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The Paramount Issue, 1938

Francis Mairs Huntington-Wilson

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THE PARAMOUNT ISSUE

To those who have taken the trouble to follow events at the national capital the greatest and the fundamental problem before the American people is how to arrest the growth of bureaucratic dictatorship at Washington. When the generality of citizens come to understand what has been going on, they too, in great majority, will realize this. Then, if they unite, they will find means to preserve their liberty, their Constitutional government, their democracy, and their local self-government. On March 18, 1938, Senator Wheeler's amendment to the President's so-called reorganization bill was defeated by a vote of 43 to 39. The amendment requires Congressional approval of changes in the executive branch of the federal government, its departments and now almost innumerable agencies. Without the Wheeler amendment, all these, and even the semi-judicial bodies such as the inter-State Commerce Commission, become the play-things of presidential power. That power is thereby grotesquely and dangerously increased. The men elected and paid by the people to represent them in Congress abdicate their duties and surrender their authority to the President. That is the situation if this vote stands. Moreover, without even looking at the names, the vote that defeated the Wheeler amendment shows, prima facie, that there are now in the Senate 39 men who

serve the American people and 43 who serve the New Deal machine.

Economy and efficiency were the alledged reasons for the bill to reorganize the executive branch of the federal government. Now, as never before, it needs real economy through elimination of usurped, over-lapping and unnecessary agencies, ^{superfluous} and personnel. As never before it needs efficiency through the application of standards of ability instead of partizanship. As never before civil service needs protection and betterment. Does the record of the present Administration hold out any hope that economy or efficiency will be served by giving it more power? Those who have studied the reorganization bill have seen from the first that economy and efficiency were sham reasons and that the real aim was one more grab for a monopoly of power for the President.

As an attempt to nullify the power of the people's representatives in Congress and to make presidential power dictatorial and absolute the reorganization bill is grotesque beyond belief. A masterly analysis of the proposal was set forth in an open letter to the President written for the National Committee to Uphold Constitutional Government, by Mr. Amos Pinchot. He therein shows that the bill as sent to the Capitol by the executive gave the President "--power to abolish, or transfer, or change all federal agencies, their officers, and their functions",--and thereby to "--control the policies, decisions, and actions of these agencies." He goes on to point out that there are many "--regulatory agencies in our government, some purely executive and others semi-judicial, upon whose policies and action depends, in large measure, the wel-

fare of every section of the country. These agencies intimately affect the nation's economic life, the life of every class of our people, of all consumers, of labor, of business, and agriculture--" and that any president, with the powers granted in this bill, "--could shape with an iron hand the policies and decisions and action of all these agencies. For, if their policies, decisions, or action did not suit him, he could disestablish the agencies themselves, remove or discipline their officers, or change the functions of the agencies, as he pleased, in accordance with his own will, or his bias, or his political advantage." To grasp the full horror of the proposal it is to be noted that whatever outrageous action any president might take under the authority of this bill, he could veto any law of Congress passed to repeal his action; and only by the two-thirds vote required to over-ride a presidential veto could the people find relief. For good measure, this bill, in the name of economy, would abolish the office of controller, the last bulwark against illegal spending of the taxpayers' money! Such, in brief, is the gist of this amazing proposal, made not in Italy, Russia, or Germany, but right here in the United States; put into words by those now closest to the President; sent to a committee of congress with very unusual secrecy.

While this march of events towards fundamental change in our government goes on, the attention of the public is concentrated not so much upon it as upon the problems of how to bring about recovery from the current depression back to prosperity; how to bring about reemployment. The more thoughtful are also wondering how

present methods of relief to the unemployed can be continued without national bankruptcy, and how this country can be saved from crushing taxes, soaring prices, and, ultimately, an inflation that will bring all incomes and wages (and relief money too) well down towards zero in their purchasing power. Now, after five years of the New Deal we are again in depression, this time because of the pernicious policies of the New Deal and the impossibility of business confidence under the New Deal; and recovery back to prosperity seems farther off than ever. Unemployment is about as bad as ever. The relief burden on the taxpayers returns to a peak. The budget remains unbalanced and the national debt still mounts. The threat of ultimate disastrous inflation and bankruptcy becomes constantly more real. More than 17 billions of dollars of taxpayers money have been spent. President Roosevelt has disposed of more of our money than did all the presidents that preceded him together. He has had more power than any other president in peace time ever had. And here we are back just about where we started, except for the staggering debt and the demoralizing effects of his courses.

