
A Jeremiad

The Korean affair is not The War. That was evident from the beginning. Just as every fistfight can end up in murder, so this bloodletting in the Orient has possibilities; but the weight of economics, as well as military considerations, is against Korea as the locale for man's next spasm of total madness.

When The War comes we will know about it, unmistakingly, by the peremptory suspension of all traditional and constitutional restraints on political power. That will be the true signal. The war powers still on our statute books will be dusted off and put into operation again and the administration will ask for, and be promptly granted, whatever else it deems necessary for a free hand.

In a word, when The War comes the individual will cease to exist as an individual. His body, his property, and his mind will be merged into the mass battering ram. The regime of totalitarianism that our recent history has been pointing to will have arrived.

It will be asserted that to carry on an effective war with the USSR we must match her methods. Our military, like hers, must be possessed of every drop of energy in the nation; any

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small concession to freedom will be weakening. Her law will be our law, which means that the will of the supreme command will be the only law.

This transformation of our political setup into an absolutism will be accomplished with little warning and practically no social opposition. For, unlike the war with Hitler, we will be in this one knee-deep from the very first shot, even before a formal declaration of war is perfunctorily passed by Congress.

The very first step will be the seizure of private property. The right of property will not be abolished in theory, but it will be enunciated as a principle that the government may without question lay its hands on anything that can be put to the war effort. Every factory will fall into its appointed place in the war machine; ownership will consist in obeying orders. Every worker will be a soldier. To facilitate the latter transition, union leaders will be drafted into the bureaucracy and their organizations put on the shelf.

The traditional economic forms of wages and profits will be retained, but the fiscal machinery will be used to rid monetary returns of material meaning. Taxes will liquidate purchasing power.

The fiction of borrowing will be maintained, but the "lenders" will accept the bonds under duress. Since every issue automatically depreciates the value of all preceding issues, the increasing worthlessness of these bonds will be reflected in a lowering of the value of money. Thus, through taxation and depreciation the danger of diverting production from war purposes to consumption will be avoided.

There can be no question that the economy will be put on a military footing, just as there can be no question that every man and woman able to contribute in any way to the fighting will

be pressed into service. There will be no private life. Total war must be total in every respect.

The liquidation of social power will be facilitated by mass fear of the consequences of military defeat; in the face of common danger the herd instinct is to follow bold leadership, blindly. This psychological support of its program will be furthered by the high command through its control of information. The censorship of thought is a military necessity.

It follows that writers and publications endeavoring to keep alive prewar values must be rendered inarticulate, for the duration at any rate. The frightened public will enter no demurrer.

All wars come to an end, at least temporarily. But the authority acquired by the state hangs on; political power never abdicates. Note how the "emergency" taxes of World War II have hardened into permanent fiscal policy. While a few of the more irritating war agencies were dropped, others were enlarged, under various pretexts, and the sum total is more intervention and more interveners than we suffered before 1939.

If The War lasts long enough, long enough to become a habit of mind, the totalitarianism will have lost its initial disfavor. The will to freedom can be broken by adjustment to subservience. Besides, the economic conditions resulting from The War will be difficult enough to make continuation of control a compelling plausibility. In their general bewilderment the people will ask for direction, and direction means control.

There will be reason enough for the bureaucracy to insist on continuance of a politically managed economy. The debasement of the currency and the burdens of taxation could well turn the people to direct barter; barter is not taxable, and the state's recourse, for its own security, is to control and tax production at its source. Under the circumstances, the factories

and the farms will not be returned outright to the former owners, except under conditions that will prompt the latter to offer their properties at bargain rates. The government can print bonds.

Will not the former labor leaders, now well ensconced in the bureaucracy, favor the nationalization of industry? What interest will they have in restoring the traditional labor-versus-capital controversy?

The workers will not find the riskless life, with subsistence assured, hard to take. A fetal sense of security will have submerged the will for maturity; there will be little demand for the free marketplace.

The aristocracy of the country will be the bureaucracy. They will be a class apart. Because of their prerogatives, to say nothing of their comparative opulence, they will have attracted to themselves the sharpest wits and the most skillful technicians, and it will be to the interest of the group to encourage a reputation for near divine capacities. This vested interest in rulership, spawned during The War, will flourish in the general enervation resulting from its consequences.

In short, the net profit of The War will be a political setup differing from that of Russia in name only. The very effort to oppose that form of absolutism will require our adopting it and, despite the best intentions, the resulting economic and social conditions will tend to perpetuate it.

There will be a resurrection, for the spirit of freedom never dies. But its coming will take time and much travail.