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Reality and Party Politics, 1939

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REALITY AND PARTY POLITICS

Further on there will be discussed a possible means of escape from government through the struggle of rival pressure groups. An attempt will be made to recall to the generality of citizens some of the considerations that are an essential background to the forming of opinions upon current problems and political issues, of which recovery, reemployment and government solvency are now paramount in the public mind. But first it will be well to glance at the accelerated tendency of the past five years to concentrate power in the hands of one man at Washington; for this strikes at the machinery through which Americans are accustomed to try to govern themselves.

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.

Other 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 partisanship in order to "fish in troubled waters" for their own ambitions.

Moreover, in each of the three typical countries that were brought to dictatorship, there was a large nucleus of fanaticism, whether 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 such thing 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 reemployment, 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 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 question, we have seen far too much slap-dash experimentation. Another striking thing has been the astonishing failure to learn from the experience of other governments. Some of those governments have faced with de-liberation, dignity, and relative economy problems very 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 demagogury 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 de-stroy 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 five years it has ceased to be considered alarmist to discuss the possibility of dictator-ship 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 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 propaganda and demagogic appeal. Is it not enough? Does the word dictatorship matter?

The Court battle is won; but the war goes on. Nothing truer was ever said than that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Capital and labor and citizens at large need to be alert to sense and stop the grasp for autocratic power concealed in the government reorganization bill and the wages and hours bill as proposed by the present Executive. Similar scrutiny is due the farm bills, for the same reason, and also because, if they affront human nature and economic law, they will of course do more harm than good.

What are Americans going to do about this whole situation? What are we going to do to restrain inordinate ambitions and to check costly experimentation with unsound theories? What are we

going to do to obtain government that is wise, trustworthy, efficient and economical? Where can we look for government that inspires confidence, that encourages hope and initiative, instead of parasitism; government that stands for America at its best? We must look to the best man we have, regardless of party.

Rome was saved by the cackling of geese, which aroused the garrison. Why not America? Surely we have a sufficient cackling of geese, official and unofficial, to arouse the sensible majority of the electorate to the need to save this country. Our sleeping garrison consists of Americans of common sense and goodwill, of honesty and willingness to work, and of ability. They are one thing of which America can be proud. It is they who must be aroused to control American policies while their minds and spirits are still uncorrupted by the current low materialism and unsound ideas. This is the great class of useful and worthy people in every walk of life or occupation for whose benefit, primarily, the country should be run, and by whom it should be run.

A vice of good Americans has been to take legislation and Government measures "lying down"; to leave government to self-seeking politicians, played upon by clamorous organized minorities. Those who form the back-bone of the nation are unorganized. They are the "forgotten men." Here and there one of them raises his voice in protest, but it is drowned out in the confused roar of propaganda and selfish or foolish agitation. These men may be labeled "Democrat" or "Republican"; but the label is meaningless. They are in the North, South, East and West. They have no party to express and impose their

views and desires.

The time has come when Americans should ask themselves whether they are no longer capable of local and national self government; whether they wish to surrender their freedom and initiative in return for regimentation and a very meagre and unreal "social security"; whether they want socialism or communism or facism, or whether they are still worthy of democratic institutions and able to solve their problems in the American way under their Constitution. That may be the hard way; but it is, in the long run, the only safe way.

If America is still America, these questions can be answered in only one way. I think we all know that there is still a heavy majority of genuine Americans, of authentic American characteristics and opinions. Although now largely uninformed or inarticulate or deceived, or led astray for a time, by material favors, they are ready to rise in response to honest leadership and to put their country on the path of wise and sound progress.

Being "Liberal", or "Progressive", or "Conservative" scarcely matters. The issue seems to be the American people vs. the present leadership, with its extravagant ambition, its foreign theories, and its henchmen and rubber-stamps. The bulk of the American people are sound liberals, not "radicals." Will the sound liberals get together? All these terms have been much distorted by misuse. The term "sound liberal" as employed here means one who wishes to see his nation prosper morally and materially, who is honest, and who brings wisdom, knowledge, and moderation, as well as zeal, to the pursuit of his aims; and one who knows the world and human-nature and is not a "crank" of any kind.

