

THE VETERANS ORGANIZATIONS

BY A. VICTOR LASKY

WITH twelve million potential new memberships at stake, the veterans organizations are engaged in the biggest competitive recruiting campaign in the nation's history. The old established groups of World War I are easily holding their numerical supremacy. Meanwhile new groups mushroom up by the dozen, most of them seeking members on the basis of particular wartime affiliations. There are numerous divisional associations; organizations for the blind; for holders of the Purple Heart; for Catholics and for Jews; for Negroes; for Greek-, Polish- and Italian-Americans. They represent all shades of political color: conservative and liberal, communist and socialist, and there are some with definitely fascist backgrounds.

Most of the new groups will not be with us long. Their chief hurdle is financial, a good many not being able to find the money even to keep a small office going after a short time. The writer has on file information on more than a hundred would-be organizations which were set up and abandoned within the past two years. One of

them — not by any means typical — was the American Order of Patriots, an outfit apparently patterned on the Ku Klux Klan, with headquarters at Houston, Texas. It was directed by a "Major" Benjamin C. Richards, Jr. The Order was dissolved within two months of its founding, after someone ran off with the funds.

While new groups come and go, the organizations set up after World War I are busily signing up the veterans of World War II. At the moment, the American Legion is leading the field (but not by a very big margin) even though the Veterans of Foreign Wars was the first to recognize the membership possibilities offered by the new Army and got to work as early as 1942. Soldiers who fought on Bataan received VFW propaganda material while the Japs were pushing through their lines. Because the VFW permitted men to join while still in the service, it got a head start on the Legion, which did not adopt this policy until 1945.

The Legion has become deadly serious about recruiting, as was made obvious at its Chicago convention last

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year. There was little of the boisterous horseplay which in former years used to drive local citizens out of town.

How best to enroll the new veteran was the important topic of discussion. Speaker after speaker stressed the belief that the Legion could look forward to still another generation of useful activity, and that this could best be accomplished by making the Legion the organization of the new veteran. There was a mass induction of several hundred new members. Edward N. Scheiberling, the retiring national commander, after referring to the vast properties the organization possessed, told them, "You can take over the Legion and run it."

The Legion, well established financially and politically, points out it can help the young man just out of service: for example, it can fix him up with a nice loan under the "GI Bill of Rights," for the passage of which, incidentally, the Legion takes sole credit. With a post in nearly every whistle stop, the Legion has another great advantage: when the veteran returns to his small town, the local post is able to see to it that he's greeted like a returning hero — by the American Legion.

Such tactics have paid off well. The Legion now claims a membership of 2,500,000, of which 1,500,000 are said to be men and women of World War II. There is no way of checking this claim, but it is fairly certain that the Legion has succeeded in attracting the bulk of those who have joined any veterans group.

The Legion was conceived in 1919 in Paris by a group of officers which included the late Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. It has always had War Department approval. For years it was the power behind the Veterans Administration. During the twenties the Legion lobbied for a bonus for the ex-doughboys, finally succeeding after a hectic "march on Washington." During the thirties the Legion worked at a campaign to "Americanize" the American people. Millions of dollars were poured into the Legion's Americanization Committee, headed by the late Homer Chaillaux, whose main claim to fame was his talent for ferreting out so-called "un-American" textbooks to be placed on a banned list. The irresponsibility of the Americanization Committee's anti-communist crusade has given way in later years to a more discriminating approach. The department, still a money-eater, now has leaders who can distinguish between a Russia-firster and a Norman Thomas disciple.

Almost as conservative as the Legion, but without the Legion's big-time connections, is the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The VFW prides itself on being a more "exclusive" organization because, unlike the Legion, it accepts only men who have seen service overseas. It now boasts some 1,600,000 members of whom 1,300,000 fought in World War II. Here again, there is no way of checking the accuracy of membership figures. Arguing that overseas veterans deserve higher remuneration than those who

"sat out the war" in the United States, the VFW is currently boosting a bonus bill which would favor the overseas veteran.

Actually the VFW works hand-in-glove with the Legion. In general, the two stand for the same things, and they have issued joint statements endorsing compulsory military training for the nation's youth, opposing immigration and so on.

