

INTRODUCTION

As Americans we have always been proud of our country. But we have too long taken our traditional opportunities and ideals for granted, and so have failed to note and act upon the great decline in our country's adherence to the qualities that once made it uniquely and hopefully promising.

It was easy, once, to hold a rosy view of ourselves. My father's grade school geography book opened with the words, "The world was made for man." On that same first page, picturing different grades of people found throughout the world, the final flowering was a gentleman and lady in our high styles of 1860, designated, "Civilized and Enlightened." In my turn, as a "scholar" in a one-room rural school, I early gained the prevailing, complacent view that the United States was the greatest country in the world. Had we thought much about that, we would have accepted it as a happy coincidence that we happened to be born here. We were about to learn of our ideals and many elements of national greatness. The very purpose of our ancestors in coming here was to get freedom, and here they found a vast land with every resource. God was recognized as the creator of Man and the source of all his rights, including that of each to worship Him as he thought most fitting. Two wars had been fought and won for freedom and equality. Every farmer, explorer, or hero of any kind that we were taught to admire had had the personal strengths of honesty, energy, self-reliance, versatility and independence. Every American could choose his work, live where he pleased, plan his own life as he saw fit, all on his own responsibility. As a society we had recognized no peerage or castes, and had established the written laws of democratic government. This was the land of liberty and opportunity, with plenty of room for everyone who wanted to come, work, and make a place for himself. We boys and girls all took these things at their face value. How good it was to begin life with such pride and confidence, that first decade of the century!

Needless to say how time and events have modified our conceptions! It may be argued by some that the personal, social, or national virtues I have here indicated are not actually our ideals, or that it is an exaggeration to say that we follow them. I grant that we are not today adhering to these qualities as we should. That is part of my reason for writing. But I do say that if we, as Americans, consult our consciences and look back over our history, we must admit that those are the qualities in people and the attributes of society that we respect as ideals. If recently we have not been conscious of thinking of them as our ideals, at least we know we should. And we should admit that we regret the corruption in government, the business exploitation, the seeking of special privilege, the institution of slavery, the racial intolerances, the waste of resources, that are undeniable parts of our history but which are perhaps unavoidable in any great effort toward freedom and democracy in a new and bumptious nation turned

loose in a land of natural plenty, but with our share of human frailty and our imperfect social philosophy. We have been failing to heed our consciences or to contemplate our true ideals, and have correspondingly neglected the training of youth and the maintenance of desirable conditions, laws, and customs.

But I am not unduly discouraged, for I know that the possession of great and true ideals of a good society, however imperfectly practiced, can, if we earnestly study and seek to improve ourselves, serve a vital purpose. They are goals without which no successful striving toward a better life can be directed; they are focal points of our philosophy around which we rally our minds and efforts in times of great confusion.

The present time is a case in point. We are being asked what we believe, and challenged to prove its validity by some of the most jealous and consummate cynics the world has ever seen. We think of ourselves as being called upon, by the great masses of downtrodden people everywhere, for world leadership. This forces us to a new, realistic and grim appraisal of our virtues, and to ask ourselves just exactly how good an example of a free and just people we actually are.

Central to my philosophy is the conviction that economic freedom and opportunity for each individual is the indispensable basis of any decent, peaceful, happy, and worthwhile society.

In this country we have failed to a considerable extent to maintain the conditions necessary for these needs of the individual. We started our life as a nation with an incomplete understanding of these, and now the sovereign body of the people and their leaders have today much less basic understanding of life and less sense of reality than was possessed by the earliest generations. Yet the problems and complications of real life are much greater than ever.

So there is an urgent need for clear, true statements of conditions and measures consistent with our ideals, and of economic principles we are violating but need to apply correctly, if we are to save our way of life and stand as an exemplary order of society in the eyes of others.

There is a need, too, for combining the consideration of economic principles with "value judgments," if our efforts are to serve society. Many are doing that now, of course. Excellent books and articles, I am happy to say, are constantly published, written by wise, informed, and articulate people who understand and appreciate the great values our society has had.

