# If We Quit Voting

NEW YORK in mid-summer is measurably more miserable than any other place in this world, and should be comparable to the world for which all planners are headed. Why New Yorkers, otherwise sane, should choose to parboil their innards in a political campaign during this time of the year is a question that comes under the head of man's inscrutable propensity for self-punishment. And if a fellow elects to let the whole thing pass him by, some socially conscious energumen is bound to sweat him with a lecture on civic duty; like the citizeness who came at me.

For twenty-five years my dereliction has been known to my friends and more than one has undertaken to set me straight; out of these arguments came a solid defense for my non-voting position. So that the lady in question was well-parried with practiced retorts. I pointed out, with many instances, that though we have had candidates and platforms and parties and campaigns in abundance, we have had an equivalent plentitude of poverty and crime and war. The regularity with which the perennial promise of "good times" wound up in depression suggested the incompetence of politics in economic affairs.

Maybe the good society we have been voting for lay some other way; why not try another fork in the road, the one pointing to individual self-improvement, particularly in acquiring a knowledge of economics? And so on.

There was one question put to me by my charming annoyer which I deftly sidestepped, for the day was sultry and the answer called for some mental effort. The question: "What would happen if we quit voting?"

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IF you are curious about the result of non-eating you come upon the question of why we eat. So, the query put to me by the lady brings up the reason for voting. The theory of government by elected representatives is that these fellows are hired by the voting citizenry to take care of all matters relating to their common interests. However, it is different from ordinary employment in that the representative is not under specific orders, but is given blanket authority to do what he considers desirable for the public welfare in any and all circumstances, subject to constitutional limitations. In all matters relating to public affairs the will of the individual is transferred to the elected agent, whose responsibility is commensurate with the power thus invested in him.

It is this transference of power from voter to elected agents which is the crux of republicanism. The transference is well-nigh absolute. Even the constitutional limitations are not so in fact since they can be circumvented by legal devices in the hands of the agents. Except for the tenuous process of impeachment the mandate is irrevocable. For the abuse or misuse of the mandate the only recourse left to the principals, the people, is to oust the agents at the next election. But, when we oust the "rascals" do we not, as a matter of course, invite a new crowd? It all adds up to the fact that by voting themselves out of power the people put the running of their community life in the hands of a separate group, upon whose wisdom and integrity the fate of the community rests.

All this would change if we quit voting. Such abstinance would be tantamount to this notice to politicians: since we as individuals have decided to look after our affairs, your services are no longer needed.

Having assumed social power we must, as individuals, assume social responsibility; provided, of course, the politicians accept their discharge. The job of running the community would fall on each and all of us. We might hire an expert to tell us about the most improved fire-fighting apparatus, or a manager to look after cleaning the streets, or an engineer to build us a bridge; but the final decision, particularly in the matter of raising funds to defray costs, would rest with the town-hall meeting. The hired specialists would have no authority other than that necessary for the performance of their contractual duties; coercive power, which is the essence of political authority, would be exercised, when and if necessary, only by the committee of the whole.

There is some warrant for the belief that a better social order would ensue when the individual is responsible for it and, therefore, responsive to its needs. He no longer has the law or the law-makers to cover his sins of omission; need of the neighbors' good opinion will be sufficient compulsion for jury duty and no loopholes in a draft law, no recourse to "political pull," will be possible when danger to his community calls him to arms. In his private affairs, the now sovereign individual will have to meet the dictum of the market place: produce or you do not eat; no law will help you. In his public behavior he must be decent or suffer the sentence of social ostracism, with no recourse to legal exoneration. From a law-abiding citizen he will be transmuted into a self-respecting man.