Another established group which, with the VFW and the Legion, makes up the "Big Three" of veterans groups, is the Disabled American Veterans, which claims a membership of 100,000, more than half World War II veterans. Like its competitors, DAV is campaigning hard; its publicity is being handled by a high-powered Chicago firm. It isn't necessary to be a battlefield casualty to join DAV. Any "service-connected disability"—and that includes, for example, rheumatism—means eligibility. The writer knows of one ex-GI who had been invited to join on the basis of a wrist fractured while in service. It was in good shape again at the time of the invitation.

Another established, but less known, organization which seeks to aid the disabled is the Military Order of the Purple Heart, which, as its name indicates, is open only to those who have been awarded the Purple Heart.

To handle the special problems of blinded veterans whether of World War I or II, the Blinded Veterans Association was formed, with headquarters at Avon, Connecticut. Ray-

mond Frey, its president, says his organization hopes to convince the public that sightless men can be useful on many jobs. The organization also acts as a clearing house for jobs suitable for blind veterans.

Some mention must also be made of the Army and Navy Union, today the oldest active organization for veterans. It was founded in 1886, and takes in veterans from all wars. It functions chiefly as a fraternal organization; its political orientation is conservative.

II

The new veterans organization believed to be the most powerful is the American Veterans of World War II, better known as Amvets. With an estimated 90,000 members, Amvets is generally considered a junior American Legion. It has a similar setup with national and state commanders. Post meetings are conducted in semi-military fashion.

Amvets represents a consolidation of a dozen small groups which combined in December, 1944 at Kansas City, Missouri. One of the organizers was a retired brigadier general, H. C. Holdridge, who helped write the organization's statement calling for "a world that will guarantee jobs and security for all our returning veterans and for all America's men and women able and willing to work." The first year of Amvets' existence is characterized in its own literature as "a tough one . . . marked by many

organizational headaches." Some indication of what these headaches were can be found in a confidential report to members of the organization's national executive committee, signed by Jack W. Hardy, its national commander: "When I learned at Chicago of the confusion that existed within the organization," Hardy says, "the negligence with which its affairs had been handled, the influence of complete 'outsiders' who had a direct financial interest in Amvets, the lack of coordination between officers, the bungling and complete mess into which its affairs had degenerated, I wondered if it was worth the effort." He went on to discuss the various arrangements entered into by certain of Amvets officers "relating to the raising of money, publishing papers, making Amvet insignia. . . ."

Other headaches faced by the organization were controversial issues on politics and labor which the national office consistently dodged. The national officers felt that to take a stand on such matters would only alienate prospective members. But they did come to the fore at Amvets' 1945 national convention in Chicago which was attended by 300 delegates who got down to business at once. A resolution opposing application of the closed-shop principle to veterans was voted down after heated debate. Thereupon the Texas delegation charged that the convention was dominated by "radical elements." Holdridge, in turn, assailed the dele-

gates for refusing to accept what he called "a more positive program" on social questions, and announced his resignation.

Amvets' leadership does not as yet know what it wants except that it wants to enroll as many members as possible. In various localities throughout the country it is busy raising funds to be used to train future leaders of the organization.

Soon after Holdridge resigned from Amvets, he associated himself with a group called the Veterans League of America. The League is a small organization with 10,000 members at most, and is concentrated in New York. It accepts Merchant Marine veterans as well as those who served in the regular armed forces. The League is dominated by socialists of the Norman Thomas variety. Holdridge himself is a socialist, which makes him a rare graduate of West Point. As legislative adviser of the League, he has appeared before several congressional committees, and has bitterly castigated the Army judicial system and the West Point educational system which, he argues, endeavors to perpetuate "the Army caste system, class consciousness and class barriers."

The League's program brings it close to the American Veterans Committee, but with one big difference: the League draws a sharp line against admission of communists.

The American Veterans Committee is the organization receiving the lion's share of publicity these days.

It is the second most powerful group to come from the ranks of World War II servicemen. On the communist question the organization officially is equivocal. As Charles Bolte, the AVC national chairman, put it to the writer: "We don't like the communists. We don't want them in our organization. But we can't keep them out if they want to join. For that matter anyone who subscribes to our statement of principles is allowed to sign up."

