

EDITORIAL

Why Hold an Election in 1940?

THE November elections came and went on the customary schedule. They were introduced by the customary amount and kind of campaign-talk. They kept reporters, broadcasters, and editors busy for the customary length of time, and were run off about as quietly as usual, on the whole. They were also quite as barren of results as might be expected, proving nothing in particular; nor so far as we can see, have they made any significant change in the country's outlook for the future. Even from a partisan point of view they were indeterminate. The party in power can put up a pretty good case for calling them a victory, and so can the Republicans. So politically, it would seem that the country is not much forrader than it was before they were held, and as for all the good they did to the country's general condition, they might as well not have been held at all.

Such, at least, is our view. We are far from saying that "we planned it that way", and for the country's sake and our own we are sorry

enough that they went as they did. But as a matter of fact, the elections turned out in every essential respect just as we thought they would, and as three months ago we said they would. They left Roosevelt still the unfettered boss of these United States, which is the main thing, with every prospect of being able to keep the job as long as he wants to hold it. They left his bureaucracy as numerous and powerful as ever. They left his policies supreme. They left safe and sound his great new political technique of bribing the unemployed and intimidating the employed. They put up no substantial interference with his wholesale confiscations of the individual's rights and liberties. On the contrary, for pretty nearly the *n*th time it was demonstrated that the new political technique has maneuvered the electorate into the iron grip of Roosevelt's own personal Tammany; and surely an election which demonstrated nothing more than that was not worth holding.

Another election is coming on in 1940; its possibilities are already being discussed. We have a suggestion to make about it which may strike our readers as rather startling, but we make it in all good faith, and—if our readers will bear with us long enough to hear us through—we think we can put up a fair case for it. Our suggestion can probably be best introduced by the query: Why hold an election at all in 1940?

Consider the question first from the standpoint of economy. The country is very hard up, and holding an election, especially a Presidential election, is a frightfully expensive business. Electing Mr. Hoover is said to have cost \$2,000,000, which was thought to be quite a bit of money, but at that time we hadn't seen nothing yet in the way of campaign-expenses. No one had hit on the bright idea of touching the United States Treasury for a slush-fund; the \$2,000,000 was private money. Now, however, the cost of electing a President has run up from millions to billions; the last touch was for something around \$4,000,000,000, and no one can guess what the next will be. It is too much. The richest nation in the world can't begin to stand such a drain indefinitely; and yet if Pres-

idential elections are to go on at four-year intervals as heretofore, there is no other prospect in sight.

Then consider the matter from the standpoint of practical utility. In the first place, as everyone knows, under our vaunted republican system there is no beating a party in power which has an unlimited war-chest. The last Presidential election proved that. It is a sorry truth, and we are as bitterly ashamed of it as anybody can be, but it is mere idleness to break one's head against a fact. So long as the present Administration wishes to stay in power, and so long as the Treasury is able to provide the funds, just so long the present Administration is unbeatable. The same would be true of any other party in power employing the same technique. We repeat, everyone knows this most discreditable fact to be a fact, and anyone who had the sense he was born with would accept it as such, distasteful though it be. Why, then, should the country have its nose rubbed in the mess of another election merely to demonstrate something which everybody already knows is so?

Then again, consider the matter from the standpoint of any available alternative. Suppose the impossible should happen, and

the present Administration were turned out, just what could be got in its place that would be any better? Remember, the preponderant mass of proletarian voting-power, self-conscious and loosely-but-sufficiently organized, would still be where it now is; the Treasury would be where it is, and the new political technique of keeping the one in hand by means of the other would still be workable. Well, then, obviously, if you put in the present crop of Republicans, you would simply be getting the New Deal all over again, perhaps with added features which might be even worse. If you put in the fascists or communists, the result would be the same, plus a lot of beastly rows kicked up by the unreconciled "counter-revolutionaries", and animated by machine-gunning, purges, herdings into concentration-camps, and similar doings in a prolonged proletarian Walpurgis-night. Put in the Townsendites, thirty-a-weekers, Epics, and such-like, and you know for sure that they would run the country into chaos even faster than the present Administration is doing. So the choice on the whole seems a poor one — why go to the trouble and enormous expense of making any choice?

