

The Dilemma of Democracy

By WILLIAM L. WINTER

IN THE PRESENT WORLD two tendencies exist in opposition to democracy—one designed against the organized mechanics of democratic political procedure, the other operating within the ranks, but each striving for the same end—seizure of power by legislating minority purpose and intimidation of personal liberty by the abuse of delegated power.

The first of these tendencies is a well-known and completely organized movement using the term communism to describe its aims and activities. Universalism is its purported creed, and while it pretends to a universal character, the inspiration and guidance of various national Communist parties are received in mandate from a supposedly international committee which excludes from its leadership all save the intensely nationalistic citizens of one Soviet State.

It is not so much the purpose of this group that is a challenge to the democratic ideals of the nation as the methods employed to promote alliance, the assumption that the mass is hopelessly inadequate in perception and therefore must be incorporated into the movement by force. In so far as this organization fosters violence, pursues illegal and anti-democratic methods to suppress existing political and civil liberty, and with victory imposes dictatorial governments upon the liberated masses, it must be recognized for what it is—not communism, not internationalism, but established and entrenched fascism.

The obvious and organized nature of communistic fascism is in itself protective in a democratic State; consequently there is relatively little danger from this first type of opposition to democracy. The second threat, not so obviously organized, is the more vicious. In its high mobility and concentration of power, social and economic fascism is able to realign itself according to opportunity to terminate individual personal freedom and nullify self-government.

The social fascist is often unconscious of the motives of his own non-democracy; he perceives only his good intentions. The professional reformer is a typical fascist, characteristically associated with other reformers for in-group purposes. He is determined to dictate to others what they should or should not read; think, do, eat and drink. The resemblance of both to the Communists with respect to ultimate aims is evident—

could the various in-groups agree on a definition of objectives and formulate a common program of action, the world would be confronted with the danger of universal fascism.

Thus a certain protection against the fascists lies in their diversity of organization and purposes. This heterogeneity of group interest, however, can have the most appalling consequences when group aims are in conflict—as in the titanic struggle between the German and Russian fascistic systems for the control of central and eastern Europe. Within our own country, crises have arisen from similar causes. The tension between the extreme antislavery faction and the Southern pro-slavery and secessionist extremists forced into war a nation for the most part inclined toward pacifism. Similar examples of misguidance can frequently be cited in the conduct of the municipal, state, and federal governments, with attendant misrule that is as objectionable as oligarchic control.

Again, a fascistic organization possessing an economic or political monopoly which it ruthlessly exploits without thought of fair play will inevitably be faced with an uprising of those who have not and wish to have. Eventually a dictatorship appears, to the discomfiture of those who do not wish to be involved, are disinterested and impartial, as well as of those who have interests at stake. The peasant revolts of feudal western Europe were forerunners of the Protestant, French, and Russian revolutions, cataclysmic occurrences which achieved extensive redistributions of power and property at great cost. Whether the dominating group is a majority or a minority does not particularly matter, nor is it important whether the revolt comes immediately or is delayed. The last decade has seen the long deferred consequences of European imperialism in southeastern Asia; the uprisings in Indo-China and Indonesia have origins that are not recent, but which occurred in the preceding centuries of conquest and exploitation.

American Democracy Is Deep-Rooted

THE SOURCES OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY are pure and deep, and the stream that has flowed forth has a moving strength. Innately the American has roots that reach far into a soil unfavorable to fascism. While the power complexes of the national monarchical States were expanding into trans-Atlantic imperialism, they unintentionally stimulated movements of flight transmitting in the same direction resistance to the instigating forces. The Separatists, Presbyterians, Huguenots left Europe under pressure but in the exercise of what they regarded as fundamental rights that could not be abridged by any political organization. Unfortunately

the toleration demanded and desired by these refugees as a spiritual necessity was too often not extended by them to other sects, and this inconsistency persists today. It is still the fundamental weakness of a people supposedly Christian and democratic that the attitude of the majority is afflicted by bigotry, distrust, suspicion, and a parochial narrowness of vision.

In spite of these limitations there is an unconscious tendency to seek fair play and justice, a tendency that from time to time breaks through to the surface with surprising illumination. The most notable development in this spirit was the long revolutionary movement which began with the protest against the arbitrary exercise of power in 1775 and did not end until it had subverted, temporarily at least, the politico-socio-economic oligarchy that controlled the United States for the few with property. The continuing American Revolution, having achieved fairly well its purpose of agrarian independence (at the expense of the aborigine), was then sidetracked by a coalition of ambitious industrialists and politicians. Hardly three quarters of a century after the continental colonies had seceded from British imperial federation, the Republic had come under the dictatorship of first the Presidency and then a psychopathic minority in Congress, from which emerged the twin principles, one of political science and the other of political practice, centralization of power and government by clique.

