

Genuine Universal Service.

By Edmund Vance Cooke.

For the past few weeks and months we have been beset by a clamor for universal military service as the only thing which will save the country. I am not sure that universal military service might not be a good thing if it were really made universal and democratic, but if democracy in the army is such a good thing, why have we not had it in the army which we already have? Will any militarist who urges universal service leave it to a vote of the men in the ranks of the regular army as to whether our army is democratic—or autocratic? Is not practically every army officer's idea of a good soldier one who obeys "the orders of his superiors" unquestioningly and unthinkingly?

How many army officers are candid enough and democratic enough to agree with Major Harlee of the Marine Corps, who stated before the Senate Sub-Committee on Universal Service: "The oath of enlistment is an oath of bondage. It marks the man who takes it as of a lower caste. I am opposed to any service except that rendered by willing men." As a recruiting officer, Major Harlee testified that it is this caste system and the fixed obligations of the enlisting oath which deter men from entering the service. He proposed that men be trained annually and be permitted to leave the service at will. Major Harlee's recommendations might go far toward making a democratic army, but how many of his associates endorse his views? Certainly not many of them who are advising "universal service" on the grounds that "universal service is democratic."

I submit it as an undisputable mathematical proposition that it is better to kill off the men of the country who have only ten, twenty or thirty years of life in them anyway, than it is to kill off the young men who have a reasonable expectancy of fifty, forty or thirty years of life. Furthermore, the chances are at least even that the physical training and

camp rigors and regularity are just what are needed to harden and rejuvenate these soft-muscled and enervated men of the banquet tables, the hustings and the inner offices of corporations. The chances are good that a considerable portion of them would come out of the army with an appetite and digestion for hardtack and sowbelly, and an increased longevity, instead of a tendency toward diabetes, such as now threatens so many of them. Let the first call be for men from sixty-five to fifty-five, the second call for those from fifty-five to forty-five, the third from forty-five to thirty-five. Men younger than that are entitled to exemption, except in cases of the direst necessity, for they have not yet had a chance to live their lives and to establish their families. Thus, when the war is over, the weaklings and the agelings will have largely disappeared and the country will be readily rebuilt by the young and the strong, the vigorous and vital. How much more sensible than to cripple and kill the young and virile and leave the future of the country to the senile and degenerate!

But sensible as this suggestion is, it will be considered as merely fantastic by so many people, that I do not urge it—at least not at present. But I do urge a universal service which shall really be universal, not one which makes a mockery of the name by enlisting youths and adolescents who have little or no voice in the enacting of such a policy or the making of public opinion, while it exempts the ones who are responsible for the procedure.

I propose a plan of universal service which shall come somewhere near fulfilling its name, a plan which will make all of us "do our bit." *I propose that we confiscate the entire income of all the people of the United States beyond that which will care for their immediate necessities, the said appropriation to be applied to the conduct of the war and to*

last as long as the war lasts and until all debts incurred by the war are satisfied.

I do not now propose the details of such a plan, except in a general way, as a suggestion. Our statisticians assert that it costs between seven and eight hundred dollars per annum to maintain an average American family in the average city, and we know that this is possible, because the incomes of the average wage-earners is less than the amount cited. However, to be on the safe side, suppose we say that the amount of income necessary to maintain a family is one thousand dollars. Then, to be entirely generous, we will double this amount and say that an American family is entitled to an income of two thousand dollars, provided that it can get it. But all over this amount of income should revert to the War Fund of the United States, and this should be a horizontal rule applying alike to coupon-clipper and coal-heaver, provided he have a dollar of income over two thousand a year.

If there is any injustice in this suggestion, where is it? War is a horrible thing and a matter of suffering and sacrifice. What sacrifice is it to a Rockefeller or a Morgan who is exempt from service? What sacrifice is it to a man with five thousand or so dollars per annum, but who never sees service? Suppose the Government does levy an income or other tax and takes a hundred thousand a year from the multi-millionaire and a hundred dollars from me, does that affect either of us in any degree? Neither of us really knows that it is taken.

But if either of us happens to have a son of nineteen or twenty and the country sends that son to the trenches, does not his father and his mother feel his loss? Do you tell me that it is justifiable to conscript a young man's years and even to demand his life, but that you may not take his father's surplus income? Are the dollars of the fathers so much more sacred than the lives of the sons?

In the name of a genuine Universal Service, let us demand something approaching a Democratic Sacrifice. While the war lasts, at least, let no one make a penny out of the blood of young manhood and the tears of motherhood. We can then make the gift of a billion dollars to France, which has been suggested, and we can do so knowing that it comes with some sacrifice from the House of Have instead of only from the House of Want. We can then pay for this war as we go, instead of resorting to the questionable, if not cowardly, expedient of saddling its debt upon our children and grandchildren. There are difficulties to be worked out in applying a plan of this sort, but they are by

no means insurmountable. They do not at all compare with the difficulties of a "universal service" which proposes to take the lives of part of our people and let another part go Scot free or even to profit thereby.

More than this, I claim, that under such an arrangement we would come out of the war with our hearts bound together by the spirit of universal sacrifice and our heads held high that each of us had done his part, and that we had not bequeathed our task and our burden to generations yet to come.