

# THE STATE OF THE UNION

BY ALBERT JAY NOCK

## *College Men and the State*

IN A recent issue of *Harper's*, John Chamberlain wrote, "An academic scout tells me that the youngest generation of college radicals is anarchistic and anti-State in its general outlook. Joe Stalin and Leon Trotsky are ceasing to exercise their old lure." This strikes me as the most important piece of political news that I have read in many years. If the scout is right, it is a sure sign that spring has come. Even if he is not exactly right, he has evidently seen something which shows that spring is on its way. In the last twenty-five years of steady winter weather it has often been hard to remember that spring always has come, and therefore is likely to come again. If this scout has actually seen a crocus or two pushing up, it is no more than you might expect.

The anti-State reaction would be perfectly natural to fresh minds which have not as yet been over-stuffed with nonsense and addled by false hopes. Looking at the performance government has been putting on the world's stage for

twenty-five years, they would naturally call it a middling rotten show. Nowhere is there any choice of acts or actors; the whole thing is an all-round flop. Acts and actors all look alike — all bad. The French and German shows are as smelly as the American, English, Russian, Italian, or any other show now before the public, no matter what the press-agents say. The handbills and posters are got up in flaming style, but the show is the same old kind of hokum done by the same old hams and barnstormers. This being so, the natural reaction is to tell the stage-manager to get the hook.

Unless I am much mistaken, also, the "youngest generation" is not looking at all this from the standpoint of "ideology" or of morals, but from the standpoint of results. Ideologies and morals are all right on the posters, but the show is what interests them, and the show just isn't there. Posters don't get results, and results are what count. In other words, I should not be surprised if the youngest generation were taking a realistic view

of politics. They are probably looking at government simply as a gadget, and deciding that the trouble with it is nothing but the old notorious trouble with gadgets — which is that they mostly don't work. The scout's young men may be taking the practical, hard-boiled view that government is a gadget which is meant to work for the good of society while you sleep, and is not doing it. This is a good sound view.

Looking at government as a gadget, here are a few questions which come up. I recommend them to Mr. Chamberlain's youngest generation of college radicals, hoping they will thresh them out as thoroughly as they can. First, then, since the governmental gadget is supposed to work for the good of society, how can it best do that?

Some say by protecting the country from invasion, and by protecting the individual and his property against assault and molestation. Nothing but that. After that, government should let society strictly alone to settle its messes as best it can, by its own co-operative efforts in accordance with the operation of natural law. It should also let the individual citizen strictly alone to deal with his own private messes in like fashion. It should interfere with the individ-

ual only for acts which lawyers call *malum in se* — acts which are branded as criminal by what the Scotch philosophers called "the common sense of mankind," such as murder, assault, fraud, theft, arson. It should do nothing about the *malum prohibitum*, nothing about acts concerning which the common sense of mankind is divided, such as selling whiskey, possessing gold, or growing potatoes in one's garden. Under this theory of social good, in fact, the *malum prohibitum* would not exist; there would be no such thing as a *malum prohibitum*.

Another school of thought holds that government should do everything for society which it can do easier and quicker than society can do for itself. Natural law is too slow. Evolutionary processes take too long and involve too much inconvenience and suffering. If society gets in a mess, government can pull it out easier and quicker than society can work itself out. Hence it should. Again, government can make easy short-cuts to many good things which otherwise society could get only by long and painful effort. Hence it should. Government, with its privileged position, immense resources, and close organization, can do almost everything for society — some say

everything — easier and quicker than society itself can do. Hence it should.

The question, then, is whether it is better to have as little government as possible, or as much. What are the pros and cons of this? Natural law works slowly, no doubt, but on the other hand, when it settles a mess, that mess is settled right, and settled forever, which the quick and easy method of governmental interference seldom does. While natural law is settling a mess, it does not breed more and worse messes — all kinds of unsuspected messes — which the quick and easy method usually does. Trusting to natural law means facing a great deal of trouble and suffering which seems unnecessary, but on the other hand, trusting to governmental interference to escape these evils usually means laying up much more pain and trouble for the future. There is plenty of experience to show that government's quick and easy interferences for the present well-being of society are practically certain to insure its future ill-being.

Between these two theories of what government can best do for society's good, which is the one to choose? A third school of thought says to choose neither, but compromise between the two; and

since this school includes pretty nearly everybody, it has always carried the day.