It baffles imagination to think how so many billions can have been spent, how so many tens of thousands of officials and government employees can have been put on the tax-payer's pay-roll, with so little result in permanent benefit to the nation, or even in mitigation of the rigors of an emergency. The quarrel is with the spendthrift politician's approach, the demagogic method and tone, the superficiality and haste, the cross purposes, the lack of any

benevolent and high-minded philosophy of society and politics, the seeming gambling with the destinies of the nation for personal aggrandisement. There is much room for quarrel, too, with slipshod measures representing half-baked ideas, measures that flout reason and ignore experience; measures that, because of haste or lack of ability or ulterior motive, fail to pursue even legitimate ends by sound economical and constitutional means.

It is unpleasant to criticize a president of the United States; but it is justified and necessary. A British King or a French President stands in the back-ground as the dignified symbol of nationality, the impartial focus of patriotism. The prime minister is the party leader. He and his colleagues do the harranguing and propose the measures. And they receive lusty argument, without gloves, in the parliament and on the hustings. To enjoy at the same time the sacred and sheltered immunity of a king and the pugnacious license of a partizan political leader would indeed be to have one's cake and eat it. With things as they are, probably the line of good taste in the matter varies with the attitude of the incumbent of the White House at any given time. The disposition of those now in power has been to insult those who disagree with their policies by insinuating that they are no better than unpatriotic, heartless self-seekers; and to coerce the representatives of the people by the threat, or the fact, of political opposition or withholding of favors in the case of those who dare to stand up against the executive will. The welfare of the nation is infinitely more sacred than the prestige of any public figure, in whatever colors

it may have been painted and however thick the tinsel. Frank appraisal now is a national necessity.

In his campaign for the presidency in 1932 Mr. Franklin Roosevelt uttered some words that seemed to connote a fresh conception of the stage of the country's development; of the abuses and the hopes of the national life. Millions of voters found in their promise a welcome contrast to the baffled and unresourceful bourbonism, the ineptitudes and dull platitudes of immediately preceding administrations. The candidate was pledged, too, to a good platform. Many, including the writer, lured by the hope of an enlightened liberalism to replace a muscle-bound stand-patism, rashly supported and voted for Mr. Franklin Roosevelt without knowing anything of the man, his character, his temperament or his mind. Now they know. Much they might have known before, by consulting thoughtful observers at Albany and elsewhere.

The first disappointment was the refusal to confer and to cooperate with the outgoing president during the critical days between November and March 4th. That had a warning savor of setting personal and partizan advantage above all other things. Once the new Administration was in power, a few acts like the gold embargo and the rescue of the banks showed a vigor and sagacity that were heartening. The situation of the unemployed and of many farmers was desperate. Any administration would have had to help them. No decent American would consent that his fellow citizens should lack the necessities of life. Some raising of some prices was appropriate, to lighten the burden of debt. Some help to some railway and other companies was justifiable to bolster savings banks and other institutions, the

repositories of the public's savings. Although in retrospect it seems like a dream, at the beginning of the first administration there was, in addition to pledges, an actual, if very temporary, reduction in the cost of the executive branch of the government; believe it or not, a measure of economy.

The President's effort to block the rapacity of the ex-soldiers in their demand for the pre-payment of the bonus was laudable enough, although it contrasts sharply with the example of blithely wasting the dollars which represent the national wealth that he himself has set. The securities exchange control stands as a creditable and long overdue reform. So likewise, in principle, does the movement toward needed control of the abuse of the device of incorporation, of the holding company in its occasional sly financial manifestations. But, nevertheless, after a very few months indeed it became apparent to those independent voters who had supported the "Democratic" platform and candidate in 1932 that they had voted into office something quite different, a curious thing called the "New Deal", with a leader whose proposals, like his technique, were unfamiliar to the American scene. One small consolation to those who helped put this government in power is that its adumbration of so many problems, while supplying sound solutions to so few, may at least have advanced the political education of the American people, may have increased their thoughtfulness and feeling of responsibility, and diminished their gullibility. It may have broken the ground for statesmanship. If the "new deal" has proved only a shuffle, it may have prepared the way for something better.