Our idea would be for Roosevelt

to let business limp along on three legs and gradually slow down "recovery" until the Spring of 1940; and then, when people were really discouraged, noisy, and desperate, for him to proclaim an "emergency" and simply take over. He would abolish the Constitution, dissolve Congress, re-organize the Federal courts, and thenceforth run the country openly and above-board as a one-man show.

All things considered, we think that this would be the best thing Roosevelt could do. It would certainly give the country a few years of blessed relief from political squabbles and skulduggery, and if the man chose to behave himself with a proper sense of his opportunities, it might be the cheapest and easiest way of getting the nation on its feet once more. His personal popularity is so great that we are pretty sure that, after another two years of depression, anxiety, and discouragement (and Mr. Varney showed in the November issue of *THE MERCURY* how easily this can be managed), the people would stand for it. We confess that we ourselves don't like the idea — it isn't our style — and if such a thing came to pass we would take a regretful leave of our readers and "go back where we came from", as good hundred-per-centers are al-

ways advising malcontents to do. But we are now talking about what seems best for the country, not about what suits us best; and since the choice of alternatives is so absurdly unpromising, any way you look at it, we think this idea of ours is about the best chance that the poor old country has.

II

This no-election idea was suggested to us by a very interesting historical parallel which Roosevelt might like to consider, if he has not done so already. It was pulled off in France nearly a century ago, and so successfully that the French got eighteen years of roaring prosperity out of it, which was not so bad. One can easily see now how it might have been managed even better, and consequently how it could be managed much better here; but even so, if it worked only as well here as it did there, it might be worth a try.

In 1848 the French fired out a perfectly good king for no compelling reason that anybody could discover, and set up for the fourth time a sort of jack-leg republic.¹

¹ It is known as the Second Republic, but between 1793 and 1799 there were three nominally republican governments. From 1789 to the present time, France has lived through three monarchies, two empires (three, if you count the Hundred Days), three republics

Presidential timber was as scarce as it is in America today, and the choice fell on a dark-horse candidate, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. His main assets were that he was his uncle's nephew and that otherwise nobody knew much about him. The two opposing candidates were impossible, so he won in a landslide, by more than twice as many votes as the other two put together. He was elected for four years, like our Presidents, but unlike them he could not succeed himself; he would be out in 1852.

Louis was a strange character — reticent, silent, regarded as a harmless visionary, but with a considerable gift for friendship. Besides being a very able man, he had interesting personal qualities. He never forgot a favor, never lost the chance to do somebody a good turn, never was disloyal to a friend, never was mean or small-minded, and never but twice in his whole career did he show himself vindictive or ungenerous on personal grounds — he exiled the sculptor David d'Angers, and would not invite Lady Jersey to the Tuileries because she had snubbed him in his

(five, if you count the Directory and the Consulate), and two Communes. Why should Americans fuss about fascism, communism, or a few constitutional changes now and then? If France could stand all that and still survive, probably America could worry through a political shift or two.

days of poverty and banishment in London. The most unfriendly critics of his regime concede that his devotion to the cause of the common people was sincere, and that he had a noble ambition to lighten the weight of their wretchedness.

He did not like the prospect of losing his job in 1852 — naturally, no job-holder ever does — and there was no doubt about his having had a “mandate” from the people in 1848, as impressive as Roosevelt’s in 1932. He knew if he did go out he would leave the country butchered to make a hoodlum-holiday in a free-for-all among contending parties of royalists, republicans, and socialists. He may have thought — he said he did, and may actually have done so — that he was the one man to stand between France and chaos; that if he could keep his job with enough power to carry out his intentions, he would give the country a much longer season of tranquillity and prosperity than it could otherwise have; which in fact he did.

