

THE STATE OF THE UNION

BY ALBERT JAY NOCK

The Social Security Fad

WHEN I looked in at THE MERCURY's office the other day, the editor met me with what Artemus Ward called "a swinish expression onto his countenance", and asked if I would like to see just one single month's output of books on this fine new subject of Social Security. Well, I thought, since my job is to observe the state of the Union, I suppose I have to take the fat with the lean, so I said I would. There were thirteen of them, thirteen books on that one subject, all published in one month, and in that month there were twenty-six working days for printers, which means that one book on social security was published every forty-eight hours during that period. It looks like a record. I have heard lately that the publishing business is shot to rags, and the sight of that pile of books made me think that, if it is not, it ought to be.

One of the books is a satirical play, and three others deal with the subject in a more or less literary fashion, with no particular ax to grind, so we will count those out. The nine remaining are deadly serious. They are serious with all the dull, unimaginative, painstaking, statistical seriousness of the truly consecrated Uplifter, which makes the task of going through them a terrible business. The reader need not fear that I am setting out to review them, for I am not. Fortunately for me, all that sort of thing is in Mr. Stallings' department, and I have no notion of bargaining in on it. This avalanche of books, however, does show something significant

about the state of the Union, and that is what I wish to point out.

All these writers assume, in the first place, that Social Security is a proper concern of government. In the second place, they assume that the State (by which they mean whatever crew of jobholders is in office at the moment) has something more than a purely electioneering interest in it. Third, they assume that the State (again meaning the crew of jobholders aforesaid) may be trusted to administer a program of Social Security honestly, efficiently, and at least as cheaply as it could be administered by some extra-political or non-political method. Fourth, every plan they propose contemplates a distinct reduction of individual liberty, and tends to make the individual still more the State's chattel than he now is. Moreover, they all take for granted, as Mr. Mussolini does, that this submergence of the individual is right and proper, because the State (*i.e.*, the crew of jobholders) is an enlightened and purely social institution which is out for the greatest good to the greatest number, and has no other interest or set of interests at stake in submerging him.

The interesting thing about all these assumptions is the utterly naïve and matter-of-fact way by which they are made to appear. They are not discussed or argued, not even stated in set terms. They merely pervade and color the whole texture of the work, as ink pervades blotting-paper. The authors seem actually not to know that they are even debatable. They treat them

as the mathematician treats the axioms of geometry. Now, the point is that they would not do this if they had any doubt about their readers also accepting them in the same unquestioning way. When a mathematician tacitly assumes that the whole is equal to the sum of all its parts, he has no doubt that his assumption will be accepted without question as a self-evident truth; and that is the attitude of these authors in expounding their various doctrines of Social Security.

Here, then, is where we get a look at the state of the Union. If the people of this country really do agree with these assumptions and regard them as axiomatic, then the Union is in an extremely bad state, for each and all of them are thoroughly unsound. My impression is that the people do agree with them, and my earnest conviction is that if they do not wake up pretty promptly and see what sort of thing it is that they are agreeing with, they will land in as fine a mess as their European brethren are in, and for the same reason.

The legitimate concern of government is with two things only: freedom and justice. Its whole duty is summed up in safeguarding the liberties of the subject, and in making justice costless and easily accessible. The moment you go beyond this, the moment you make government responsible for Helping Business, for Redistributing Wealth, for Unemployment Relief, for Social Security, or for anything whatever but the discharge of those two functions, you change the basic character of government. That moment you convert it into an all-powerful machine for the distribution of economic advantage, an instrument which can be got hold of and used to help oneself and hurt somebody else. That moment, in short, government ceases to be a social institution and becomes an anti-social institution.

If government in America had attended strictly to its own business from the beginning, if it had concerned itself with freedom and justice and nothing else, we would not now be hearing a word about Social Security. All our present difficulties are due to its never having done that. On the contrary, it has progressively invaded and confiscated the liberties of the subject, and it has made its disregard of justice a byword throughout the world. From the beginning it has been a mere mechanism for the distribution of economic privilege through hiring out its taxing power for a political *quid pro quo* from whatsoever pressure-group bid highest. First, land-holders got a privilege; then industrialists; then money-lenders, speculators, shavers; latterly farmers, bonus-seekers, and the like; while four years ago Mr. Roosevelt completed the circle of privileged classes and mobilized what will in time, no doubt, turn out to be the most powerful pressure-group of all, by bringing in the hoboes. All this has confirmed the people in a settled belief that government is something to be run to and leaned on for economic coddling; and it is this belief that colors every page of these writers on Social Security.