To apply the term "fascism" to the developments of the last eighty-five years may seem anachronistic, but there is no better way to describe the absolute and introverted will-to-power. The noun has been somewhat discredited by the abuse of Communists and pro-Communists, to whom any opponent is a "fascist." Likewise, "democracy" has been appropriated and tossed about by all political factions, yet democracy can only mean properly the self-government of a people free of any authority except their own and that of morality. Franklin Roosevelt, popularly regarded as a protagonist and hero of democracy, received support from both communistic and other organizations whose spirit was undeniably fascistic. Both democratic and anti-democratic elements are well embedded in the warp and woof of our history and tradition.

Insurance against the encroachment of anti-democratic forces can never be obtained by political mechanics alone; the only guaranty of democracy is constant political, moral, and spiritual vigilance.

In the colonial period the opposition to arbitrary government under the guise of royal authority culminated in open and co-ordinated revolution.

Doubtless those who would have preferred to keep rebellion in hand and under their personal control were disconcerted. The bitterness of strife in the constitutional controversy and the relentless political warfare between Federalists and anti-Federalists were significant of the cleavage within the newly formed union. Finally the struggle against oligarchy found expression in the elimination of property restrictions on suffrage, and in the aggressive agrarianism of the Jacksonian movement. Yet the entrenchment of the political machine in the same era had the effect of crystallization of our later political development, creating a pattern that tends to dominate and to restrain the popular will as often as to facilitate its function.

The Record of the Last Century

THE GREATEST HANDICAP which the Republic has had to suffer has been the forced reconstruction of the South after the war brought about by the insoluble triangle of slavery, tariff, and the possession of the federal power. This is not the only occasion on which two movements, both of which were fascistic in character, have clashed to leave fateful scars in the history of a nation, but seldom has the result been so disastrous and permanent. The subjugation of the South by force and prolonged military rule were met by white supremacists with fraud, violence, and intimidation. The most virulent effect derived from the economic destruction which left the South in a permanently debilitated condition, creating both an anti-national regional psychosis and an attitude of mistrust toward the social, political, or economic acceptance of the Negro which had been imposed by the Republican party and federal troops. It thus has become impossible to enforce in the South the provision of the federal Constitution enfranchising all citizens regardless of race.

In addition to imposing this peculiarly undemocratic type of political exclusiveness upon the country, the Civil War period, through the re-introduction of a high tariff, ensured the peculiar development of the Industrial Revolution in the United States. A more grandiose, more subtle and influential type of fascism was directed toward the exploitation of industrial labor, the farmer, and the consuming public. The emergence of economic fascism in the latter half of the nineteenth century was signalled by the expansion and consolidation of corporations, railroads, and banking institutions, and was paralleled by the deification of an abstract concept of success which was erroneously supposed to be available to all who were sufficiently interested in opportunity. Simultaneously the control and manufacture of public opinion was being centralized through the

amalgamation of the press and the elimination of the true individuality of journalism—a process completed in the twentieth century.

In the Eighteen-Nineties imperial expansion first reached its continental limits with the seizure and division of the productive portions of the land; while the mineral resources were yet to be fully exploited, more imaginative men began to be conscious of fields abroad. The interest generated in the Caribbean, the Pacific, and eastern Asia inevitably was directed by men whose sense of power was less predatory and more intellectual. Only a very small minority in the United States had a real interest, economic or otherwise, in overseas expansion, but the influence, in the press and in the government, of this minority was persuasive.

International fascism directed by political adventurers, commercial and financial interests, missionaries, manifest-destiny prophets and naval expansionists resulted in the establishment of a heterogeneous colonial empire including the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii, not to mention the protectorate over Cuba and the assumption of special rights in Latin America. The consciousness of the literate public had to be projected into a world sphere. Among the educated, Mahan's repeated references to imperial destiny predicated upon sea power of the British model served the same purpose as the yellow press for other sections of the public.

The program for expansion began to find a popular acceptance under the auspices of McKinley and the Republican Party as a front for interested parties and a segment of the State Department. Unfortunately the full diplomatic implications and the moral responsibilities of empire were far from being realized. Since 1900 the American foreign policies have been motivated by a complex of interests, paramount among which is the desire to enlarge the field of trade and capital investment abroad. A policy of entering into competition among the empires and "spheres of influence" of the great European powers proved irreversible, particularly since British diplomatic pressure increased as the war against Germany was prepared. The borders of American financial entanglement extended far beyond the political frontiers, and the policy of extension of credit and moral support to the Allies in World War I led inevitably to our participation when the possibility of their defeat appeared.