The Constitution and the General Assembly, however, stood in his way; exactly, for example, as our Constitution and Congress has stood in the way of some of Roosevelt’s designs. So Louis-Napoléon and his inner circle did in 1851

what we are suggesting Roosevelt might do in 1940. They organized a *coup d’état*, dissolved the General Assembly, putting most of them in jail, exiled or jailed all political opposition, superseded the Constitution, and continued Louis-Napoléon’s Presidency for a term of ten years. They submitted the matter to a *pro forma* election, and got it ratified by about 7,500,000 votes against 650,000. A year later, in 1852, they converted France into an empire, with Louis-Napoléon as Emperor, and took another plebiscite which ratified their action by an even larger score, 7,824,000 to 253,000. No doubt these elections had a Hitlerian and Rooseveltian tinge to them, but like our elections, they faithfully went through the motions of conforming to the republican principle, and there the figures are. Louis-Napoléon always declared himself a good republican, even as an emperor; nowadays he would have styled himself a democrat, as Roosevelt does — the terms are interchangeable in common use, apparently.

We are not suggesting that either in 1940 or ever Roosevelt should declare this country an empire, with himself as emperor. In the first place, it would be unnecessary because, as we have often pointed

out, America's actual political structure is already built on an imperial model. Moreover, changing the American system's name would be bad judgment because Americans, like children everywhere, are always more concerned with packaging than they are with a product; they will take any swindling nostrum in the political line if it is labeled to suit them, preferably if labeled "democratic". There is no use in going against this infantile peculiarity, especially when nothing substantial is to be gained by doing so.

But short of this, we are all for Louis-Napoléon's program, even though we don't like it. We see it as a sort of Hobson's choice, and we hope we shall always be patriotic enough to sink our personal preferences for the country's good. One or two features of the program, indeed, strike us favorably. Jailing Congressmen, for example; we are strong for that, and also for the silencing and dispersion of those elements in our society which have come to be a common nuisance, such as uplifters, do-gooders, quasi-patriotic associations, economic planners, and such-like. Louis-Napoléon made short work of clamorous nonentities of this kind, thereby earning our profound regard.

One other feature of his regime seems to us altogether admirable: we refer to the press-laws. There was no formal censorship, but the press-laws were so framed that any mention of public affairs, foreign or domestic, was distinctly dangerous. You were every bit as likely to get into trouble if you praised the regime as if you dispraised it. Hence editors took no chances; they cut out all politics and public affairs, lock, stock, and barrel, and then had to look around for other interesting matter to fill their space; and the consequence was that France has never had such good newspapers, either before that period or since. In brief, the press-laws were the most civilizing measure promulgated by the Second Empire. If Roosevelt copies them and enforces them strictly throughout his ten-year term, we believe the United States will see the faint dawn of its first chance of ever becoming a civilized country. We earnestly recommend the matter to the President's attention.

No election in 1940; no more political diatribes in the *New Masses*, the *Nation*, and *THE MERCURY*; plenty of wide, spacious boulevards in New York City; and Empress Eugenie (Eleanor) hats for women. What could be sweeter?

THE OTHER SIDE

This department presents the views of some of those who most sharply disagree with THE MERCURY's editorial policy.

EPISTLE TO THE RIGHT

BY MAX LERNER

I ASSUME that there is still time in America to make a plea, even to the embittered Right, for ordinary social decency in the years that lie ahead of us. The fact that THE AMERICAN MERCURY has through this Department opened by ever-so-slender a crack the door leading out of the dark chamber of its thought may be an item of evidence that Americans far to the right of center still harbor a faint glimmer of light.

If so it would be a solitary glimmer in a world that seems intent on a return to the cave. The Nazi triumphs in Europe have sent that continent hurtling back to a medieval social system and a paleolithic code of honor in the midst of a Twentieth Century technology. The result in America has been to leave those on the Right in an uncomfortable position. Except for a few extremists, they can-

not help recoiling at the spectacle of terror and death and oppression worse than death — of a movement that has come into power on the wave of nationalist and racist hysteria, that makes a cynical cult of lies and brutality, that cracks the whip of terror over a majority of even the capitalists themselves, that equips itself with the total State force and proceeds to evoke from men their worst sadisms and stamp out everything they have in their more lucid moments held dear. And yet, for all this recoil, the spectacle retains its fascination for those on the Right. The whole logic of their position is an equivocal one. They have not decided yet what weapons they are willing to use or how far they are willing to go with them.

Some have, of course, decided. There are undoubtedly a number of capitalists and a group of mid-