

IN A TIME OF APPREHENSION

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✧ *In a Time of Apprehension* ✧

GRADUATION DAY is a time of endings and—as the word Commencement itself suggests—it is a time of beginnings. It is therefore naturally a time for stock-taking, for trying to get our bearings, for deciding where we are and where we ought to try to go next. In these few minutes I propose to try to do this on a broad scale. I propose to try to chart the position in the great stream of history in which we—as members of the great American community—find ourselves in this year 1938; and to suggest how we as individuals might wisely set our course. That is a very brash thing to attempt, and for the breadth of the generalizations and impressions of which I shall be guilty I apologize in advance. I trust that as a non-union historian—or I might say an historian whose amateur standing is unquestioned—I may be forgiven for rushing in where even the best-equipped scholars of history might fear to tread.

But I should like to record my conviction that during the past twenty-five years or so—since, let us say, the outbreak of the world war—our civilization has been going into a new phase; and that unless we understand the essential differences between that new phase and the phase which preceded it, we shall not understand the nature of the predicament in which this country, and indeed the whole world, finds itself in this year 1938.

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That preceding phase of history, as I see it, covered roughly the whole nineteenth century and (let us say) the first fourteen years of this twentieth century. It was, therefore, the period in which most of us elders (if not betters) grew up and in whose traditions we were immersed. In it were established the habits of thinking, the expectations, and the folklore by which our American community is still largely ruled, even though the hard logic of events has brought the period to an end.

That earlier period was a time of incredible expansion for what we call Western Civilization. Consider for a moment the nature of this expansion.

In the first place, as we are all aware, it was an age of industrialization, mechanization, urbanization; an age in which factories and larger factories sprang up, and factory towns; an age in which water-power was used on an increasing scale, and then steam power, and then gasoline and electric power. This industrial evolution brought with it an extraordinary increase in creature comforts. And it also brought about, for millions of people, a great change in the nature of their daily work: no longer were they independent workmen on their own; by the end of the period a vastly larger number of them were dependent upon jobs.

In the second place, it was a time of enormously increasing population. As Professor Fairchild has recently reminded us, it has been computed that if the population of the world had continued to grow as it was growing during the first decade of the present century, at the end of 10,000 years it would have amounted to a figure which I can best describe to you by saying that it begins with the figures 221,848, and these figures are followed by 45 zeros. And if the population of the United States had continued to increase as it was increasing during that decade 1900-1910, even by the year 2000—which

many of you will live to see—this country would have been worse crowded than China now is.

In the third place, the peoples of the Western nations were overspreading the world, moving out into the vacant spaces (as we Americans moved into the vacant spaces of our own West) and turning out or swallowing up or governing more or less strictly those peoples whom they termed more backward (as we swallowed up the Indians). It was the palmy day both of pioneering and of imperialism, with the British Empire serving as the type and pattern of imperial expansion.

And in the fourth place, it was an era in which the natural resources of the earth were opened up as never before, and used up as never before: when resources like coal and oil, which had taken millions of years to be laid down, were used up at a rate which could no more be continued indefinitely than could the increase in population.

Now the economic system under which we live, and which we loosely and sometimes too sweepingly call capitalism, works best when it is expanding. Indeed when it has formed the habit of expansion, and this expansion for any reason stops, the system works very badly. It needs growth to function smoothly. One might liken it to an automobile which runs sweetly so long as you keep your foot pressed down on the accelerator, but which, as soon as you take your foot up, begins to slow down and shudder and buck. During that great nineteenth century period the system thrived on expansion—an expansion made possible not only by industrialism and the rising standard of comfort, but also by the vast gain in population, the using up of natural resources, and the constant opening up of new markets as the empires won dominion over palm and pine.

That period was also a time of increasingly rapid



communication. It was a time of tremendous scientific advance. And finally it was a time of advancing political democracy—when throughout Western civilization the common man seemed to be on the way to greater political freedom and opportunity, to a better education, to a better chance to assert his personal independence.

But these immense changes brought about all manner of stresses and conflicts.