A good farmer plows one field at a time. He does not scratch dozens of fields just enough to expose them to erosion. He does a few things well. And he thinks a lot of the state of the farm next year. He practices husbandry, which is economics. The course of the current government has been quite different. Earlier in the Administration the face of "politics" peered through attempts then made to placate one large group after another, as if each would remain placated, and there could be realized the politician's dream of fooling all of the people all of the time. Those were the days of N.R.A. and its blue eagle. Monopolies were encouraged under "Code Authorities." If an outsider wished to break in to business, or to have his own price scale, it was just too bad. Jail or a fine for his "equality of opportunity"! Now, it seems, monopolies are wicked again. The new phase appears to be to "straff" business, to glorify the least "privileged" third of the population, and to appeal to the unthinking, the extreme radicals, and those who will vote according to their apparent personal financial advantage at the moment. This course seems based on a theory that these categories comprise the majority of the voters of the United States. Those of us who believe in America must believe that this is not so, and that a majority of voters will prove that the politicians in power grossly underrate their character and intelligence.

Our present government,--and that means the whole executive administration and all the members of congress who take their orders from it, so long as the latter are a majority,--is dominated by President Roosevelt. Its actions, policies, technique, tone and color mirror his character and mind. He has even tried, as witness the Black appointment, to impress his image upon the Supreme Court,

intended to be, as the Congress is intended to be, a co-equal but independent branch of government. It is therefore quite necessary, in any attempt to understand what goes on at Washington, to try honestly to appraise the character and mind of the present occupant of the White House.

Born to wealth and luxury, and to the traditional Roosevelt ambition, he studied at Groton, Harvard and Columbia Law School, and then occupied himself with law and certain business ventures. It is generally accepted to be the fact that during all those years he gained neither the eminence nor the popularity requisite to the satisfaction of vanity and ambition. The satisfaction of those qualities were to be found in a brilliant political career. To his political career he brought a vanity and an ambition the more ravenous for satisfaction because of their previously somewhat meagre diet. If "by ambition fell the Angles", it is scarcely surprising that an excess of that quality should bring to light amazing traits in a mere man.

To adopt the ways of the "practical politician" connotes opportunism. Now no one would advocate slavery to consistency. But there is a vast difference between changing one's announced principles and beliefs due to a sincere change of mind, and changing them to fit what one fancies will serve one's purposes at the moment. The "practical politician" is observed to be far from particular what he tells the people, so long as he thinks he can "get away with it" and profit by it. At his worst, he is expected to have abandoned fastidiousness and acquired a very considerable

callousness in all those little matters like truth and the finer shades of honesty in public affairs. His business is to get the votes, to win elections. He cherishes one little virtue, and that is to be trustworthy about his agreements (however against the public interest!) and to be loyal to his fellow party men. Although scarcely qualifying in this last mentioned detail, Mr. Roosevelt would certainly not deny that he believes in and practices "practical politics."

If a person living in wealth and luxury, and having vivid imagination, projects himself into the lives of the less fortunate he shudders to think how acutely he would suffer in such circumstances. He conjures up in his mind a vision so distressing that it would greatly amaze most of the people he is pitying. Writers, who are usually acutely sensitive, and sometimes neurotic, often grossly exaggerate the sufferings of the less fortunate of mankind by this process of self-projection into a life that to themselves would be unbearable while, to those who live it, it may be fairly satisfactory. No one quarrels with human sympathy. Indeed we cannot have too much of it. But exaggeration and maudlin sentimentality are something different; and the two doctrines that one-third of the American people are in an awful plight; and that the most unfortunate of all are all guiltless, underprivileged heroes who should be gladly supported, and in circumstances to which they are not accustomed, by the working population, are neither true nor fair.

Such exaggerations and sentimentalities are grist to the mill of certain types of reformers and idealists, and to communists and socialists, who would base social arrangements upon them, ignoring all experience of human nature and economic law. This reformer type

bears watching. If sincere and zealous to the point of fanaticism, he will justify the means he takes by the ends he pursues to a point that would shame the "practical politician." In times of depression like these, when discontent is so widespread, the reformer-agitator flourishes. Perhaps the discontented groups can carry an election? When this is believed, the practical politician puts on the mantle of the reformer-agitator. Love of power and love of man. Oh happy conjunction of the planets, Oh double justification!

