

Peacetime Conscription

By Lancaster M. Greene

Proponents of peacetime conscription for young Americans are busy in Congress and in the newspapers. They have other words for it, strictly euphemistic. After reading their arguments I still prefer Gertrude Stein.

Gertrude Stein says that the trouble with the Germans and the Japanese is that they are the most obedient people in the world. When Army officials asked what to do with the Germans, she said they should teach them disobedience. Generals threw up their hands; the Army wouldn't understand that, said Miss Stein. I wonder whether civilians who favor peacetime conscription would understand it either.

Proponents of conscription would prepare for obedience, hate and war. Would they prefer to be called practical or cynical? I like Miss Stein's optimistic belief that people who learn disobedience may cooperate to make a really civilized world. "Civilization is cooperation," as Henry George said; it is not obedience.

Parents who teach their children to obey are often amazed at the people they obey. Teaching children obedience is a substitute for teaching them the reasons why, for helping them to think for themselves. Miss Stein says that since the Germans and the Japs are taught obedience it is to be expected that they will follow a bad leader from time to time, until we teach them otherwise. I hope Americans will teach their children love and "disobedience" and let our boys spend their time getting an education in fundamental economics, logic and the liberal arts, instead of learning to obey in the Army during their adolescent years.

Those who are for peacetime conscription are alarmed that 30 per cent of our boys of 18 showed physical and mental deficiencies. Splendid that we should discover this situation. Well, whence come these people? Is it any secret that most of the disease, deficiencies, fires and crime bills of our civilization are from slum areas? Social workers have been shouting this from the housetops for years.

The enigma of civilization, poverty in the midst of progress, still mocks our ignorance, and an obedient army won't solve it.

The argument is made that medical science has advanced to the point where the physician's chief task is to keep us from getting ill; and in the same way, an injection of the serum of war preparation will keep us from getting into war. This is specious reasoning and evidence of a defeatist attitude toward the physical and social health of the human race. We will be healthy when our bodies and living conditions are so sound that they need no injections of any kind. If we teach our young people to devote themselves to the study of the basic causes of war rather than to practice for war they will understand the true meaning of "prevention."

As a Parthian shot, who won the war anyway?—those who were prepared for the last war, those who were prepared for this war, or those disobedient Americans who just took time out from their preparation for peace?

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