

A Word with You

By ROBERT CLANCY

Lord Acton's famous saying "Power tends to corrupt," tends to be true. "And absolute power," he added, "corrupts absolutely." This seems an inevitable concomitant, but it set me a-wondering.

Letting alone the present and recent past and seeking the calm objectivity of history, we'd find Acton's classic vindication in Napoleon. With whatever youthful ideals Napoleon started, he became more and more inflamed with egotism and arrogance as he climbed the ladder. Yes, we might say corruption set in proportionately.

But we'd have to go back farther for an example of *absolute* power, which Napoleon fell short of. The Roman emperors came closer than any other to absolute dominion over the civilized world. Some of the emperors were good, some bad. But we're testing Lord Acton, so let's take a good one.

Marcus Aurelius

The wise and good Marcus didn't have to struggle for power. The world was handed to him on the half shell by his wise and good predecessor, Antoninus Pius. None of your Neronian insane orgies for Marcus. (All was corruption around Nero—but he wasn't so all-powerful after all, was he?) Marcus used his absolute power diligently, discreetly, for the good of the empire. He put down corruption, appointed able administrators, neglected nothing important, and found time to write down philosophic meditations, from which here's a gem:

"Never hope to realize Plato's Republic. Let it be sufficient that you have in some degree ameliorated mankind, and do not think such improvement a matter of small importance. Who can change the opinions of man? And without a change of sentiments what can you make but reluctant slaves and hypocrites?"

Not bad from the most powerful ruler on earth! No, let us have the grace to exonerate Marcus Aurelius from the charge of corruption.

And Yet—and Yet

Marcus appointed as his successor his son Commodus—a worthless scamp, as it turned out. Back to Nero. Was this the blind spot of Marcus? Just one weakness—but it was enough! From that time on the empire started sliding on its long downward path to extinction.

That's the catch. As long as a good man like Marcus or Antoninus was in the saddle, things went along. But too much depended on their being good. With absolute power as the stake, lesser men fought, wrangled and struggled for another century, bringing ruin in their wake.

It is much better to have free men dividing the responsibility for society, and to have the creative thinking of many minds brought to the task. It is an unhappy fact that during the reign of the "good emperors" up to Marcus Aurelius, which many historians declare to be the happiest period of all time, there was practically no creative thought outside of the emperor's. Is that good?

All right, Lord Acton, you win this round!