Probably enough has now been said to indicate what seem clearly to be the only possible explanations of the innumerable shifts from one position to another that have characterized his public utterances during the whole course of President Roosevelt's public life. An important and suggestive example is the fact that when he was governor of New York he emphasized states' rights and local self-government, while nowadays as President he constantly undermines them and does all he can to aggrandize presidential power. As a candidate he condemned federal extravagance and the creation of new commissions and other federal agencies. As president he has broken all records in undreamed of expenditure and in piling up bureaucratic machinery. Such things as promises, unfulfilled, to balance the budget need not be recalled. And with the shifting phases of opportunistic policy his "brain trust" has shifted. Sound men like Moley and Warburg and Gen. Hugh Johnson and many others are out. So also, to be sure, is the radical and visionary Tugwell. The most intimate White House advisers are now understood to be certain

very energetic young radicals, very clever but not very wise. The reorganization bill asks for half a dozen more such intimate helpers, to be well paid and to comprise, apparently, a sort of sub-callibre cabinet. The machinery is being geared for continued presidential omnificence.

The method of controlling Congressmen and Senators has been touched on. It is simple enough. If a member of congress will not obey the White House, then his allotment of financial and other favors for his district will be cut down; and the New Deal machine will work against him politically as well. And this crude method of control may go on working until the public realizes that it is their money, as taxpayers, that is being passed around; and that that money, so far from being inexhaustible, is running dry; and that unless the waste is soon stopped, the country and everyone in it are headed straight for ruin. The only way to stop all this is to elect men to Congress who will tell their constituents the truth, who will not be "rubber-stamps" for any president, and who will shoulder their responsibilities with honor and conscience.

The least official appointed by a president is told in his commission that the president appoints him because he reposes "special confidence in his integrity, prudence and ability." And every official, in his oath of office swears that he will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that he will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that he takes this obligation freely, without mental reservation or purpose of evasion--So help him God.²

To a casual observer it appears that there are a good many people in the present government at Washington who hardly meet the above tests. - The future of 120 odd millions of people is too solemn a matter for play-boys to make amusing experiments upon or for vote-seeking politicians in congress to juggle with.

To sum up, then, there is no doubt whatever that the great majority of American voters wish to stop the present march towards presidential dictatorship; that they wish to see business recovery and, through it, reemployment and general recovery of prosperity; that they do not wish to be crushed by taxes or to have their money rendered valueless through disastrous inflation; that they want to proceed towards a balanced budget instead of towards national bankruptcy; that they want a government that will encourage cooperation instead of stirring up inter-group strife, to the injury of everyone. To citizens who care for the future of their country, and who have some measure of wisdom and will give but a little thought to the situation, it is very clear that the only way to accomplish these things is to have done with the present functioning of the national government. We usually speak of administrations; but the current regime has consisted of a flighty and headstrong executive branch dominating a largely rubber-stamp congress, the two comprising a government limited in its vagaries only by the restraint of the Supreme Court. And even that restraining hand, even if it had not been purposely weakened, is powerless to prevent the wreck of the business, fiscal, monetary and financial structure of the nation, and with them it the wellbeing and hopes of all. That is the path that lies ahead, unless present policies are reversed.

It is very clear that to escape disaster and to attain any or all of the real aims of the majority of Americans the only recourse is to take governmental power out of the hands of the New Deal machine. Pressure of public opinion upon the present congress is useful, but it is not enough. It is necessary to see to it that in the coming elections there shall be

reelected those who have fought the good fight of the people vs the New Deal; those who saved the Supreme Court and who are fighting the outrageous reorganization bill. It is necessary to defeat the rubber-stamp senators and members of the house, irrespective of political party, and to send to Washington in their places men of conscience and common sense, who put country above party and above momentary personal expediency. And it is necessary now to begin preparing the ground for replacing the present regime, when the time comes, with an administration that is trustworthy, prudent and wise; less given to opportunist politics and more capable of statesmanship. With costly hollabaloo we have been shifted from the frying-pan of growing plutocracy to the fire of far faster growing bureaucracy. The party of coalition that must displace the leadership and authorities of today will find a path that avoids both those evils. To get the vast power of the federal government into different and safer hands is the paramount issue before the American people.