

THE STATE OF THE UNION

BY ALBERT JAY NOCK

The Difficulty of Thinking

MR. ERNEST BOYD's paper, printed elsewhere in this issue, should be read with the closest attention. It points to a structural weakness in human nature which has always existed, and which seems likely to exist forever. This one weakness accounts for every one of the mistakes and absurdities which men have committed in their efforts to create a stable society, and it is the only thing that will account for them. The dullest mind must sometimes wonder why the whole political world should be permitted to get itself in such a filthy mess as it is in at present. It seems inexplicable. Why does Fascism exist? Why is Communism? Why the New Deal? How can anyone explain such fantastic figures as Stalin, Hitler, Roosevelt, Mussolini?

The answer to all these questions is the same. These preposterous nightmares exist only because Nature has for some reason made it so easy for human beings to feel and to act, and at the same

time has made it so hard for them to think. There is no other reason. Nature has fitted us out with self-starting, automatic, high-powered machinery for emotion and action; while our machinery for thinking is at best low-powered, has to be laboriously cranked by hand, and must be watched and coaxed along all the time, or else it will run down at any moment, and stop.

There the fact is, and no one has ever been able to get around it. Without exception the human being has always found it easier to feel than to act, and both much easier than to think. Nature made him that way, and also gave him a strong tendency to follow the line of least resistance; and just there is where the poor devil of a human being has always run himself out of luck ever since the world began.

So, if one cares to take that view of it, one might conclude that Nature never intended man to be a social animal. Or, if she did, it certainly seems that she has

built his whole psychical structure wrong end to. It is impossible to guess what her idea was. A stable organization of society must be based on right thinking. There can be no doubt of that. A stable society obviously cannot be set up haphazard by trusting to luck—there are too many chances against it. Neither can it be set up to function by trial and error—it will not hold together long enough for that. Nor can it be set up on the basis of ignorant good feeling and unintelligent, well-meant action. Feeling and action are all very well in their place, but that place is under the strict control and direction of right thinking.

Moreover, in order to be stable, a society must not only be set up on a basis of initial right thinking, but it must be kept going under direction of *continuous right thinking*. An individual has to do more than start his life straight by right thinking and then leave it to itself; he has to keep it straight by right thinking as long as his life lasts. He meets new conditions and changing circumstances to the end of his days, and if he does not continually apply right thinking to them, his life goes off the rails. Likewise, human society cannot be stabilized once

and for all and then left to itself; it has to be kept stable, and nothing will do this but the continuous application of right thinking.

All this would be a simple matter if only Nature had made thinking easy for us instead of making it so very hard. If she had made thinking as easy as feeling or action, the vicious absurdities of Fascism, Communism, and “the corporative State” would be laughed off the face of the earth, along with the imbecile witch-mongering of the New Deal. Hitler would be peaceably working at his trade, Roosevelt pottering at some harmless trivial pursuit like stamp-collecting, Stalin probably tilling the soil and tending goats in his Transcaucasian home; all amidst stable communities of quiet, prosperous, and happy people. But if Nature ever had any such design as this, it would seem that she did not do her part. By making emotion and action so easy, and thinking so hard, she has brought about the exact opposite. Undeclared wars of aggression, rebellions, piracies, tyrannies, restraints, strikes, riots, production everywhere suffocating under ruinous taxation—such is the delightful order of our day!—and over all is the spirit of passion which knows no rational control,

and which vents itself in ignorant, bestial, and frenzied action.

An observer of the state of the Union, therefore, has to face the strange provision of Nature whereby not only are human beings so largely incapable of right thinking, but so many are incapable of thinking at all. They are capable of blazing emotion, with its corollary of dogged prejudice; they are capable of energetic action; but they cannot think. In this respect, too, the Union is worse off than many of its neighbors, because American education is notoriously not aimed at the cultivation of thought. Strictly speaking, it is not education, but training. It does a great deal for the "average student", for the motor-minded, for the incompetent, for the person who shows promise of being able to "do" something; but for the person who shows promise of some day being able to think, it does simply nothing.

