

Land and Freedom

Comment and Reflection

THE news of the recent coal mine strike prompts us to touch upon a delicate subject. In passing, however, we would earnestly call the attention of the people and their government to the immunity always enjoyed by the mine *owners* from the abuse customarily heaped upon the operators and miners alike. Also, it is suggested that the additional compensation desired by the workers might easily be granted if paid out of the handsome rents, or *unearned increment*, received by those who are privileged to hold titles to the mines, as distinguished from the working lessees or operators.

IT has been said that the interests of the individual conflict with those of society, even in a democratic state. There is some merit to the viewpoint, but this is not to say that the interests of individuals and society are *opposed* to each other. "Conflict," as referred to, probably means no more than the difficulty which all of us have experienced in reconciling personal desires with responsibilities. Some rather distressing examples, other than coal strikes, are to be noted in such occurrences as black markets, and profiteering and, sadder yet, the abuses attending the so-called honor system as applied to pleasure driving. A great many people have admittedly participated in these and many other anti-social practices. Why should this be?

SO strong is the instinct that men will seek to gratify their desires with a minimum of effort, that even in times of national emergency, if not peril, they are more or less reluctant to combat it. Of course, the complexities of modern civilization tend to obscure for the individual what are really his own best interests. The long-range view of enlightened selfishness is the exception, not the rule, and the sin of sloth besets us on all sides. Our habits of thought are even such that when occasionally we do make a sacrifice, it is expected that a startled world will bestow a ready approbation. How different, though, can things be in the proximity of fundamentals! In Russia, or China, who now could be so naïve as to seek recognition for having deprived himself of this or that? Would he not be ridiculed for wanting to eat his cake and have it, too?

IN nations like America, however, we have not yet begun to think much in terms of "saving our skins." Almost symbolic of this is the complacent manner, as though a concession for the sake of appearance, in which we allow that one bombing might wake us up to the good sense of air raid drills. And this state of mind

carries through to the enjoyment of all peace-time pleasures. No doubt, the average citizen does at times take stock of his own brand of selfishness, and reflects on what this can mean when multiplied by the actions of others like himself. But suspicion ever lurks nearby, and whispers, plausibly enough, "Why should you do without? The gas and rubber you are thinking of saving would only be wasted by someone else." (Incidentally, if everyone, including so-called war-workers, were compelled to use public transportation, the facilities of the latter, especially buses, could be correspondingly improved. This would result in more democratic service to all.)

HOWEVER, a beneficent Wisdom has provided an adequate balance, if we would but use it, against such individual shortcomings to society. More and more have we come to see our salvation in a government of laws, as distinguished from men. For even the lowliest citizen has reason enough to suspect that his "betters" have the same individual weaknesses as himself. Actuated by self preservation, we are willing, and anxious to become subordinated to a set of *rules* that will apply to all alike. So far as we know, the culmination of this principle of union and justice is to be found in our American democracy.

SO, without belittling the good intentions which may underlie departures from *the rules of total war*, we prefer to base our calculations in times of crisis on a system sternly administered by law and equity. Consider how difficult, if not impossible, would be the task of our modern state in recruiting a fighting force of *volunteers*. On the other hand, the principle of conscription is now generally accepted, and very little fault can be found with its administration. Rationing is also in complete accord with democratic ideas. And since profiteering must be combated, ceilings on prices are quite necessary for our individual welfare. Even at the risk of dislocating what is left of our normal ways of living, we have a paramount right to collectively curb personal greed.

IN this, the greatest trial of human liberty yet known, we simply cannot afford to take chances. If we are committed to total war, it is idle to complain of regimentation, a necessary incident thereof. To insist that business be allowed to go on as usual is a contradiction in terms. Whether we like it or not, this war is inexorable in its demand that the ploughshares be beaten into guns.