



1938

Our Road to Dictatorship, 1938

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*Containing Chief Am. Heads for
Socialist Dictatorship* 19 17

OUR ROAD TO DICTATORSHIP.

What has been happening or attempted in the United States corresponds, to a surprising degree, to the course of events in other countries while they were being led along the road to dictatorship of some kind. Always an extremist minority was confronted by a divided opposition and, because the majority were divided and lacked leadership, the extremist minority had its way. Through failure to cooperate with sound middle-ground liberals, "labor" and "Capital", ultra-conservatives, and the rest, all ended in being exploited or "liquidated" by extremists. This seems to be one lesson of history.

Those nations that have come under dictatorship had not, like the English-speaking peoples, a long heritage of liberty and self-government. Also, there had really been chaos in their countries. We have had neither of these excuses. Here, it has seemed as if those in power actually cultivated a defeatist attitude towards American institutions; as if they fostered class-feeling in a country without "classes", and discouraged cooperation. One might almost infer that they were fomenting confusion and parasitism in order to "fish in troubled waters" for their own ambitions.

Moreover, in each of the three typical countries (Italy, Germany and Russia) that were brought to dictatorship, there was a large nucleus of fanaticism, whether for dramatic self-assertion, for military nationalism, or for militant communism. This fact produced leadership of a certain sincerity of purpose, whatever one thinks of the purposes or of the methods employed. Here in the United States no

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such fanaticism was native, in any amount worth mentioning. What we had of fanaticism for socialism or communism, both of which apparently require dictatorship, was ~~strictly~~ an alien importation. And those who believed in such foreign cure-alls were, with few exceptions, persons who understood little of the precious heritage of our liberties, who saw here only freedom to attack our institutions, liberty to attack liberty. So here in America there has been no excuse of convinced fanaticism among the people, no mandate even of a respectable minority, to explain official attempts, sometimes subtle, sometimes crude, to undermine our Constitution and substitute dictatorial bureaucracy.

Really the crisis of 1931-1932 presented to American government very few problems that were new, unless in degree of intensity; and none that could not be dealt with within the frame-work of American institutions. Emergency powers were generously voted, as a temporary measure, to the Executive. These powers were loaned, not given, by the people, through their representatives. Once the first crisis was passed, instead of relinquishing them, we have seen the Executive constantly reaching out for more powers. Court packing, and government reorganization and wages and hour laws, as originally proposed by the Administration, all appear, on examination, to have been thinly veiled schemes to gain more power. The original problems of the depression, such as, for example, how to bring about recovery and re-employment, and, later, how to balance the budget, have been dealt with so inefficiently (since the early months of the crisis), that it is hard to believe their solution can have been a principal official

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aim. Rather do the problems seem to have been exaggerated so as to serve as an excuse for huge expenditures and the building up of a political machine of bureaucratic and dictatorial power.

Italy, Germany, and Russia each started from conditions entirely different from those in the United States, and dictatorship was implicit in the aims pursued. Nothing of the sort has been true here. If bureaucratic autocracy is sought in America, it must be as an end in itself; for we have no problems whose solution requires it. In contrast, again, to some other countries, the course of official action here, with some few notable and praiseworthy exceptions, has seemed to be tinged with a curious and alarming frivolity -- as if statesmanship were, not responsibility for the destiny of a nation, but rather a game for the satisfaction of the players. Instead of a philosophical approach to grave and intricate questions, we have seen slap-dash experimentation. Another striking thing has been the astonishing failure to learn from the experience of other governments that have faced with deliberation, dignity, and relative economy problems similar to those faced here with such superficiality, clamor and waste. Relief, unemployment, and labor problems are a few examples.

Here, the tax-payers' money has been spent to buy popularity with propaganda and "spoils", and thus has created a gigantic partizan political machine. When there is added to all this a frequent resort to demagogy and deceit, the debauching of politics, government, national finance and, much the worst of all, of the national character, follows as a natural result. These phenomena are familiar land-marks on the road to despotism. So are novel and hasty projects of law. So are

official fostering of huge groups dependent upon government for livelihood, making for that partisitism which did so much to destroy Rome by demoralizing the people.

In the absence from the United States of the usual justifications for dictatorship, it seems a fair question to ask whether dictatorial power is being sought here in order to change our institutions or whether it is sought to change our institutions in order to gain and hold power. It is a considerable shock that within six years it has ceased to be considered alarmist to discuss the possibility of dictatorship in the United States. In substance it makes little difference whether that term is used, or whether we say that the present executive is bent upon usurping functions and responsibilities of the Courts and the Congress. Our alarm is increased by the fact that so many members of the Congress, from fancied self-interest, "party loyalty", and in a few cases, perhaps, a gullible Utopianism, have been inclined to submit. We must at least admit, further, that there has been a determined effort to centralize government at Washington, thus weakening State and other local self-government, both in scope and in independence. If "the power to tax is the power to destroy", so, too, is the power to give largesse in return for submission. We have certainly seen grandiose attempts at regimentation. And our vast, costly, and highly political bureaucracy is notorious. We have seen, in high places, disrespect for the spirit of our Constitution and for our Supreme Court, the two safeguards of our liberties. We have seen the attempt to govern, with the help of personal advisers unknown to us, through pressure of favor and threat, of paid propoganda and demagogic appeal. *Is it not enough? Does the word dictatorship matter?*