Concentration on Political Democracy

THE SECOND WORLD WAR brought home the full implication of the failure and breakdown on a world-wide scale of the democratic principles. For nearly two centuries west European civilization, including in this sense

the Americas and the British Dominions, had focused its attention and directed its effort as if obsessed toward a single goal—the realization of the practice of democracy through parliamentary, representative governments, and mature safeguards for liberty of expression and reasonable freedom of action. The outcome of this magnificent, heroic striving was the brood of dictatorships hatched between 1917 and 1935. One after another European countries turned their backs on political democracy and set up fascistic regimes. But the most ominous portents were not those which appeared in the distressed areas—Russia, Germany, Austria, Italy and Spain—but in the coalition “national” governments of the country with the most venerable parliamentary tradition, and the advent in the United States of a political ego that was very much at home in the age of Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler. As the Romans, weary of their problems, had reposed extraordinary powers in Caesar, so in the twentieth century the electors of the American Republic in the face of its greatest economic crisis sacrificed precedents in exchange for the guarantee of a permanent dole.

The advent of the Rooseveltian third term inaugurated a new era in the history of the United States as surely as the decision to reenforce Fort Sumter. What developments may be in store for this generation and the two following can not be foreseen with any degree of precision. But there is every indication that the people will continue to surrender their interest in the government in return for flattery and fine radio oratory, that rulers of whatever background or derivation will offer bread and amusements and other “socialistic” panaceas while continuing to pander to a small, well-knit group of economic fascists.

The anomaly of American politics has long been a people sovereign in law and absolute in theory, yet indifferent to and careless of their sovereignty, indulging an attitude toward their responsibilities that Louis XV would have considered unworthy. The actual business of governing has thus fallen into the hands of factions and cliques which control these factions, party organizations which are ends in themselves, run by officeholders or candidates whose chief concern is to obtain and hold position and its incidental compensations. Instead of the formulation and pursuit of a policy of national social welfare, the occupation of the professional politician is absorbed in the endless struggle for power by private interests whose lobbies bring every kind of pressure to bear upon legislators and administrators. Trade and manufacturing associations, banking groups, farmers associations, railroads, veterans' organizations, labor unions, reform societies,

churches, mining and shipping interests, professional associations, chambers of commerce and regional interests have their weapons, the nature and use of which the professional politician must understand, since they may be used against him at any time. Bloc voting by the electorate, social influence, the manufacture and control of opinion, rumors, economic favors or retaliation, private censorship or control of press and radio, and, speaking generally, collectivistic intimidation are among these weapons. To expect statesmen of great stature to emerge from the organized feudal anarchy of the lobby system of legislation would be naïveté itself.

The dislocating effect of the anti-social struggle for special consideration, exemptions, and privileges is belied by the appearance of respectability, order, and equilibrium which the existence of only two major parties imparts. Indeed, the uniformity of aim of the two parties is sometimes disconcertingly obvious in a country in which the opposition as a public service would be expected to offer a genuine counter-program. The difference between the promise of the candidate and the performance of the elected official subjected to the homogenizing, domesticating influence of the state or national capital is a common topic of humor. Not quite so well known is the practice of legal or financial firms which have a stake in government policy—the maintenance of at least one member of each major party in the partnership, to ensure a friendly hearing at court under any circumstances.

Vested Interests Generate Reaction

THE FACT that the federal, state, county, and local governments pass, except in the South, from one party to another at elections, is offset by the national nature of patronage. The distribution of offices and favors at the disposition of the federal executive aids in imparting a semblance of cohesion to political procedures that are diverse in motivation and execution. Thus the Democratic administration of the past sixteen years has been able to keep in line anti-federal attitudes of the South, through combining a program of federal aid with occasional concessions to local prejudice. Regional anti-federalism may present an easier problem of control than the growing tendency to the assertion of states' rights by the states individually, taking the form of taxation of inter-state enterprise and the exclusion of competitive commodities. Vested interests through their lobbies are returning us to the period of inter-state tariff wars under the Articles of Confederation.