II

It surely takes no great intelligence to perceive how this idea of the function of government would immediately bring forward a class of men who are nothing more nor less (and who regard themselves as nothing more nor less) than merchandisers of privilege. Such men naturally gravitate into politics, make themselves the nucleus of parties, and their recurrent party-contests, such as the one we are now witnessing, are merely contests for control and management of the huge tax-

ing machine. Hence the second assumption that our authors make — the assumption that they disinterestedly care two straws for Social Security — is seen at once to be puerile. Not being in politics for their health, these men allocate privilege where it will do them the most good. They are out for votes, in order to hold their jobs; then as an anchor to windward, they are out for patronage and for whatever perquisites can be conveniently picked up. If, therefore, the issuance of a privilege gives promise of a satisfactory return in votes, patronage, and perquisites, they will issue it; but if not, then not.

Everyone knows that this is so. Any issue of any newspaper presents abundant evidence that it is so, and it also presents evidence that both the paper and its readers know it is so. But there is a strict convention against naming the fact in plain terms, like the Victorian convention against naming certain parts and functions of the human body. When we name it at all, we call it by some euphemism like *Playing Politics*, instead of calling it damned thieving, blackguardly scoundrelism, which is precisely what it is. Nevertheless, convention or no convention, there the fact stands, just as legs were legs in Victoria's day, and we all know it, and in the light of this knowledge the second assumption of our authors shows itself to be pure silliness. Can anyone imagine any of the professional politicians who are to the front this summer — say Mr. Farley, say Mr. Roosevelt — looking for one moment at Social Security with a non-professional eye? If anyone can do this, he should be advised to capitalize his imagination in the motion-picture business, for it would make his everlasting fortune.

These same considerations also destroy our authors' third assumption, which is that State-managed Social Security would

be managed at least as honestly, efficiently, and cheaply as it would be under private management. Has anyone ever seen or heard of any State-managed enterprise which filled that bill? I doubt it. If the testimony of an unbroken record goes for anything, I think we may take it that State-managed Social Security would be made merely another snug nest for bureaucracy, favoritism, wastefulness, and graft; otherwise no politician could be got to touch it with a ten-foot pole — why should he? People who cherish any illusions on this point may be advised to compare the overhead on State-managed Relief with the overhead on privately-managed enterprises of the same kind. If they are still doubtful, and wish to press their investigation further, let them tackle the general question why a State-managed dollar never goes as far as a privately-managed dollar. Notoriously it never does, and there must be some reason why — well, what is the reason? Or, further, let them inquire into the circumstances that give rise to the formula known as Smoot's Law of Government, which is that the cost of government tends steadily to rise year by year, no matter which party is in power.

The fourth assumption is interesting because it marks our authors as simon-pure liberals. I have known many liberals, and I never yet knew one who was not keen for aggrandizing the power of the State, and for bringing the individual ever further and further under State control. It is instructive to compare the old-line Tory's respect for the liberties of the subject with that of the liberal. Was it the liberal Asquith, Grey, Lloyd-George and Co., who broke up the first draft of the Defense of the Realm Act? No, it was old Halsbury who got up and said that never as long as he lived would he stand by and see the fundamental rights of British subjects ab-

rogated; and if the Realm had to be defended that way, the Realm might go to pot. The diehard Tory had his faults, but he also had the fixed idea that some things simply are not done, that some respect is due to a principle, and that one must speak up for a principle even if one has to hold one's nose meanwhile.

