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## Dangerous Words, 1938

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## Dangerous Words

Since words are the tools of thought, it is ~~very~~ important that we keep ~~clearly~~ in mind the meanings of the words used in our politics. Otherwise we shall be led astray. Our political thinking will be as efficient as the work of a carpenter who did not know one tool from another. Among <sup>many</sup> ~~the most~~ dangerous words are "liberal", "progressive", and "conservative."

President Roosevelt has set a new pitfall for voters by trying to preempt the word "liberal" and to give it a meaning to suit his own purposes. He would make "liberal" a respectable cloak for whatever ~~of radicalism~~ he may, at any given moment, find opportune. He would justify in the name of "liberal" or "progressive" the concentration of power in his own hands, and also various measures of socialistic import. Since he is likely to succeed in perverting the popular concept of "liberal" and "progressive", real liberals will probably have to find a new name for themselves. For practical purposes,--and Mr. Roosevelt's purposes appear completely practical, from <sup>his</sup> ~~the point of view of his own aggrandizement,~~-- his definition of a "liberal" is a Roosevelt yes-man. It is like the definition <sup>of</sup> right-minded people as "people who think as we do." The "liberal", Roosevelt model, is indeed liberal with the taxpayers' money; but he has discarded the whole essence of liberalism. Herbert Spencer might have been writing today when he said "Most of those who now pass as Liberals are Tories of a new type."

"Liberal" is an attractive word. Freedom is at the heart of its meaning. It connotes what is generous, reasonable, and tolerant. It was a quality of those high-minded men who have striven to unshackle the human spirit from too rigid dogma, whether religious, educational, social or political. It was a creed of the idealist and the genuine reformer. It implied ~~that~~ open-mindedness, which is requisite to intellectual advance, to progress. Those who were liberal were, naturally, opposed to "reactionaries" who were, <sup>against</sup> ~~on principle, opposed to~~ all change; to "Bourbons", who were said to learn nothing and to forget nothing. Those "radicals" who



*The real liberal.*  
learn nothing and ~~forget~~ everything must be equally repugnant to ~~them~~.  
One who was liberal looked forward; but he was not so foolish as to disdain the teachings of the past.

<sup>a</sup> <sup>is</sup>  
When words ~~are~~ taken over as ~~the name~~, the slogan and the stock in trade of politicians, anything can happen to its meaning. Liberals in politics early strove to restrain the authority of the (British) executive, to make the legislature more representative of the people, and to enlarge the power of parliament in opposition to that of the king. They were for freedom of political and social development, ~~we read~~, and for advanced ethical ideas, and for retrenchment and reform! Herbert Spencer wrote:—"The function of liberalism in the past was that of putting a limit to the powers of kings. The function of true liberalism in the future will be that of putting a limit to the powers of parliaments." With a power-seeking executive controlling a "rubber-stamp" congress, the ~~real~~ liberals of America *have been confronted by the menace of these two powers in* have today to combat the combination of these two ~~menaces~~. *forces.*

"Liberal" or "progressive" parties <sup>are</sup> always ~~seem to be~~ exposed to certain dangers. They are a magnet to radical, <sup>or other</sup> "red" minorities, who seek to use them for their purposes, and to discontented elements whose demands are without reference to practicability. They also attract the dreamers, the sentimentalists, and the purveyors of cure-alls. Worst of all, and particularly in times of depression, they invite the politician almost irresistibly to become the demagogue. There then follow excessively paternalistic government, vast expenditure, and staggering~~x~~ tax burdens; and sometimes meddlesome and oppressive rule,--a far cry from liberalism. Some of these phenomena came to the fore in England under Mr. Lloyd George years ago when so much social legislation was enacted; but British common sense and the relative responsibility of British politicians have prevented disastrous extremes *in Great Britain.*

<sup>last</sup>  
In Maryland, on September 5th, President Roosevelt made political speeches. They were part of his campaign to prevent the people from sending



ing to congress any representatives not subservient to his will; <sup>and</sup> who might thwart executive domination of our government. Few things seem further removed from "liberal" than that purpose. "Liberals" usually profess great trust in the people; but the people of Maryland were not trusted to choose their senator. There was high comedy in the choice of that occasion definitely to take over "liberal" as the designation of the New Deal faction. On the same day President Roosevelt indicated his definition of "liberal" and "conservative". He said he considered liberals "people who feel that the past should be brought up to the present by using every legitimate instrument to do the job, government included." "Conservatives", he said, were people who "believed that improvement should come from individual initiative or local initiative without the help of government and if improvement could not come without government action, then they wanted no improvement at all."

It is doubtful if any "conservative" of Mr. Roosevelt's straw-man type, type, who wants no improvement unless it can come without government help, could be found to exist in the flesh. But Mr. Roosevelt's "liberal", if we take his words, as we must, with the course of his whole New Deal as their context, is one who wants no improvement at all through individual or local initiative or in any other way except through action by a bureaucratic central government dominated by Mr. Roosevelt, ~~from whom alone all blessings, if any, are to flow.~~ Such a conception of politics and government is the antithesis of liberal. It is authoritarian and anti-democratic. It leads towards socialistic dictatorship. It becomes the tool of radicals and "reds", whose friendly support of it is so conspicuous.