So let us examine the position of this third school and ask a few more exploratory questions. Should government run the post office or leave it to private enterprise? Should it issue currency, standardize weights and measures, fix tariffs, give franchises, land-grants, subsidies? If we can say "Yes," then should government control the practice of banking, medicine, surgery, dentistry, agriculture? If we say "Yes," then should it administer charity, provide education, maintain schools and colleges? Should it concede that the State owes everybody a living, and proceed accordingly? Should it take on a full program of "social legislation," with housing, pensions, doles, and all other measures of "social security?" Finally, should it take complete control and direction of all social and individual activities?

The question is obviously where your compromise is going to stop, and why it should stop at one point in this progression rather than at some other point. The answer must obviously be made from the long-time point of view. Will society be better served *in the long run* if you stop at this point rather than at

that point? If you stop here rather than there, are you taking care of society's proximately-good at the expense of its ultimately-good? Admitting, for example, that if you let government "help business" you do something for society's present well-being, yet you at once put it in the position of an auctioneer, throw open the way for pressure-groups, and thus directly bring about a monstrously disproportionate state of permanent ill-being. If you let government administer charity, you may keep society out of a painful temporary mess, but as we are now seeing, the permanent political and social consequences make up an extortionately high price to pay for the good you do.

Again, can you be sure that you could make any compromise stop where you want it to stop? This question will bear a great deal of probing. Why should conceding a new function to government always be like starting a snowball down hill? Why should government always be reaching out for new powers and functions, always consolidating what it gets, never giving up any except under life-and-death pressure? Why should it seek always to aggrandize itself, never be content with the importance assigned it? If its function is

to serve society, why does it always seek to graduate out of the status of a servant and become society's master? Is it in the nature of any compromise you could possibly make, that this should be so — that if you give government an inch it will take an ell?

## II

I suggest that Mr. Chamberlain's young men go through these questions with a fine-tooth comb and mull them over thoroughly, and then decide whether any compromise between the two schools of thought is practicable. If they do this, I think it may help them to clarify their anti-State outlook. They should be able to turn up all the books they need out of their college libraries. Statist literature of all kinds — communist, fascist, totalitarian, or what-not — is lying about so thick everywhere that there is no need to recommend any of it by name — one can't miss it, and can't very well go wrong. Literature of the opposing school is scarce and harder to find. It is headed by Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics* and his essays called *The Man Versus the State*. Compromise-literature is plentiful; probably Professor Laski's *The State in Theory and Practice* would do well to start.

I take it that these young men are open to suggestions which may help them to interpret their own experience and observations. Everywhere they are seeing society go down hill pretty fast. In their own country they see that decent Americans are all poorer, more discouraged, harassed, and unhappy than they were ten years ago. They see the way of life made unnecessarily hard by the very agency which is supposed to make it easier, and by that agency alone. Hence most naturally they are feeling, as the Declaration puts it, that when government makes such a dreadful botch of its business, "it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

Precisely so — and these young men are those who will have a hand in the forthcoming business of altering or abolishing, of making a new start. Therefore it is important that they should make up their minds on what "such principles" are. They see that totalitarian principles are not the thing; they

see that compromise principles are not the thing either — they are distinctly not delivering the goods. They see that in the countries where compromise principles have been longest in force and most thoroughly worked out, they seem to deliver less goods than in countries where they are relatively new. The third set of principles has not yet been tried, so experience can say nothing about it.

In their present frame of mind, it seems that the thing for these young men to do is to look into the three sets of principles which I have mentioned — the individualist set, the Statist set, and the compromise set. My questions may be of some help to them in this; they were meant to be, and I hope will be.

I suggest that the young men read up carefully on all three sets of principles, talk them over thoroughly among themselves, and thus get a provisional idea of the scheme of governmental organization which "to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness." If their idea is sound and workable, it will come in uncommonly handy someday, and the sooner they get it put together, the better.



# POETRY

## DECORATION DAY

BY LOUIS STODDARD

**I**F we could speak today to all our dead  
these are the bitter words we must have said:

Here, soldier, lilacs to recall the beauty  
of lanes you left behind in name of duty,  
and slender tulips from a sunlit bed,  
warmer than the one that rests your head;  
they are yours, sailor, for your memory,  
to help you to recall the sparkling sea,  
the funnels swinging and the evening star;  
these things were yours but they no longer are.  
How well the hills have kept their old contours,  
the softly-lighted slopes where evening pours  
night from a generous cup of days and nights  
and the untroubled stars put forth their lights.

Remember the world? How bright it was with color?  
Flowers roof your dark and narrow cellar.

## THESE DARK HILLS

BY JESSE STUART

**A**s oaks that root deep in Kentucky earth  
And these eternal juts of rock that stand,  
I stand with these dark hills that gave me birth  
With plow and hoe and slopes of sedge-grass land.  
Flesh in my body and blood in my veins