The rise of industrialism on a bigger and bigger scale, requiring millions of people to work at routine specialized jobs upon which they became dependent, robbed these people in considerable degree of economic liberty. Realizing that although they had the vote—and the air of political freedom in their nostrils—large numbers of them were becoming hardly more than serfs in their jobs, they asked for economic as well as political democracy. Very naturally they insisted—often bitterly—that the state (in whose management they had some say) should intervene in economic affairs (in which they had very little say). And so there was much friction and disorder as the expanding democratic state met head-on the expanding business organizations; and the idea slowly gained ground that the political state should in time become the supreme arbiter in *all* the affairs of the people.

Another kind of stress was caused by the fact that imperialism tended to become self-defeating. If you live in Birmingham, England, and sell your cotton goods to the people of India, you can become very prosperous—for a time. But pretty soon the people of India are going to want to make their own cotton goods, and then you are prosperous no longer. As the primitive peoples of the world found out about the advantages of Western civilization they became restive and unmanageable; they

wanted to govern themselves and to build factories for themselves. Imperialism—at least as a method of exploitation—began to run up against the law of diminishing returns.

Furthermore, imperialism caused rivalries. England, with France following, had got most of the juiciest colonies. Other nations wanted some of the imperial swag. And so, though imperialism was destined to become less profitable, it nevertheless offered a constant threat of war.

Another thing happened, too. Those resources which were being used up so fast were not unlimited. It takes a long time to grow a forest, or to build up soil that has been worn out, and the earth can never again make coal and oil and iron. Under the threat of war, general staffs realized that ownership of these resources might be essential to victory. And their desire therefore to grab what resources they could increased the very threat of war which prompted it.

Still further stresses came about from the fact that as the world became smaller, and its economic system became more complex—until people thousands of miles apart became dependent upon one another's fortunes and one another's decisions—Tom, Dick, and Harry found that the social and economic problems which confronted them as citizens of a democratic state became more and more difficult. Tom, let us say, is a wise counselor at a town meeting. But how well equipped is he to decide whether the tariff on sugar shall favor Cuba, Hawaii, or the Colorado beet-sugar industry? He can understand village problems, but how about Federal Reserve policy or our Far-Eastern policy? Tom, as we have seen, wanted his government to intervene in his economic affairs. The number of things in which that government had to in-



nese, actuated by a similar desire, are bankrupting themselves trying to grab the Chinese resources and to win the 400,000,000 customers of China with bombs and bayonets—a very expensive method. But they can hardly achieve a profitable expansion that way—except possibly through a Spartan militarization of their lives which would be as unlike the sort of process by which London and Birmingham became rich as an army camp is unlike a cotton exchange.

Now theoretically the sort of expansion which our economic system appears to need might continue despite the passing of all these familiar aids to expansion. It might be brought about by a sheer continuing increase in efficiency—by making goods so economically and on so huge a scale and distributing them so effectively that everybody (including those who are now too poor to buy) might have all he needed. But this would not be the sort of expansion to which we became accustomed in the old days, and it would require many changes in our arrangements and habits. And so far we have not been able to achieve it. We in the United States had a limited burst of it in the 1920's, aided by a burst of speculation (which could not last) and by lending money to other countries to buy our goods (which could not last); and we had a very partial recovery between 1933 and '37, aided first by a devaluation of the currency (which cannot be repeated often) and by government spending (which cannot last). Otherwise our failure to make our system expand in the absence of the traditional aids has been tragic, here as elsewhere.

No, we are in a new era now. Either we must work out new methods of expansion, or we must learn to live somehow without expansion, in a static economy. Whatever happens, the old days cannot come back again.

An intellectual superman, faced with such a problem, might confront it rationally, studying coolly and realistically the various possible ways of bringing about an expansion through efficient production and distribution of the goods we know we have the plant and the man-power to make, if only we could simultaneously bring about new investment and sustain buying power. Or, failing to achieve that end or deciding that it could not be achieved, such a superman might study equally coolly the necessities of a static economy.

