions. Sonia Rodriguez of Brentwood washes out her soup cans and her husband, Juan, takes his concern for dental hygiene to an extreme. "He's a teeth fanatic," she says in an effort to explain the preponderance of used dental floss, toothpaste and mouthwash containers in their garbage – and the paucity of gum wrappers and junk food.

And one Suffolk woman, who asked that her name be withheld, tells tales on her garbage-obsessed husband – good-natured tales that might not be out of place in the "Believe It or Not" of Garbage World.

"In my house, if you're cracking peanuts you'd better have a piece of paper handy, too, for the shells, because you can't just throw them in the garbage can," she begins. The rest of the rules read like the commandments of a man with a passion for order and cleanliness: Food garbage is not allowed in the bathroom or bedroom waste baskets; broken glass must be wrapped in two paper bags; all paper boxes must be ripped at the seams. Even grease has its proper place.

"If you use a spatula to scrape grease or fat from a pan," the woman explains, "you'd better not wipe the spatula on the edge of the garbage bag. There's hell to pay for that one. Everyone knows fat belongs in the middle of the can – because if it's near the edge someone might walk by and get grease on his clothes."

The obsession with garbage as dirt goes hand in hand with the commercial credo of "never touch garbage again." Jorie MacKinnon, who helped organize a recent recycling experiment by 100 East Hampton families, tells of one woman's nose-to-nose confrontation with raw refuse: "She'd always used plastic bags with ties and here she was for the first time throwing food garbage in an unsealed paper bag. She called and said she had a problem. 'What's wrong?' I asked. She sounded kind of embarrassed. 'It's the garbage, it, it, it – well, it smells.' And I thought, we're so removed from our garbage – we even forget that it smells."

Both experts like William Rathje and socially conscious garbage producers like Jorie MacKinnon believe this attitude captures the essence of the mess – for the nation as well as the individual.

"Americans have an assembly line attitude toward garbage," Rathje says. "We use something, we throw it away, and it goes down the line to someone else. We think it's gone, but it's not gone. We simply push it away and don't think about it any more."

By contrast, people in other nations find ways to get the most out of their garbage. The Japanese give their

newspapers and magazines to door-to-door entrepreneurs in exchange for rolls of toilet paper. In India, people make fertilizer by boiling animal bones they have collected from the garbage piles. The Dutch have created the world's largest compost pile – turning a million tons of refuse a year into approximately 125,000 tons of organic material for farm and garden usage. In Sri Lanka, man and beast alike wait at the dumps in Colombo for the garbage trucks to arrive – the human scavengers rush forward first, then the cows, pigs and goats are allowed to feed on the heaps. And in Vietnam, one of the poorest countries in the world, there is virtually no litter because street beggars find a use for almost every scrap.

"Other societies see things as cyclical," Rathje says. "There is no end of the line; what goes around comes around. Garbage is always out there affecting something. "

MacKinnon puts it on a more personal level. "We have to stop thinking of our garbage as kaka-poo-poo. "

The Sigmanns' trash joins the assembly line the moment it goes into the plastic bag in the kitchen. As Deneen Sigmann observes, "I don't have time to fool around with garbage. " They just want to get it out of the house. But the plastic bags sprinkled with canned corn and caramel apples stay tied to Garbage World – they tell the story of an American family.

The Sigmanns allowed a dozen bags of their garbage to be studied over the course of a month. The bags contained slightly more than 165 pounds of garbage. Deneen and Walter Sigmann and their four children throw everything – from spaghetti sauce to Sunday newspapers to insulin syringes – into the trash bag in their kitchen. By weight, the most prevalent items followed national patterns. The family discarded 42.6 pounds of newspapers, 42.2 pounds of food waste, 32.4 pounds of paper goods and 19.7 pounds of plastics, among other items such as fabric and vacuum lint.

The bags offered material proof of Rathje's underlying premise: "We are what we throw away."

Their garbage showed that the Sigmanns go to McDonald's, they drink regular coffee and whole milk, eat pizza and takeout deli food. They read newspapers and own a cat and a dog. They try to save money by eating Hamburger Helper, bottom round and chuck steak instead of better cuts of meat, but they gorge on frozen food and store-bought baked goods, which tend to be expensive. They spend small fortunes every week on packaged cakes and cookies, they eat Cheerios and cornflakes and the whole range of sugary cereals – Count Chocula, Trix and Fruity Pebbles to name a few. The family drinks almost one gallon of milk a day and eats about three loaves of bread a week. The younger children went trick-or-treating and the family went shopping at a discount outlet mall in Pennsylvania. Walter Sigmann smokes a pipe, Deneen smokes menthol, filter-tipped cigarettes – about two packs a day. Deneen reads romance novels and Jennifer wears Avon lipstick. Cathy is a Girl Scout and gets B's in spelling and A's in math. Mary writes home regularly from Drake University – begging her mother for care packages of her favorite store-bought chocolate chip cookies. Waltie changes the oil in the family cars and replaces the filter in the microwave oven. The Sigmanns are cable television subscribers and they snack on pretzels, potato chips and popcorn. They drink diet soda and throw away the twist-off caps but return the plastic bottles to the store. They attend Good Shepherd Roman Catholic Church, and like many Americans, they don't even open the volumes of junk mail that arrive every day.

The Sigmann garbage can underline Rathje's theme of truth-in-trash. It reveals their medical and financial histories – their prescription drugs, their credit cards, their bills.