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WOULD chaos result? No, there would be order, without law to disturb it. But, let us define chaos. Is it not disharmony resulting from social friction? When we trace social friction to its source do we not find that it seminates in a feeling of unwarranted hurt, or injustice? Therefore, chaos is a social condition in which injustice obtains. Now, when one man may take, by law, what another man has put his labor into, we have injustice of the keenest kind, for the denial of a man's right to possess and enjoy what he produces is akin to a denial of life. Yet the power to confiscate property is the first business of politics. We see how this is so in the matter of taxation; but greater by far is the amount of property confiscated by monopolies, all of which are founded in law.

While this economic basis of injustice has been lost in our adjustment to it, the resulting friction is quite evident. Most of us are poor in spite of our constant effort and known ability to produce an abundance; the incongruity is aggravated by a feeling of hopelessness. But the keenest hurt arises from the thought that the wealth we see about us is somehow ours by right of labor, but is not ours by right of law. Resentment, intensified by bewilderment, stirs up a reckless urge to do something about it. We demand justice; we have friction. We have strikes and crimes and bankruptcy and mental unbalances. And we cheat our neighbors, and each seeks for himself a legal privilege to live by another's labor. And we have war. Is this a condition of harmony or of chaos?

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In the frontier days of our country there was little law, but much order; for the affairs of the community were in the hands of the citizenry. Although fiction may give an opposite impression, it is a fact that there was less per capita crime to take care of then than there is now when law pervades every turn and minute of our lives. What gave the West its wild and woolly reputation was the glamorous drama of intense community life. Everybody was keenly interested in the hanging of a cattle rustler; it was not

done in the calculated quiet of a prison, with the dispatch of a mechanical system. The rail-riding of a violator of town-hall dicta had to be the business of the town prosecutor, who was everybody. Though the citizen's private musket was seldom used for the protection of life and property, its presence promised swift and positive justice, from which no legal chicanery offered escape, and its loud report announced the dignity of decency. Every crime was committed against the public, not the law, and therefore the public made an ado about it. Mistakes were made, to be sure, for human judgment is ever fallible; but, until the politician came, there was no deliberate malfeasance or misfeasance; until laws came there were no violations, and the code of human decency made for order.

So, if we should quit voting for parties and candidates, we would individually reassume responsibility for our acts and, therefore, responsibility for the common good. There would be no way of dodging the verdict of the marketplace; we would take back only in proportion to our contribution. Any attempt to profit at the expense of a neighbor or the community would be quickly spotted and as quickly squelched, for everybody would recognize a threat to himself in the slightest indulgence of injustice. Since nobody would have the power to enforce monopoly conditions none would obtain. Order would be maintained by the rules of existence, the natural laws of economics.

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THAT is, if the politicians would permit themselves to be thus ousted from their positions of power and privilege. I doubt it. Remember that the proposal to quit voting is basically revolutionary; it amounts to a shifting of power from one group to another, which is the essence of revolution. As soon as the non-voting movement got up steam the politicians would most assuredly start a counter-revolution. Measures to enforce voting would be instituted; fines would be imposed for violations, and prison sentences would be meted out to repeaters. It is a necessity for political power, no matter how gained, to have the moral support of public approval, and suffrage is the most efficient scheme for registering it; notice how Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin insisted on having ballots cast. In any republican government, even ours, only a fraction of the populace vote for the successful candidate, but that fraction is quantitatively impressive; it is this appearance of overwhelming sanction which supports him in the exercise of political power. Without it he would be lost.

Propaganda, too, would bombard this passive resistance to Statism; not only that put out by the politicians of all parties—the coalition would be as complete as it would be spontaneous—but also the more effective kind emanating from seemingly disinterested sources. All the monopolists, all the coupon-clipping foundations, all the tax-exempt eleemosynary institutions, in short, all the "respectables"—would join in a howling defense of the *status quo*. We would be told most emphatically that unless we keep on voting away our power to responsible persons, it would be grabbed by irresponsible ones; tyranny would result. That is probably true, seeing how since the beginning of time men have sought to acquire property without laboring for it. The answer lies, as it always has, in the judicious use of private artillery. On this point a story, apochryphal no doubt, is worth telling. When Napoleon's conquerors were considering what to do with him, a buck-skinned American allowed that a fellow of such parts might be handy in this new country and ought to be invited to come over. As for the possibility of a Napoleonic regime being started in America, the recent revolutionist dismissed it with the remark that the musket with which he shot rabbits could also kill tyrants. There is no substitute for human dignity.