But such, alas, is not the way of most of mankind. Man is a creature of habit; and when the system that was good enough for father does not work he is likely to become frightened and angry. He wants to wrap himself about his possessions, if he has any; if he thinks he hasn't his fair share, he wants to grab his neighbor's. He wants to find a villain to blame for what has gone wrong, and smash that villain. Or he wants to run away to some safe island, or to run back to the haven of his happy boyhood. Or, in his fright and bewilderment, he turns to old superstitions and incantations to bring back what has been lost.

That is what has been happening in the Western world on a gigantic scale since about the year 1930, when the refusal of the traditional economic systems to work in the traditional ways became manifest to almost everybody; and that is why I have taken as the title for these remarks of mine the words "In a Time of Apprehension." We are living in a decade of irrational panic and of frenzied opinions born in panic.

Look about you. Look first abroad. At Mussolini, who cannot meet the problem of Italian poverty but tells his people that he will make them mighty Roman soldiers, able to conquer the world—in other words, able to grab wealth that neither he nor anybody else has the wit



to teach them how to earn. Even if they are not able to grab it, perhaps they will be so occupied with the legend of their national destiny and so excited shouting for Duce and country that they may forget their poverty. Look at Hitler, who when his people were in dire want, arose to teach them that their future, too, lies in grabbing. See him feeding them with intellectually indefensible ancient myths about the Nordic race; and offering them, as scapegoats upon whom they may take vengeance for all the ills they have suffered, a tiny minority of unhappy Jews. Look at the emergence of nationalism—in several mutually destructive forms—as by far the most vital, as well as the most dogmatic, religion in the world today. Look at the amount of sheer cruelty which fright, and the jealousy and bitterness which fright engenders, have let loose upon the world—in Ethiopia, Spain, China, Austria. And look, if you will, by contrast, at the fact that there are no more prosperous and contented and admired people in the world today than the Scandinavians, who have not tried to grab, have not tried to live by compulsory superstitions, but have kept their heads and stuck to their knitting and faced their economic problems realistically.

Much of the frenzy which has visited other parts of the world we in the United States, we may thank our stars, have escaped. But is it not fair to say that we, too, in considerable measure, have been frightened during these past few years by the refusal of our economy to expand as it used to, and have been led by our fear into panicky behavior?

Has it ever occurred to you, for instance, that the widespread call for “confidence” and for “security” is the call of a frightened people? Listen to some of our prosperous friends at their favorite pastime of denouncing the President of the United States, making him the sole

scapegoat for everything which has happened which they do not like, and believing gleefully the most preposterous nonsense about him: is not this a twentieth-century form of witchburning? Whatever may be one's opinion of the President and his policies, to imagine that the results of a major trend in history such as I have been describing are attributable to him alone is to indulge in the sort of flight into emotionalism which betrays a profound inner fear. Or on the other hand, listen to some of our friends on the Left, whose easy explanation of the course of history is that Wall Street and the offices of the big corporations are full of wicked and greedy men. Again, how much easier to find a scapegoat than to solve a complex problem! Have you noticed the recent tendency, even in this country, toward anti-intellectualism—toward viewing all teaching as a form of propaganda and regarding with fear and distrust the scholar who tries to get at the facts and reason from them instead of accepting the particular dogma which appeals to the emotions of those about him? You can hardly have failed to notice the recent increase in anti-Semitism, as contemptible a form of irrational scapegoat-hunting as our modern world has to offer.

I mentioned a moment ago the desire of frightened people to go back to the ways of their youth, when they were happy. How eager many men and women are to argue that what ails the world is that it has departed from the ways of the nineteenth century, when what they call “sound economic principles” were in command; how eager they are to show that what ails the world is just like what ailed it in 1873 and 1893 and 1907! Or, on the other hand, how eager some people in the other camp are to accept—hook, line and sinker, as a prescription for today—the ideas of a very brilliant economic thinker who lived in the early part of the era which is now over. I



spoke of the desire of frightened people to run away: do we not see people taking their possessions to Nassau, or Bermuda, to escape the taxes which are symptoms of our failure to solve the economic problem?