The word "progressive" is another alluring word whose meaning bears watching when it is taken over by politicians. Its meaning was enriched ~~with-much-geed~~ <sup>many</sup> in Wisconsin ~~about thirty~~ years ago, when the late elder La Follette was governor. Many sound and ingenious measures for dealing with difficult problems were devised, with the help of the <sup>state</sup> University, ~~of~~



and were enacted into law. What was admirable in the "Wisconsin Idea" of those days was undoubtedly due to the method of approach to the problems. And that is indicated by the following remark by Theodore Roosevelt in his introduction to a book on the subject:-"Reformers, if they are to do well, must look both backward and forward; must be bold and yet must exercise prudence and caution in all they do. They must never fear to advance, and yet they must carefully plan how to advance, before they make the effort. They must carefully plan how and what they are to construct before they tear down what exists." A liberal conservative asks no more than this. Later attitudes of the late Senator La Follette, <sup>as the "Bull Moose" candidate</sup> proposals of Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, and <sup>support of the New Deal by that</sup> <sup>distinguished</sup> <sup>blank cheque</sup> professional progressive, the venerable Senator Norris today, show into what strange paths a party label, ~~ex-~~ expanded by ambition or excessive zeal, may lead; how the good word "progressive", like "liberal", may open the road to radicalism and demagoguery.

~~"Radical", from its derivation, should mean one who goes to the roots of things. In practice it seems to mean one who would pull everything up by the roots and rashly substitute untried things of improbable good. "American" and "un-American" are other suspicious words. Americans who want to keep America American are called un-American if they show any interest in the suppression of alien propaganda and the disruptive activities of more or less alien groups. "American" appears to connote a blind or amiable sufferance of every assault upon the national thought and ideals by those not yet assimilated to the nation. It appears that "red-baiting" is much wickeder than red coddling.~~

Among distorted words "conservative" takes a prominent place. A "conservative" is one who is unwilling to abandon what has been tried and found good until it is fairly clear that a proposed change will not produce harm to the nation as a whole more grievous than the evil it is designed to cure. He knows that, as Bacon said, "As for the philosophers,



they make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths, and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light because they are so high." In other words, the "conservative" faces the fact that human institutions, to work successfully, must be suited to human nature as it is. He does not forget that natural laws still hold veto power over the working of human schemes. He is not ready to scrap the accumulated wisdom and experience of the ages in favor of any man's ambitious dream. He asks for convincing reason, not eloquence and hope. He would conserve what good we have obtained; and that is certainly next in importance to obtaining it. He is no "reactionary", no "Bourbon". For clarity's sake he would better call himself "liberal-conservative". That, I <sup>attitude</sup> fully believe, <sup>the</sup> accurately describes the political, economic, and social ~~creed~~ of our vast majority of genuine Americans; the point of view from which they will decide the many issues raised by the New Deal, once they <sup>Thoroughly appraise</sup> ~~understand~~ <sup>its results</sup> ~~them~~. *and implications.*

Among other words that are used with meanings that vary with the purposes of the user are "American" and "Am un-American", <sup>- words,</sup> <sup>persons</sup> ~~Am~~ strangely enough, <sup>that</sup> these two words are most frequently on the tongues of ~~those~~ <sup>persons</sup> ~~le~~ who are not typical Americans nor very well qualified to define their meaning. ~~Both require defi redefinition; and that, in turn, requires a fresh refurbishing, a refreshment, and a bringing up to date of our conception of what America and Americans aspire to be.~~

1 # That equity <sup>must-sometimes</sup> modifies, in favor of majorities as well as  
of minorities, <sup>even</sup> the rights of a theoretical justice when that  
is found to work too great harm to the nation as a whole.  
Without recognition of such principles, we have not a  
state but a pre-for-all, with every man and <sup>working</sup> group <sup>working</sup> for  
himself, and nobody <sup>working</sup> for the nation.

~~§~~ On the contrary,  
our Constitution and our representative system make this  
country a Republic



We need to remember that liberty does not mean license; that "rights" are not absolute, but end, for each person, where the rights of another begin;

*essentials*  
We need a clearer understanding, in the world of today, of the meanings of socialism, of fascism, of naziism; and of communism, which is responsible in Russia and in Spain, for wholesale murder and cruelty ~~beside~~ <sup>in comparison to</sup> which even the recent barbarities and persecutions in Germany are mild.

— Even the sacred word "democracy" requires reexamination and redefinition. American democracy, certainly, was not intended to be rule by minority pressure groups, nor yet direct rule by the masses under the misguidance of demagogues. We must be sure what we mean by all these dangerous words. They require redefinition; and that, in turn, calls for a refurbishment, a refreshment, and a bringing up to date of our conception of what Americans ~~want~~ <sup>want</sup> their country to be. ~~As we shall see later,~~

~~without clarification of the national aim, a sound foreign policy is scarcely possible. As to domestic policies, the same lack of~~

*P* Lack of clarification of our fundamental national aims has permitted opportunism to bring inconsistencies and confusion into our domestic policies. As we shall see later, the same thing makes a sound American foreign policy scarcely possible.