

CHAPTER XIII

A Problem in Psychology

IN A PREVIOUS CHAPTER I made some mention of the mentality of the politician. Because this subject has always fascinated me, I beg leave to expand upon it, in a speculative way. I have never had the opportunity or the inclination to make an exhaustive study of the mind of the politician, but believe this to be a promising subject for some enterprising psychologist. It might throw some light on the mysteries of political science.

It is a gross exaggeration to say that all politicians are "crooked." The percentage of dishonesty—the sense in which the derogatory word is used—is no greater among those who engage in politics than it is among merchants, doctors or farmers. I daresay that corporation officials are more likely to yield to the temptation of an easy dollar than are office holders, simply because only stockholders are affected and they are not likely to make a fuss over minor peculations if they are receiving their dividends regularly. On the other hand, if a newspaperman gets hold of the fact that the female relative of the public official accepted so much as a mink coat from a tax delinquent, the ensuing headlines give the impression that you cannot trust anybody in public life with a piggy bank. This is not true; you most assuredly can.

In an entirely different sense, the word "crooked" is applicable to all politicians, but it is a sense in which the word is never used. I mean that it is simply impossible for one immersed in the political game to think normally or "straight"—assuming that the non-political mind can be so described. If we accept as normal the thought processes of those who make a living in the market place—the stenographer, the banker or the editor—then the tergiversations of the political mind must be considered abnormal or "crooked."

Coming to the point, the psychology of the politician is obviously quite different from that of the work-a-day producer, and it is this difference that should be explored if we are to understand politics. We Americans, who talk so much about public affairs, will never know what we are talking about until we take into consideration the phenomenon of political psychology.

To illustrate what I mean, and not to invoke invidious comparison, we must assume that there is a political psychology. We take it for granted that the habitual law-breaker has a "twisted" mentality, assuming, of course, that we who are afraid to break the law are thoroughly sane. In like manner, we should assess the contradictions and inconsistencies of political thought as an occupational hazard. Until we do, or until psychology comes up with a clear-cut analysis of the political mind, we shall never be able to make sense out of the oddities of political action, and the political air in which we are compelled to live will continue to be cluttered up with confusion.

I believe that the psychological study suggested should start with the premise that the political mind is an acquired characteristic. Just as there is no positive proof of an inher-

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ent criminal mentality, so we must assume that the politician was quite "normal" before he started politicking. In both cases, environmental conditioning is the basic cause, although something can be said for the thesis that both the politician and the criminal started life with a predisposition for their respective modes of life.

So, psychology must take a look at political science, and ask: what is the preoccupation in the world that produces the mentality under question? The answer is obvious. That world revolves about the making and the enforcement of law; nothing else. The ordinary citizen, who is considered normal simply because he is in the majority, lives *within* the law. The criminal is concerned with the breaking of the law and lives *outside* it. The politician is different in that his thought pattern is shaped *behind* the law. It is in relation to the law that these three environments are distinguishable; the mental habits acquired in each environment are necessarily indigenous to it.

It is a certainty that all three categories of persons have one common denominator: the necessity of making a living. That is the starting point of all human endeavor. The majority of us are, of course, destined to make our living by producing goods and services, and must therefore abide by the rules of the market place. We are not concerned with the law, except as it favors or handicaps our main purpose. We are inclined to make adjustment to it—to live *within* the law—simply because that is the easiest way to get along. And out of this adjustment we develop certain convenient thought patterns, or rules of behavior, which to us seem to be immutable "principles."

For instance, we of the "normal" group declare that "hon-

esty is the best policy." Maybe it is, maybe it isn't, but experience tells us that if we habitually practice dishonesty we lose favor with our fellow men and the making of a living becomes more difficult. The goal of the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker is to get the most out of life, and though the tendency is to get it with the least expenditure of labor, the competitive world in which they operate compels them to give as much as they receive, and out of that necessity comes the aforesaid "principle."

In the making of a living *outside* the law—in the criminal world—other "principles" take form. To the criminal mind, the highest "good" is the acquisition of other people's property with the least danger of being apprehended. Therefore, the aristocrat in this world is the manager of a mob or syndicate, operating under cover of political protection; though in point of fact he is only an exaggerated pickpocket, he achieves "big shot" status because of the minimum of risk he takes. Thus, it may be said that the first "principle" of the criminal world is "to get away with it." And, it should be noted, the criminal finds no moral difference between his manner of making a living and that of the ordinary citizen or the politician; all enterprise is to him a "racket," differing only in the respect that some forms of "racketeering" are legal and others are not. That's the way he thinks.