It has been evident for twenty-five years that the horizontal lines of cleavage running through both our American parties, and dividing ultra-conservatives, sound middle ground liberals (normally most numerous in both), and extreme radicals, have been much more real than the line dividing the parties themselves. This situation may be tolerable, even if absurd, in serene times. But it is not only absurd but tragic in the present crisis, which transcends in importance the fate of any political party. The great majority of Americans who stand between the two extremes of political and social thought can prevail only if united. Napoleon was accustomed to defeat the armies of the Coalition one by one because they never were wise enough to present a united front to him. He met his first check when some of them had the idea of joining together to oppose him. When this occurred, he showed his appraisal of the mentality of his opponents by remarking, "I should never have believed that of a general of the Coalition!" Shall the stupidity of disunion in the face of a united minority recur here?

For a very large number of voters it is difficult to get excited, in times like these, about promoting the interests of the Democratic Party or the Republican Party as such. It seems like fiddling while Rome burns. Republicans everywhere have a rare opportunity to deserve and to gain the respect of the whole nation if they have it in them to put country above party, even to the point of giving up the party name and the party identity and merging with those like-minded of the other party. Parties arise to meet emergencies. Neither of the present nominal parties is in position to meet the present crisis, which is a great one. Things have gone too far for the Republicans, as an oppo-

sition party, to stem the tide; and the situation is too grave for a merely critical and powerless opposition to be of much real use. Therefore the real service Republicans can render is that of uniting with the like-minded Democrats.

On the other hand it is very doubtful whether the genuine Democrats within the "Democratic Party" can alone check the dangerous courses of the "New Dealers", who function under the same party label. How then, if they wish to serve their country, can they hesitate to merge with like-minded Republicans, under whatever name?

As is perfectly well known, no considerable number of Southerners will vote for the name "Republican." So long as it is "Republican" vs. "Democrat", the brains and character of the South remain politically stultified; and whoever calls himself "Democrat", whatever he really is, starts with the vote of the South in his pocket. This is a great loss to the Nation, unreal especially at a time when all like-minded Americans should stand together. It simply plays into the hands of minorities.

A large part of the official Democratic Party is, it is well known, as appalled and disgusted as anyone with certain trends of the current regime. The stage is set for a vital coalition party with a real mission. Both parties have, of course, moved very far from the original connotations of their names. What is worth saving in either of them is quite congenial to what is worth saving in the other. New England and the South can now join hands to stand for authentic Americanism. It is interesting to recall that the official name of Jefferson's party became "Democratic-Republican." This would seem a

name made to order for this situation, were it not doubtful if the South would stomach the word "Republican", even thus diluted.

"National Democratic" might do; or "Constitutional Democratic."

The name will be found if the leader appears.

Republicans can take the patriotic course in the first place by supporting, in primaries, conventions, and elections, whether national or local those real democrats who have had the conscience and courage to oppose the most flagrant outrages of the "New Deal." They can put principle and country above the curse of party loyalty. In return they must expect the same of real Democrats. It is disquieting to see some "Democrats" seeking to reestablish "party harmony" when they know there is none; seeking to compromise the destiny of a potentially great people in the name of "party loyalty", which is often mere prejudice or love of office-holding.

The Nation honors those Senators who defeated court packing. It looks to them to defeat other sinister measures. It looks to all Republicans to support them. It looks to those who defeated court-packing as the nucleus for Americans who believe in America to form a party that really represents America. For practical purposes, for the seventeen millions who voted against Franklin Roosevelt in the last election to register as Democrats and so place the leadership of the dominant party in reliable hands, would seem to afford the surest and quickest escape from present dangers.