I never saw or heard of a liberal who had any such idea as that, or who seemed to have any trouble about persuading himself that a little matter like the liberties of the subject might properly be confiscated in behalf of the Larger Good. Taking our Supreme Court as it stands, which group of justices would be naturally in favor of giving the citizen the largest margin of existence to dispose of as he durned pleases? Would it be the liberal justices, Stone, Brandeis, Cardozo? I doubt it. If my own constitutional liberties were at stake, I would say, give me *McReynolds et al.*, world without end. I have long thought that the professed liberal is the real collectivist, and the four years of Mr. Roosevelt's regime seem to have smoked him out into the open as such.

The long and short of it is that all this pother about Social Security is one of those recurrent moral epidemics that our country is continually breeding. Apparently our people can never be contented unless a

moral epidemic is running in double harness with a social epidemic like mah-jongg, midget golf, or bare legs. Hence at one time or another we get up a great furore about Abolitionism, Imperialism, Prohibition, the League of Nations — anything will do, and the sillier the better. Politicians appraise these outbreaks calmly for what they can get out of them, and trim their sails accordingly. Just now Social Security in its various forms, from Townsendism up and down, is heading the political best-seller list, and our politicians are promptly on hand to work it for all it is worth.

The mischief of such books as I have been describing is that they play straight into the politician's hand. A letter which I received this morning lays bare their root-vice very cleanly:

At present, all schemes seem bent on cajoling governments to ameliorate our predicament. Nowhere do men seem to understand that progress is made by those who go ahead with their views, with the aid of voluntary participants, rather in spite of governments than through them.

There you have it. If that is the case with our people, as these books show it undoubtedly is, I submit that the state of the Union is about as unpromising as imbecility can make it.



AMERICANA

CALIFORNIA

A FIT rival to Cecil DeMille is uncovered by the proprietors of the Carmel Theater:

WEAVER OF DREAMS

From the kings he borrows — and from dynasties — dipping into the coffers of the past for his materials. To the castle of a Saxon monarch he goes for staunchness and solidity, to the temple of Ilium for beauty, to be fashioned into forms of majesty and grace. A Grecian urn yields him a perfect line, a Pompeian frieze, perhaps, a rhythmic pattern. In a Byzantine seraglio or Mohammedan mosque, he may find his colors, and from the palace of a Chinese emperor take what he desires of richness and magnificence, of poetry and symmetry, of works of structural skill and exquisite craftsmanship, with which to materialize his vision. Then, with a genius that is all his own, he shapes it, out of his inner consciousness, conjuring it into the thing of co-ordinated beauty that stands forth, at last, an edifice. Thus does he create — the Weaver of Dreams, designer of this theater — A. A. Cantin, the Architect.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

A NEW DEAL senator stuns his colleagues by kicking over the pork barrel, as recounted by the *New York Times*:

Senator Minton of Indiana succeeded in persuading the Senate today to remove from its omnibus Flood Control Bill a \$2,540,000 project for drainage of the Kankakee River Basin. His action came while other members were clamoring to insert in the measure projects for the benefit of their individual districts.

A stunned silence descended on the chamber as the purport of Mr. Minton's amendment became clear. Then Senator Copeland, in charge of the bill as chairman

of the Commerce Committee, proposed that a special gold medal be awarded to Senator Minton in commemoration of the almost unprecedented occasion.

CONNECTICUT

THE perils of Yankee cooking are viewed philosophically by an enterprising advertiser in the *Norwich Morning Bulletin*:

PILLSBURY FAMOUS
PANCAKES
VERMONT MAPLE SYRUP
BAKED SAUSAGES
ROLLS — CAKE — COFFEE

THIRD BAPTIST CHURCH

TOMORROW

TUESDAY, MAY 26TH

Supper 30c — Children 20c

Served 5:30 to 7:30 P.M.

*This ad donated by C. A. Gager
Funeral Director*

ILLINOIS

THE wonders of spiritualism in the rising town of Dixon, as verified by the sober Associated Press:

Ghostly figures — a woman's head, an Indian head and an arrow — which Mrs. Tom McReynolds said appeared in an antique mirror, drew hundreds of visitors to her home today.

The figures, Mrs. McReynolds said, first were seen last Saturday when she polished the mirror and their clarity has been undiminished. As she drew a cloth across the glass, she said, a voice spoke her first name — "Flora".

"The woman's head," Mrs. McReynolds said today, "is a perfect likeness of my mother, who died June 24, 1931."