One may reasonably doubt that there are now in the United States thirty thousand persons who are able to think closely, consecutively, and disinterestedly on any subject, or to carry out a line of thought — any line — to its full logical length. For my own part, I doubt there being half that many. So when Mr. Ernest Boyd

blames the Liberal intellectuals for being in full flight from reason, for demanding a united front in action, for being "afraid to think", one must wonder whether, after all, he is not suggesting something quite beyond their power. Mr. Boyd knows the Liberal intellectuals far better than I do, so I speak under correction, but what little I know certainly leads me to believe that they are appearing quite in character. None of their works and ways has ever associated them in my mind with any capacity whatever for thinking, but only with a great capacity for emotional ardor and a great urge for hand-over-head action in all circumstances, even the most serious.

When Mr. Roosevelt says he believes in "democracy and more democracy", he is talking sheer claptrap; nevertheless we may take him at his word, as we may when he offers lip-service to the ideal of "majority-rule". But the proper object of democracy and majority-rule or any other kind of rule, is the maintenance of a stable society, and a stable society cannot be maintained except by the prevalence of right thinking. Very well; in this Republic where everybody has a vote, and the majority is supposed to rule, what

kind of material have we which can presumably supply a right-thinking majority?

According to statistics cited by Dr. Alexis Carrel, there were in this country five years ago, in State institutions, 340,000 insane persons, 81,500 feeble-minded and epileptics, with 10,930 on parole. This takes no account of the number of cases in private institutions. The rate of increase is about 68,000 new cases annually. At this rate about 1,000,000 of the children now in our schools and colleges will be in asylums. There are now in the whole country 500,000 feeble-minded, and 400,000 children who have not intelligence enough to meet the very moderate requirements of our public schools. The deranged are a much more numerous group; neurosis and psychosis run the number of the afflicted far up into the hundreds of thousands. In New York State, one person out of every twenty-two, at some time in his life, and for a longer or shorter period, does a turn in the bughouse. In addition to all the foregoing, one of our most eminent alienists tells me that by the very lowest possible estimate, there are 1,500,000 drug addicts in the United States, and the same number of alcoholics.

These statistics are a good beginning — but they are only a beginning — for a person who is trying to get a little real light on Mr. Roosevelt's sublimated drivel about "democracy and more democracy", and his devotion to majority-rule. Taking these facts as a starter and going on to sift all the other evidence available, it is only a very intrepid person who would affirm that the average power of reflective thought in the United States is a hair's-breadth above the normal twelve-year-old level. For my own part, a careful study of the matter leads me to believe it is far and away below that; but unquestionably it cannot be higher.

Very well then, first, in order to have democracy and more democracy, you must first have a *demos*, and is a populace whose power of reflective thought stands at this level a *demos*? Clearly not. Mr. Roosevelt has no *demos*; he has merely an *ochlos* — for the Greeks had a name for it. That is to say, he has merely masses with infantile mentality, infantile sensitiveness to any stimulus which a demagogue may see fit to apply to their passions, and an infantile instinct for blind and violent action. Second, what likelihood is there that majority-rule

under these conditions will tend towards stabilizing our society? None whatever; the thing is simply impossible and fantastic. On the contrary, it tends towards just such a state of anarchy and confusion as it brought upon France in 1792—such a state as Mr. Roosevelt, Mr. Lewis, and their entourage are doing their best to bring upon this country within the next three years.