But the argument is rather specious in the light of the fact that every election is a seizure of power. The balloting system has been defined as a battle between opposing forces, each armed with proposals for the public good, for a grant of power to put these proposals into practice. As far as it goes, this definition is correct; but when the successful contestant acquires the grant of power toward what end does he

use it? Not theoretically but practically. Does he not, with an eye to the next campaign, and with the citizens' money, go in for purchasing support from pressure-groups? Whether it is by catering to a monopoly interest whose campaign contribution is necessary to his purpose, or to a privilege-seeking labor group, or to a hungry army of unemployed or of veterans, the over-the-barrel method of seizing and maintaining political power is standard practice.

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THIS is not, however, an indictment of our election system. It is rather a description of our adjustment to conquest. Going back to beginnings—although the process is still in vogue, as in Manchuria, or more recently in the Baltic states—when a band of freebooters developed an appetite for other people's property they went after it with vim and vigor. Repeated visitations of this nature left the victims breathless, if not lifeless, and propertyless to boot. So, as men do when they have no other choice, they made a compromise. They hired one gang of thieves to protect them from other gangs, and in time the price paid for such protection came to be known as taxation. The tax-gatherers settled down in the conquered communities, possibly to make collections certain and regular, and as the years rolled on a blend of cultures and of bloods made of the two classes one nation. But the system of taxation remained after it had lost its original significance; lawyers and professors of economics, by deft circumlocution, turned tribute into "fiscal policy" and clothed it with social good. Nevertheless, the social effect of the system was to keep the citizenry divided into two economic groups: payers and receivers. Those who lived without producing became traditionalized as "servants of the people," and thus gained ideological support. They further entrenched themselves by acquiring sub-tax-collecting allies; that is, some of their group became landowners, whose collection of rent rested on the law-enforcement powers of the ruling clique, and others were granted subsidies, tariffs, franchises, patent rights, monopoly privileges of one sort or another. This division of spoils between those who wield power and those whose privileges depend on it is succinctly described in the expression, "the State within the State."

Thus, when we trace our political system to its origin we come to conquest. Tradition, law and custom have obscured its true nature, but no metamorphosis has taken place; its claws and fangs are still sharp, its appetite as voracious as ever. In the light of history it is not a figure of speech to define politics as the art of seizing power; and its present purpose, as of old, is economic. There is no doubt that men of high purpose will always give of their talents for the common welfare, with no thought of recompense other than the good will of the community. But, so long as our taxation system remains, so long as the political means for acquiring economic goods is available, just so long will the spirit of conquest assert itself; for men always seek to satisfy their desires with the least effort. It is interesting to speculate on the kind of campaigns and the type of candidates we would have if taxation were abolished and if, also, the power to dispense privilege vanished. Who would run for office if there were "nothing in it"?

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WHY should a self-respecting citizen endorse an institution grounded in thievery? For that is what one does when one votes. If it be argued that we must let bygones be bygones, see what we can do toward cleaning up the institution so that it can be used for the maintenance of an orderly existence, the answer is that it cannot be done; we have been voting for one "good government" after another, and what have we got? Perhaps the silliest argument, and yet the one invariably advanced when this succession of failures is pointed out, is that "we must choose the lesser of two evils." Under what compulsion are we to make such a choice? Why not pass up both of them?

To effectuate the suggested revolution all that is necessary is to stay away from the polls. Unlike other revolutions, it calls for no organization, no violence, no war-fund, no leader to sell it out. In the quiet of his conscience each citizen pledges himself, to himself, not to give moral support to an unmoral institution, and on election day he remains at home. That's all. I started my revolution twenty-five years ago and the country is none the worse for it.