Under examination, the putative character of American political economy in adherence to laissez-faire principles proves to be nothing more than

a carefully cultivated illusion. Government subsidies and calculated interference in economic activities for the benefit of powerful lobbies have been the tradition and practice in the United States since the beginning, and can be traced back to the colonial era, but have become specially pernicious since the Eighteen-Sixties. The Republican administrations of the Civil War and post-war periods materially assisted in the creation of economic monopolies by subsidizing private enterprises through gifts of federal land to railroads and enactment of "protective" tariffs in restraint of trade. The interests thus fortified have become virtually impregnable, but the reaction of the public to their ruthless use of economic power multiplied legislation in a chain of developments that now seems to have no end. The interstate commerce, anti-trust, agricultural tariff acts, the laws first for the protection and then regulation of labor unions, the subsidies of agricultural industries and licensing of co-operative organizations, price-fixing and wage-fixing decrees, federal banking and credit corporations, the support of millions of unemployed, represent the confused and unrationalized efforts of our legislators to appease the public either by tying strings to the Frankenstein's monster of financial monopoly, or by the creation of smaller counter-monopolies. From a political point of view this mass of legislation resembles a casually constructed pyramid resting perilously upon its apex; from the economist's standpoint, the smothering influences of private monopolistic control on the one hand and incompetent government regulation on the other make the very suggestion of the possibility of "free enterprise" ludicrous.

Thus the last hundred years of our history have seen the undercutting of both our political and economic democracy; the critical and dangerous period has set in with the exhaustion of desirable free economic land in the Nineties. Until then capital in the form of land had been available to anyone possessing initiative; since the passing of the frontier the trend has been toward the elimination of economic independence. The farmer has held out as an occupational group, but his position was considerably shaken by the expansion of World War I farm prosperity and the subsequent foreclosures of the Twenties and Thirties. With another depression the enterprise of the farmer (already subject to commodity market and political controls to the point that it can hardly be called free) may be subordinated to the rank of employment. The effect of the economic trend of the last half century is to make proletarians of the vast majority of the population—their reduction to being working men and women, "labor," whether they realize it or not. Such small businesses as survived the depression received

a new lease on life in the second world war, but that may be only temporary. Unless unforeseen circumstances reverse the trend to centralization, the pretense of economic democracy will have to be abandoned, and its decline will parallel that of our political institutions.

The Responsibility of the Constituent

AS FOR THE LATTER, their fate seems to be atrophy, through lack of use in the spirit for which they were intended. The present political machinery does not need to be drastically changed (though the desirability of some minor repairs is obvious enough), but it does need to be intelligently and earnestly used by all Americans. The revolution that will save democracy is the creation of a healthy sense of responsibility in the individual toward his government, the realization that political failure or evil is the fault not of governors, but of their constituents who installed them in positions of power. It is a common but foolish delusion to expect from leadership a higher standard of morality than from society as a whole.

Modern democracy is not an ideal system, ideally achieved—its foundations are historical, traditional, and economic; its development has been both philosophic and organic. No contemporary parliamentary State has come into existence without reference to the republics of Greece and Rome. Neither, in a study of the origins of our political culture, can Christianity with its emphasis on the equal value of all souls before God be ignored. The self-conscious, literate, newspaper-reading modern public has been the expansion of the middle class who saw in the popular referendum an offset to power too highly concentrated in monarchical and aristocratic institutions; legislatures are more susceptible to plutocratic influence than royal courts.

If there is to be any logic behind democracy, if it is to be more than an expedient justified by and derived from certain related factors in our social evolution, it is essential to do more than maintain democratic forms, to expect the magic of a name to effect self-government. Government of, by, and for the people is now on trial and the watchful care needed for the conservation of civil liberties is nothing in comparison with the mental and spiritual effort necessary to free ourselves from moral lethargy, partisanship and selfishness. Among a people that prizes its sentimental and naive attachment to the abstraction of a patriotic history, and continues fatuously to glorify political and economic individualism in the face of factual evidence of their disappearance, almost every kind of group organization exists, and alignment of loyalties prevails, except a genuine national organ-

ization and national consciousness. Fundamentally our peril lies not in the movements of any minority, but in the inertia of the majority; not in aggression, but in passive disgust and disinterest. The protection of the institutions to which we have a deep emotional liaison calls for more than theatrical investigations, reports of committees and commissions, the effusions of the press and the babblings of the radio—it demands the realization that the American system rather than being subverted or overthrown is slowly becoming meaningless and useless in the hands of its possessors.

Institutional change in one direction or another, for greater or less popular participation in government, is not of much significance if the will to exercise the existing rights is absent. The suffrage can be extended, as it was by Napoleon III, while losing its effectiveness. Our constitutional apparatus might be preserved without the slightest alteration *ad infinitum*, yet through popular diffidence be transformed into a mechanical display of meaningless forms. More and more power is now being transferred or delegated to the executive by the legislature in the interests of "efficiency." The importance of the Presidency is increasing, since it is regarded as the friend of the masses *vis-a-vis* the supposed impotence of Congress. It is significant that Augustus, the first hereditary emperor of Rome, received the title "Restorer of the Republic." The character and status of the Roman electorate in the imperial period are too well known to require comment.