I note today among some of the best intelligences I know a sense of doom, a sense of impending disaster; the Spenglerian idea that we are on our way downhill has taken such possession of these people that he who utters a cheerful thought in their presence feels himself set down as a sentimentalist. And among the rank and file I note a disposition to irrationally emotional opinions on public matters, almost akin, sometimes, to the symptoms of paranoia.

This is not surprising. For we are battered daily by headlines which bring to us the disorders of the world. (I saw in a news story from Czechoslovakia the other day a sentence which might serve as a sort of *leitmotif* of our times, or at least of the contemporary journalistic picture of our times: it said that war in Europe had apparently "been averted for this weekend.") We note, perhaps, that our businesses don't make money as they used to, or that jobs aren't to be found where they used to be found, or that laws and taxes and unfamiliar ideas are encircling us in new and bewildering ways. And so in our confusion we are likely to think of ourselves as being persecuted or on the verge of persecution.

Now the trouble with witch-burnings and scapegoat-huntings and incantations and attempts to run back to one's youth, or to escape, is that they solve no problems. They merely give a sense of release to anxious people. Only through the use of intelligence can we find the way out.

I trust I am not so foolish as to imagine that the American people will ever turn completely rational. But

I think it is reasonable to say that the more men and women there are in this country who are willing to accept the fact that the problems which beset America today are not the problems of the nineteenth century, that we cannot go back, that this is a new situation that we are in; and the more people there are who are willing to work at seeking the facts of this new situation, examining them with all the disinterestedness of which they are capable, and who will not start marching or cheering or hating until they have come to reasonable conclusions from these facts—the more of these people there are, the easier it will be to keep the ship of state steady through good weather and bad.

The lessons for us here today seem to me reasonably clear. In all our thinking, talking, and acting on public problems we can try, in the first place, to take the wide view—to look beyond the particular difficulty which confronts us to the broader difficulty of which it is only a fragment: to look beyond our personal and local troubles to the national and international problems which help us to understand them. (I might add that as good a way as any to check up on the breadth of one's view is to question—for a moment at least—any policy one finds oneself favoring which would be to one's own immediate advantage or that of one's business or one's friends.)

And in the second place, we can apply to these questions, so far as we are able, the scientific method of thinking. When an automobile engine breaks down we do not fall into a panic, look for a villain, or prepare to fight somebody. But how many people are willing to examine an economic system dispassionately when the engine misfires? Here again I have a hint to pass on to you. It is easier to think scientifically if you are on your guard against regarding public affairs as a sort of game in which, once you have chosen your side, you can stop all



mental effort and just cheer for your team. I suggest that it is a good idea to avoid assuming that everything the president does must be right, or wrong (as the case may be); that everything that John L. Lewis says is right, or wrong (as the case may be); that everything Dorothy Thompson says is right, or wrong (as the case may be). The chances are that these people, like most of the people you know, are right on some things and wrong on others. It is not being scientific to take a 100% radical or 100% conservative attitude, no matter how furious the people who disagree with you may make you; the scientific attitude is discriminating. I am not arguing against working with a political party, or against enthusiasm; I am simply suggesting that among intelligent people they have their limits, and that skeptical and investigating minds are as valuable in public affairs as in engineering problems.

This college stands for the use of the intelligence. It tries to inculcate the habit of looking facts in the face and dealing with them scientifically. (No one, for instance, can see the investigations being made here in social studies without realizing this.) It tries to inculcate disinterestedness. It tries also to provide, through its training in the arts, the basis of such a valid and fruitful emotional life that its graduates will be truly integrated and liberated people, able to confront a new situation without going off the deep end, and able to face possible changes in the material circumstances of their lives with that equanimity which comes from having inner resources for the enjoyment of living. The things for which this college stands are very badly needed in the world today. I think we may reasonably hope that its graduates will not get the twentieth-century jitters, but will be factors for steadiness and level-headedness and intellectual inventiveness in facing the years to come.