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## On Saving the Country

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A friend writes: "Let the socialists have the damned country, it isn't worth saving."

But, I am not for saving the country. I am not for saving anybody—but myself. That's as much as I feel able to try, and it's the only job of salvation that a fellow can undertake and expect positive results. Trying to impose salvation on another is an impossible conceit and in the final analysis comes to imposing my will on his, which is something quite different from saving him.

It might be advisable right here to define this "saving" business. The obvious question one must put to the fraternity of country savers is, What do you want to save it from? For saving implies the avoidance of an evil. The communists are out to save the country from capitalism, the Republicans from the Democrats, the anti-Semites from the Jews, the white Protestants from the Negroes and the Catholics, while the "liberals"—God save their kindly hearts—are busy combating a heterogeneous host of evils which are taking the country to perdition. Each reformer diagnoses the country's case differently and then proceeds to go to bat for his particular curative pill.

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It never occurs to the reformer that people have a right to be left alone, or even to be wrong. When a person finds complete satisfaction in the common groove of thought, is not inclined to question or investigate its soundness, self-improvement is impossible; any attempt to disturb his equanimity is a form of sadism. The businessman who finds complete contentment in his bank balance, the worker to whom his squalid tenement is castle and his beer is the nectar of life, the professor who has achieved heaven via the degrees attached to his name—why bother them? If they are not edifiable, they are at least satisfied.

The panaceamonger has no intention of permitting people to enjoy their adjustment to what he considers error. He is for saving them, come hell or high water, and toward that noble end he proceeds to practice mental mayhem. The fact is, as anyone who has watched this breed will testify, he actually derives pleasure from torturing his victims. Mesmerizing them with his ancient-mariner glare, he dins his cacophonous phrases into their numbed brains until any latent capacity for reason is completely gone, buries them in leaflets, and struts off with all the joy of life. He will not let ignorance continue along its blissful ways because his personal delight is in peddling “the truth.”

Let us consider the concept of freedom, for that is the glorious goal toward which, regardless of their contradictory diagnoses and conflicting therapeutics, all reformers would lead us. Putting aside any idea of freedom in the abstract, we see that freedom is what people become accustomed to. Some years ago this was brought to my attention in a striking way. I was driving in a western state where, at that time, anybody who had the price of an automobile was a qualified driver. There was an accident. Following the ritual I had become accustomed to in the East I pulled out my driver's license and asked the other

fellow to show his. He was puzzled. He not only had no license but thought the obligation of carrying around such a thing an infraction of a man's rights. So it is, when you think of it; but habit had wiped out of my mind any such estimate of the license. In like manner we are becoming inured to the habit of carrying on our person all kinds of identifications and permissions, as required by the state, and never think of them as shackles on our freedom. The other day a man to whom I was speaking about this pulled out of his wallet eighteen pieces of paper necessary to his functioning as a human being.

Thirty years ago Americans argued that the proposed income tax would be an infringement of their liberty. Now that we have become accustomed to the levy—and how!—do we think of it in that way? Hardly; it is, in fact, an “instrument of democracy.” Conscription is being puffed up into a form of freedom by the offspring of the very folks who came to America to avoid it. In its potentiality, if not yet in its methods, is the FBI any different from the Gestapo? Yet we don't see the similarity simply because we have incorporated this inquisitorial system into the American way of life. The Russians boast of their freedom, just as we will boast of our freedom when we habitualize our thinking to the world's greatest, most stupendous and supercolossal planned economy.

Let me recall the statement that freedom is what we become accustomed to—if we set aside any idea of freedom in the abstract. There's the rub. Some of us, afflicted with a passion for nonconformity, get ourselves an axiom of freedom—that it is a condition of living based upon inherent and inalienable rights—and insist on measuring every social institution and convention palmed off on us by that yardstick. And, though we may be impotent as far as changing the current of events, we will not permit our axiom to be swamped by them. Some of us

protest out loud; more of us, under the duress of three meals a day, grumble in private. We think things out for ourselves, we do not let the prevailing ritual supplant our sense of self-respect—and that is what “saving” amounts to.

Peculiarly enough, though this attitude of self-edification smacks of asceticism, it is in fact the only way by which the “good society” can be brought about. If I do a good job on myself in the way of improving my fund of knowledge and my understanding, and of maintaining a sense of responsibility toward my judgment, the result might strike the fancy of a fellow man; if he is activated by the example to go to work on himself, my personal effort will have burgeoned into what we call social improvement. After all, do not our social institutions reflect the sum total of current intelligence? Can society be any better than its parts?