And in many instances, the truth encompasses social exchange and ritual. In Manhattan – where the Islip

garbage barge became a tourist attraction and people steal metal litter baskets to use as barbecue pits – trash can be part of the absurd circus of urban life. Patricia Kravitz takes her 5-year-old daughter, Sara, to watch the garbage trucks unload the giant metal dumpsters in the alleyway of the West Side high-rise where they live. For New Yorkers who prefer the charm of brownstones to the convenience of elevator-buildings, taking out the trash means walking down – then back up – three, four, maybe five flights of stairs. Bags of garbage wait outside apartment doors until it is time to do such urban errands as moving the car to comply with alternate-side-of-the-street parking regulations.

In the suburbs, where homeowners wheel their molded plastic cans to the curb on metal trolleys, garbage becomes a way of socializing. On summer evenings, Carol Masak, who has lived in the same East Northport development for 29 years, chats with the man across the street as they both put out the trash. Sometimes they even share their garbage – when Masak has more trash than the carter will take, she carries a couple of her bags across the street.

The way America gets rid of its garbage has forced some communities to take the first steps toward recycling. From North Hempstead to Islip to East Hampton, town officials are grappling with new problems – like how to get homeowners to throw glass in green cans and paper in purple cans and food waste in cans of a different color. But most of the time, the American way leads only to de facto recycling. Carol Masak rolls newspapers into fire logs and puts coffee grounds and eggshells around the shrubs in her front yard. Sonia Rodriguez sends magazines to her sister in Puerto Rico. And one humid afternoon last summer, Patricia Kravitz performed what she considers an act of creative recycling.

For two weeks, she walked around Manhattan with an aluminum Coke can in her pocketbook. She felt guilty just throwing it away. And the 5-cent deposit wasn't worth the 10-minute wait at the bottle-return section of her local grocery store. The way out finally appeared in the form of a homeless person picking soda cans out of a trash basket. Patricia Kravitz decided that tossing away her soda can served a greater good. "It was like seeing a remarkable chain," she recalls. "There are people in New York who are living off our soda cans. "

But such informal stabs at recycling are easy because they don't require changes in lifestyle. They don't require us to break the habits that result in the flood of recyclable items now inundating our landfills. Each year, the average U.S. household discards 1,800 plastic items, 13,000 individual paper items, 500 aluminum cans and 500 glass bottles.

Deneen Sigmann worries that the mechanics of recycling would produce separation anxieties. "I guess separation and recycling are probably good ideas," she says, "but I'm not going to bother until I absolutely have to. When somebody knocks on my door and says you have to do this or you go to jail, then I'll say OK, I'll do it. I won't like it but I'll do it . . . It would be annoying. It would be an inconvenience. It would be time consuming. "

The agonies and the ecstasies of recycling are related by Jorie MacKinnon in a journal she kept during the East Hampton experiment. She didn't know what to do with the tiny staples that hold tea bags together, she questioned whether wine-bottle corks were biodegradable. Her husband, Steve, scrubbed melted cheese off the aluminum foil from a takeout order. And she worried about brunch guests. "Will we be able to keep guests from misplacing their leavings?" she wrote. She felt guilty at her job with an environmental group because she couldn't rinse the mayonnaise off her sandwich wrapper before throwing it away. She made a note to warn the cleaning woman about "the new system. "

But it wasn't all kaka-poo-poo. She uncovered a secret soul of origami in a dismantled takeout Chinese-food carton, and she saw "terrific videos on recycling. " She found herself "filled with the fervor of a recent convert. " And she discovered a philosophy. "It's nice in a way to be developing a more involved relationship with our garbage. "

But experts like Rathje believe most Americans just don't want to be bothered. "We haven't had to be as careful as some countries," he says, "but we're going to have to start conserving if we want to maintain the lifestyle we have today. We have the potential to change before it's too late. "

It's a matter of bad habits being set in the concrete of everyday life. When it gets down to garbage, America seems caught in its own leftovers – mired in a mind-set exemplified by the CinchSak slogan and Deneen Sigmann's exhortation to "just get it out of here. " Garbage only becomes visible when it can no longer be ignored – when the bag overflows, when landfills dominate the horizon, when the Islip barge has no place to go.

And even then, it is difficult to look at the refuse teeming on our shores. Or to learn the lessons of our own history. "Garbage is part of life," Rathje observes. "Whether we want to see it or not, it will always be there."

In Deneen Sigmann's kitchen, the Cinch-Sak fills up without anyone in the family even noticing. In America's landfills, the markers of our time and culture accumulate. Oxygen cylinders, axes and boots litter Mount Everest and old lunar module parts fill the craters of the moon. Even the final frontier – space – has been polluted by the discards of a disposable society. More than 5,000 pieces of American garbage float in Earth's orbit – dead satellites, spent rocket stages, boosters, a power wrench, even a Hasselblad camera left behind after a manned mission.

Jorie MacKinnon offers a prophetic warning. "Without question, anything that you just don't want to know about is going to come back and get you."

One Family's Trash

Over the course of four weeks, Newsday collected and analyzed 12 bags of garbage from the six-member Sigmann family of Holbrook. The garbage added up to 166 pounds, the equivalent of an average-sized man. Here is what the Sigmanns threw out:

<u>Item</u>	<u>Weight</u>	<u>Percentage of Garbage</u>
Newspapers	42 lbs. 11 ozs	25.7
Food	42 lbs. 4 ozs	25.4
Paper	32 lbs. 7 ozs	19.5
Plastic	19 lbs. 11 ozs	11.9
Glass	9 lbs	5.4
Fabric	8 lbs. 5 ozs	5.0
Tin cans	7 lbs	4.2
Vacuum lint	4 lbs. 8 ozs	2.7
Aluminum	3 ozs	--
Total	166 lbs. 1 oz	

Columns may not add up precisely because of rounding.