Palpably a semi-conscious tendency has already set in to accept as the most suitable form of government that which produces "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," and to condone the use of any means which does not flagrantly defeat the end. American political evolution has often followed this course of little resistance, but in the lack of principle it is *per se* fascistic. Governed in many phases of his policy by a facile opportunism, Franklin Roosevelt attempted to convert the federal Supreme Court into an annex of executive approval. Defeated in this effort by the Congress, he doubtless looked upon the incident as the hindrance of a noble humanitarian purpose.

Neither opportunism nor the convenience of compromise should ever be substituted for the principle of democracy. In adherence to this principle a medium of ending the tension, the estrangement, between the individual citizen and the State is to be sought in the instrument of representative government. Man and political society have become dissociated, but despite the present cleavage the building of this continental empire has been more

than a myth or a dream—it is a labor of social co-operation. Our problem is not to permit the continued projection of the illusion of isolate and helpless separateness, but to clarify the relationship of each personality to himself and to his fellows. Admittedly the solution must be more than political, and in its deepest implications is universal, moral, and economic. But the State is the visible and best organized expression of the society which the totality of individuals compose, and the immediate goal must be the re-establishment of rapport between the citizens and their representational collectivity—the Republic.

The Role of Referenda

TO ACCOMPLISH THIS END certain measures can be taken to enforce symbolically the effect of individual responsibility that is no longer borne by the citizen and to shake the grip of the professional politician upon government. For example, a referendum should be required upon the enactment of all legislation of national importance, including laws regulating labor organizations and trusts, the declaration of war and the conclusion of peace, the conscription of manpower and capital for military purposes, the ratification of trade treaties and alliances, the imposition of tariff and excise duties. To enable the intelligent participation of the public in the referenda, the text of every bill to be voted upon should be translated into non-legal language, and circulated, together with arguments for and against the bill by leading statesmen and political and social scientists, throughout every community.

Such a referendum would tend to counteract that political schizophrenia which has developed among Americans of the last four generations—a feeling of being alien to the government with whose existence they are under democratic and representative processes a part.

Less than three centuries ago the prevailing type of government in west European society was absolute monarchy. The prince was the trustee of supreme authority reposed in him by God, controlled only by the law which he himself could alter through edict. He personified the national State and on the practical level his power was regarded as a bulwark against encroachments of specially privileged classes. He assumed the responsibility of government, thus validating the popular feeling that the State was one thing, centering on the king, while the people were quite another.

Absolutism has now been thoroughly discredited, yet unfortunately the attitude prevalent under the monarchy, in which the government was abstract from the people and its functions none of their concern, has

persisted and resulted in a deadly indifference compounded of cynicism, complacency, and a conviction of impotence. This is the dilemma of American democracy, the critical period for its solution has been reached, and in essence its solution must be the resumption of responsibility by the majority *and* by individuals, of whom the majority is composed. There is no other way out; otherwise the infinity of laws regulating our political and economic life must have the effect of strangulation with restrictive bonds of red tape. The re-establishment of democracy can only be achieved if the individual is made to feel that he as an individual has a personal responsibility for his own actions, that he is not bound or controlled by the government, and that on the contrary as a citizen he has the additional and heavy responsibility for whatever the government may do. In this way a genuine nationalism, a national democracy, may be created, and the moral equilibrium of the people restored.

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Rent Control in Peiping

THE CHINESE COMMUNISTS, true to their theory, have been attempting to solve the rent control problem in Peiping by decree, just as they have attempted to solve the agrarian land problem. This provides admirable opportunities for "squeeze," to which the Communists are not adverse. The Peiping Military Control Committee issued a proclamation announcing a series of measures to help solve the housing problem and encourage people to repair and build houses. These are the measures: Houses can be sold and bought freely. A house "stolen from public property or owned by criminals" can be confiscated, but only by order of the People's Court. Rents are to be fixed "by fair and reasonable agreement" between owner and tenant and must be paid in people's money" or in kind, not gold or silver. Repairs must be borne by the owner unless the agreement stipulates otherwise. Disputes will be settled by the Land Bureau or the People's Court. Tenants may be evicted only if the owner wants to live in the house himself or to rebuild or to sell it, and then only with a minimum notice of three months. House owners should be "enabled to earn a profit" but rents should not be fixed "too high." Considering these measures, the odds are ten to one that the housing problem will be a perpetual one in Peiping, just as it is in Moscow.