The statement to which Bolte referred was an outline of what AVC stands for: United States participation in the United Nations, jobs for all veterans "under a system of private enterprise," and social and economic measures which will remove the causes of war. Today, with its 60,000 members, the AVC is a far cry from the organization of four years ago. Then it amounted to a group of widely-scattered servicemen writing each other round-robin letters discussing the need for a "liberal" veterans organization to combat the "reactionary" American Legion. Bolte, who had fought with the British and had lost a leg at El Alamein, decided with several others in 1943 that the time was ripe for such an organization, one that would be the complete antithesis of the Legion.

The AVC's original program was best expressed in Bolte's slogan: "Citizens first, veterans second." Bolte believed that jobs were more important than bonuses to help along the veterans' integration into the com-

munity. The AVC permits none of the semi-military procedures characteristic of other veterans groups. It is conducted in strictly civilian fashion, no saluting and no flag waving. Local groups are called chapters instead of posts. Many well-knowns are in its ranks, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., chairman of its housing committee; Bill Mauldin, the cartoonist; Ronald Reagan and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., the actors; Audie L. Murphy, holder of the Congressional Medal of Honor; and Oren Root, Jr., Willkie's aide in 1940.

As an organization that allows more freedom of expression to its membership than other veterans groups, AVC would, at first glance, appear an easy target for communist penetration. Strangely enough, it was unmolested until recently. At first the Veterans Department of the Communist party strongly opposed AVC and told all good comrades to join the Legion. Said the *Daily Worker*: "We communist veterans disagree with Mr. Bolte's deprecation of the Legion. . . . We communists strive for the greatest unity of veterans which at present finds expression by going into the major established veterans organizations. The Legion is growing and all encouragement should be given it. . . ." So the communist veterans proceeded openly to approach the Legion while the Legion's headquarters sent a warning letter to all posts to be on the lookout and urged the exclusion of communists.

In April, the communist position on AVC was suddenly altered, and it was decided to move into the AVC. Within weeks, at AVC meetings in New York charges began to be heard that the AVC leadership consisted of "red baiters" attempting to keep out veterans who were members of the Communist party. So far the organization has successfully withstood the communist onslaught. National interest was drawn to the AVC convention held in June at Des Moines, where the communists made a concerted effort to move into the leadership. They failed utterly, not being able even to win election to a vice-presidency for one of their candidates. The convention was in other ways a good indication of the road the AVC hopes to travel. Among other things, it spoke up against Jim-Crowism, and dramatically got action against a restaurant which refused to serve several Negro delegates; it endorsed international cooperation; and most important in the domestic field, it took a firm stand against a national veterans' bonus.

Bolte and his co-leaders hope to keep the communist issue more or less dormant until they have enrolled a million members. Currently they are conducting a campaign to raise \$1,000,000 for this purpose.

Veterans groups with membership qualifications based on racial or religious backgrounds include the Catholic War Veterans and the Jewish War Veterans of the United States. Both groups exist "to meet

special problems not common to all veterans," their spokesmen explain.

Within the Jewish community objections have lately been raised to JWV for the first time in its fifty-two years. A group of chaplains meeting under the auspices of the Reconstructionist Foundation, a reformed religious group, recently put on record their objection to it as a sectarian group, arguing that other veterans organizations are adequate to meet the needs of all veterans, regardless of race or creed. The mere existence of the organization is an argument refuting anti-Semitic slanders, JWV leaders assert in reply to criticism of this kind, because "JWV posts, participating as units in public celebrations, patriotic exercises, national holiday observances, are a constant reminder of the loyal and heroic rôle played by Jewish men in the defense of our country."

The United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, organized not long ago in Chicago, hopes to recruit "the nation's nearly 1,000,000 Negro veterans of World War II . . . fast becoming the forgotten men of America's program of reconversion to peace. The Negro veteran of this war is, as a result of his war experiences, an awakened, articulate being. He is determined to secure the things for which he fought and to enjoy without reservation the benefits of democracy which he helped defend." The organizing convention of this new group was attended by a number of white delegates representing such organiza-

tions as the International Workers' Order, the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Communist party.