Some years ago an accidental observation on an inconsequential incident set me thinking on the subject of the political mind. I was riding in an automobile driven by a police captain, in mufti, and since we were in a hurry he paid hardly any attention to traffic regulations. Twice stern-visaged minions of the law pulled up alongside us to do their duty and each time the world *behind* the law came

into view when the captain flashed his badge. The deference shown the badge, even though the traffic cops were under the jurisdiction of a different state, indicated a tacit understanding among law enforcement agents that amounts to class consciousness.

What differentiates the world *behind* the law from the other two? Simply this, that is it concerned entirely with the acquisition of power over people, criminal or ordinary; its only business is the exercise of the monopoly of coercion which it enjoys. We who are on the other side of the fence talk of government—the name we give to that world—as if it were a specialized service, like doctoring or retailing. It isn't. None of the services that make up our kind of world enjoys the prerogative of regulating others; we either render service of some kind or suffer the consequence. Government, on the other hand, is completely outside the competitive field, and thrives not in proportion to the service it renders but in proportion to the power it wields.

Hence, the proposed psychological investigation must apply itself to a study of the nature of political power in order to ascertain how the exercise of it affects the thinking of those in the business. How does it create that peculiar attitude common to the county sheriff and the national official? Psychology could no doubt find a name for the attitude—I suggest "power complex"—but in the meantime we could describe it as a fixation: the highest "good" is regulation, control and domination. The "principle" evolving from this attitude is that the "law is supreme," meaning that those who make and enforce the law are supreme.

We of the "normal" frame of mind get ourselves into a dither simply because we do not make allowance for this

attitude. We expect a government owned enterprise—like TVA or the Post Office—to be run efficiently, without a deficit; but efficiency in a public business is not reflected in any profit or loss statement; it shows up at the polls. We are apt to apply economic theories to government operations; but the only “sound” economics a politician knows are those that help the “ins” stay in power or the “outs” to get into office. A producing citizen knows that living beyond one’s income is an act of bankruptcy; the government, which has a monopoly of manufacturing money, cannot go bankrupt and is therefore untroubled by deficit financing. The voter thinks he votes for a principle or a policy; the politician knows better.

In short, *behind* the law the pattern of thought is different from that which obtains in the “normal” world of law-abiding citizens, or the “abnormal” world of criminals. It may or may not be psychopathic, but it is different.

The psychologist will surely find a number of gradations and variations of this “power complex.” Just as the petty thief and the counterfeiter are on different mental planes, though their outlook on life is similar, so there is a marked difference in the attitudes of the customs house inspector and the state governor. Maybe the difference is commensurate with the degree of power exercised by each. But, I am inclined to believe that the thought processes of the bureaucrat and the elected official are so distinct in kind as to constitute major classification. The first thing that strikes you when you come into contact with the appointed official is his peculiar admixture of obsequiousness and arrogance. Toward his superior, his benefactor, he shows a deference that is not different from that of a flunky, while toward the

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general public his attitude is supercilious and condescending; he is government, while they are the public. Perhaps a subconscious recognition of his utter uselessness, his parasitical position in life, causes the bureaucrat to so swell himself up. Anyhow, it is an unmistakable characteristic of all bureaucrats, even the lowly receptionist who selects those of the outside world who may be permitted into the sanctum of her superior.

The elected official, on the other hand, is a bit more complex. Often his mind will work almost like that of his constituents and seems to be absolutely "normal." Perhaps that is because his dependence on votes does not completely separate him from the world *within* the law; he is compelled to keep in touch with it. Yet, if you examine his thinking closely you will find that he and his constituents are worlds apart. They think of him as a man who represents their interests, while he knows in his heart of hearts that his interest is to be elected, or re-elected, and toward that end he finds it convenient to make them think he is all for them; he is out to feather his own nest, always.

At any rate, here is a subject that some enterprising psychologist ought to investigate. He would do the world a valuable service to dig into the political mind and come up with some answers.