Furthermore, when one examines this majority and takes its measure, one has no trouble about seeing how little chance there is for the saving power of thought to make any headway whatever against its ignorant excesses. In the years before 1792, as my friend Mr. Hendrik van Loon has lately pointed out, there were men who could have saved France. Turgot could have done it, and so could Quesnay, the elder Mirabeau, Necker, or any one of a dozen others. But in the period 1789–1792, the power of reflective thought stood no more chance than it would stand today in a discussion with Mr. Roosevelt or Mr. Lewis, or in a memorial addressed to Congress. Some years ago the president of Columbia University said most truly that “thinking is one of the most unpopular amusements of the human race. Men

hate it largely because they cannot do it”. The masses resent it with the resentment that ill-bred children display against any appearance of superiority, and their leaders and representatives resent it because it interferes with what they want to do.

Consequently, what little power of reflective thought exists in the Union is pretty effectively sterilized. Suppose the whole force of it could by some sort of miracle be concentrated upon Washington, Wall Street, our captains of industry, organized labor, our newspapers, colleges, universities, pulpits, forums, yes, even our Liberal intellectuals—what then? Could it impress twenty-five persons out of the entire lot with the simple truth that America is now precisely where France was in the period 1789–1792, and that the American New Deal is headed straight for the point where the French New Deal of 1789 arrived in the days of the Terror? I greatly doubt it. Yet it remains true, as Bishop Butler said, that “things and actions are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be”.

In the face of Mr. Roosevelt’s rabble-rousing fustian about “democracy and more democracy” and his homage to majority-rule,

could it even impress twenty-five people with the plain common sense of the French painter, Horace Vernet, when he said that "before you can have an ideal republic you must have ideal republicans, and Nature cannot afford to fool away her most precious gifts on a lot of jack-leg lawyers and hobnail-booted riff-raff"? Again I doubt it. Yet it remains true that before you can have "democracy and more democracy" you must have democrats who can think, and Mr. Roosevelt's ideal of majority-rule is merely rule by a majority of bumptious and turbulent twelve-year-olds.

Still, ineffectual as it may be, the power of reflective thought

does exist, and those who have it are of all men the most to be envied, because they have the future with them — a very distant future, certainly, but it is theirs. For the present, too, while all about them are blindly following some dubious leadership and violently taking such sides as ignorance and prejudice dictate, they follow no one blindly and remain on the side of truth and fact, content to go fearlessly wherever reason leads them. In a sense, they are not particularly useful to their fellow-men, but they are as useful as circumstances allow them to be, and their only regret is that they cannot be more useful than they are.



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*The Art of Prophecy*¹

BY JOHN W. THOMASON, JR.

IT is nearly twenty years since the armies of the First World War went home, to enjoy the arts of peace and to take up the matter of pensions. They had settled war. There wouldn't be any more war.

Since then, hardly a season, and never a year, has passed without violent military episodes in some quarter of the world. Fighting has run in scale from small border skirmishes to major national efforts involving metropolitan armies. One need not search the annals to recall the protracted Polish struggles against the Red evangelists in the early 'Twenties; the Syrian troubles; and the Riffian wars that broke the back of Spanish monarchy and drew in, unusually, army corps of Frenchmen from France to reinforce the tough French Colonials. There was the debacle of the Greeks in Asia Minor, when Mustafa Kemal

was leading the Turk to his own again. In the depths of South America, Bolivia and Paraguay fought each other to exhaustion in little-regarded but exceedingly deadly and resolute battles. Throughout the period British regulars were steadily occupied on the Indian Northwest Frontier: I remember the report coming back to Peiping, a month or so after the Royal Scots were transferred to the Indian Station, how this chap and that one, fellows we played polo against, were lately killed in action. The American Marines have had battle casualties in several theaters. And Mussolini conquered Ethiopia, not scrupling to employ poison-gas against naked natives, the first time, I think, white men have done it.

China has been continuously in upheaval, and the present episode begins to look like a big war, the

¹ *The Struggle for the Pacific*, by Gregor Bienstock. \$4.00. Macmillan.
Europe in Arms, by Liddell Hart. \$2.50. Random House.
Poison in the Air, by Heinz Liepmann. \$2.50. Lippincott.