But in the recommendations of practically all of them, I see the lack of one vital element of social philosophy: there is no knowledge, faith, belief, or determination motivating a search

for any factor by which people could be other than helpless before economic conditions which, it is thought, can be met only by the authority and resources of government. Liberty and independence are paid much lip service, but are reluctantly thought of as necessarily to be curtailed in a growing civilization. Though poverty and depression are rightly regarded as among the most urgent problems, yet it is evident that we cannot live by prosperity alone and that an ever higher standard of living is not all that people need. The need for "moral regeneration" is well recognized, but none seem to say on what tangible basis this might stand. Economics is practically always taught or studied with the thought that matters of ethics and justice are outside its province, while humanitarians are usually impractical for lack of knowledge of political economy. And yet the best of our intellectual and idealistic young people are crying out for some explanation of today's evils -- evils which, in the eyes of the young, because of the God-given freshness of their minds, seem unnatural.

The truths of human nature and of human needs must be combined with the truths of basic economics in order that we may see what reforms are needed in public policies and private lives. To formulate that combination is the objective of this essay on American Ideals.

It has seemed to me that the history of America has usually been taught in a way that implies a general upward trend toward an ever better society, and that people have taken "at face value" the outward trappings and attainments of civilization and have thought it impossible that our civilization might ever decline.

And yet any such sense of security in progress shows a neglect of the lessons of ancient history -- revealed by the diggings of archeologists among the ruins of many past civilizations that rose, flowered for a time as ours has done, but then decayed and died. Our civilization has produced so far no permanently buried ruins such as we see of really ancient societies; but in the past two decades, we and the enemies of our faith have perfected a new and terrifying means of widespread, instant, and long-lingering devastation of the face of the earth and all its people that would dwarf all past wars, floods, volcanoes, and epidemics there have ever been: the power of atomic energy, a weapon its possessors dare only rattle in its scabbard, a force around whose ramifications man fascinatedly flutters as the moth about the flame.

Although some of my sequences in American history may seem too well known to need stating here, they are inserted in order to show in perspective the ways and places in which I think a true conception of history must diverge from the general line of optimism of many writers.

Although the contrasts, inconsistencies, and paradoxes in the life of society are repeated several times, this, too, has seemed necessary in order to show the elements of progress and poverty, of good and evil, in full perspective.

I am loyal to the best that this country has stood for and am grateful for the life it has made possible for me. Life owes me nothing. Therefore any criticisms I may express regarding American life and customs are not to be regarded as personal complaints of my own; they are given as a necessary part of an effort to show how conditions could be far better. Many of our stop-gap, uneconomic measures, modes of taxation and relief, and public projects for mitigating or "containing" the effects of unjust institutions and evil conditions, which leave their causes alone, will be condemned. That is not to say they should be abolished at once, even if that were possible; only when better means are found to correct injustice and evil can that be done. I believe in peaceful evolution, proceeding only as improved social and economic policies and their understanding can be advanced. To aid in such progress is part of my purpose.

If, from the standpoint of human hope, liberty, and progress, you and I say -- as I do -- that we believe this is the greatest country in the world, we should do so only with the resolve to keep in mind the risks of self-satisfaction: neglect of needed vigilance to uphold its good institutions and reform its bad, and the sin and danger of overlooking the wonderful powers and potentialities of the peoples of other lands. We must remember the admonition -- putting the coat on if it fits -- NOBLESSE OBLIGE, words used to indicate "the obligation of honorable and generous behavior associated with high rank and birth", or, "From the great great things are expected".

It seems generally agreed that in the world today, in which all common people are struggling with the powers of ignorance, poverty, backwardness or other evils not yet clearly defined, AMERICA, the land that has been unusually blessed, has an important "mission". Many conceive of that as the sharing of our material wealth and technological knowledge. I agree to that, if it can be done wisely, but think we also have a far greater duty, first to ourselves, then to others: first, to understand our ideals and their indispensable economic and social basis, to believe in them, to perfect them, to live by them, then fully display them, letting them shine out in a weary world of darkness, fear, and hate, showing what a fair land liberty and justice can create.

For the understanding of this work, no previous study of economics is needed. But, before reading Chapter VI and beyond, a study should be made of the DEFINITIONS OF TERMS and of the BASIC LAWS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY, found in the appendix.