III

No Protestant organizations comparable to the Catholic and Jewish groups exist. There is a group calling itself the Protestant War Veterans of America, but it has no connection with any Protestant denomination. It is headed by Edward James Smythe, a defendant in the 1944 sedition trials, and accepts only "white gentiles of the Protestant faith." Anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic and anti-Negro, the organization's aim is to "protect the Protestant majority from the communist minority," by "counterrevolution" if necessary. It is a one-man organization and dormant at present.

Much more active in behalf of domestic fascism is the so-called Christian Veterans of America, headed by Frederick Kister, a thirty-one-year-old Chicago protégé of Gerald L. K. Smith. This organization is part of Smith's periphery of nationalist, America-First organizations. From what this writer saw at a recent dinner given by the Christian Veterans in honor of Arthur Terminiello, the suspended priest who is chaplain of the group, this seems to be an organization with few veterans in it.

But the group's importance should not be underestimated. Smith is undoubtedly aware of the possibilities

inherent in the nation's youth, especially if there is a depression with consequent social dislocations. He said several years ago that his "time will come in the postwar period — in the election of 1948. The candidate will not be myself. He will be a young veteran of this war. But, I'll be behind him. If business conditions are bad with inflation, widespread unemployment and farm foreclosures, then my candidate will be elected and the extreme nationalists will come to power."

The first veterans group Smith organized was the Nationalist Veterans of World War II, headed by George Vose. As it later turned out, Vose was indeed a veteran but one who had been court-martialed on charges of selling passes to soldiers in his company and also for disposing of government property. Smith dropped him and then bound Kister, who advocates a bonus of \$2500 for every veteran, the "destruction of communism" and America First.

There are other veterans groups organized for reactionary aims, but most of them operate at cross purposes, making for confusion and rivalry among themselves. Joe McWilliams, the former Yorkville "fuehrer," not at present in the public eye, once had a scheme he called the Serviceman's Reconstruction Plan. It would have given every ex-GI \$7800 in mustering out pay. But McWilliams isn't accepted socially by Gerald L. K. Smith or Kister, and anyway he would probably prefer to operate on his own and for himself.

MR. BERNARD SHAW REGRETS . .

By F. E. LOEWENSTEIN

ALMOST everybody who is an Irish man, a vegetarian, an autograph collector or an anti-vivisectionist seems at some time or other to have had the urge to write to Bernard Shaw. For many years his post bag has been enormous, and when he has taken a characteristic part in controversial matters like phonetic spelling or women's suffrage, compulsory vaccination or teetotalism, it has mounted to high peaks. Thousands of letters have naturally been attracted by his steadfast battle for political and social measures, some of which seemed unattainable at first and are now commonplace (two of them have been embodied in special Acts of Parliament at his suggestion).

Like the Duke of Wellington, Shaw has always made a practice of reading every letter he receives, and he has the same fancy occasionally for snapping out a retort instead of a formal reply. But as it became impossible for him to answer all his letters, or even to have them answered, he fell back on the business

habits acquired during four years as chief cashier to a private banker in Dublin, and had forms printed to meet the most frequent cases. The first notable one of the series, printed in 1915, was to acknowledge the support he received on the publication of his *Common Sense About the War*, which infuriated many people at the time.

Shaw's form replies are all on postcards. The first ones were printed on the thin penny postcards issued by the postoffice in those happy days; since then they have been printed on privately purchased cards of different colors, for quick reference by his secretaries.

One of the early forms, printed on the ordinary postcard — and showing his telegraphic address, "SOCIALIST PARL-LONDON" — was for editors:

Mr. Bernard Shaw regrets that he is unable to undertake any extra literary work at present. His time is filled for months to come.

Some time later another one connected with applications from the

F. E. LOEWENSTEIN now lives in George Bernard Shaw's home at Ayot St. Lawrence, but before taking up residence there he had to overcome the author's strong prejudice against him for having founded the Shaw Society, which G.B.S. was afraid would become a nuisance to him. Dr. Loewenstein acts as bibliographer and remembrancer, a Boswell to the playwright and political-social thinker whose ninetieth birthday the Western world celebrated in July of this year.