



# In the **MERCURY's** **OPINION**

*August is traditionally a time of political respite. The parties have nominated their candidates, the clamor abates for a spell, and the captains and the kings, if they do not depart, at least go off on vacation. So we have decided to take a vacation, too. Let all the particular political problems vexing Americans today continue to go unsolved for another month. Now, thankfully, we turn our columns back to THE MERCURY's first editor, H. L. Mencken, whose subject is not this party or that party, this candidate or that, but Politics-in-General.*

## **"Government . . . Is Force."**

JULY, 1924

"Government," said William Godwin in that "Enquiry Concerning Political Justice" which got Shelley two wives and lost him £6,000 a year, "can have no more

than two legitimate purposes: the suppression of injustice against individuals within the community, and the common defense against external invasion." The dictum, after a hundred and thirty-one years, remains unimproved and perhaps unimprovable. Today, to be sure, with Darwin behind us, we'd make some change in its terms: what Godwin was trying to say, obviously, was that the central aim of government was to ameliorate the struggle for existence — to cherish and protect the dignity of man in the midst of the brutal strife of Homo sapiens. But that change would be simply substituting a cliché of the nineteenth Century for one of the eighteenth. All the furious discussion of the subject that has gone on in the intervening time has not changed the basic idea in the slightest. To the plain man of

today, as to the most fanatical Liberal or Socialist, government appears primarily as a device for compensating his weakness, a machine for protecting him in rights that he could not make secure with his own arm. Even the Tory holds the same view of it: its essential function, to him, is to safeguard his property against the lascivious desires of those who, if they were not policed, would be tempted to grab it. "Government," said George Washington, "is not reason, it is not eloquence — it is force." Bad government is that which is weak, irresolute, and lacking in constabulary enterprise; when one has defined it, one has also defined a bad bishop, cavalry captain or policeman. Good government is that which delivers the citizen from the risk of being done out of his life and property too arbitrarily and violently — one that relieves him sufficiently from the barbaric business of guarding them to enable him to engage in gentler, more dignified and more agreeable undertakings, to his own content and profit and the advantage of the commonweal.

Unfortunately, this function is performed only imperfectly by any of the forms of government now visible in Christendom, and Dr. Johnson was perhaps justified in dismissing them all as but various aspects of the same fraud. The citizen of today, even in the most civilized states, is not only secured but defectively against other citizens who

aspire to exploit and injure him — for example, highwaymen, bankers, quack doctors, the rev. clergy, sellers of oil stock and contaminated liquor, and so-called reformers of all sorts — and against external foes, military, commercial and philosophical; he is also exploited and injured almost without measure by the government itself — in other words, by the very agency which professes to protect him. It becomes, indeed, one of the most dangerous and insatiable of the inimical forces present in his everyday environment. He finds it more difficult and costly to survive in the face of it than it is to survive in the face of any other enemy. He may, if he has prudence, guard himself effectively against all the known varieties of private criminals, from stockbrokers to pickpockets, and from lawyers to kidnapers, and he may, if he has been burnt enough, learn to guard himself also against the rogues who seek to rob him by the subtler device of playing upon his sentimentalities and superstitions: charity-mongers, idealists, soul-savers, and others after their kind. But he can no more escape the taxgatherer and the policemen, in all their protean and multitudinous guises, than he can escape the ultimate mortician. They beset him constantly, day in and day out, in ever increasing numbers and in ever more disarming masks and attitudes. They invade his liberty, affront his dignity, and greatly

incommode his search for happiness, and every year they demand and wrest from him a larger and larger share of his worldly goods. The average American of today works more than a full day in every week to support his government. It already costs him more than his pleasures and almost as much as his vices, and in another half century, no doubt, it will begin to cost as much as his necessities. . . .

Nowhere else in Christendom, save perhaps in France, is government more extravagant, nonsensical, unintelligent and corrupt than here, and nowhere else is it so secure. It becomes a sort of crime even to protest against its villainies; all the recent investigations of waste and corruption in Washington were attacked and brought to wreck in the name of duty, decorum, patriotism! The citizen objecting to felony by the agents of the sovereign state, acting in its name, found himself posted as an anarchist! There was, of course, some logic in this imbecility, as there is in everything insane. It was felt that too violent an onslaught upon the disease might do gross damage to the patient, that the attempt to extirpate what was foul and excrescent might imperil what was useful and necessary. Is government, then, useful and necessary? So is a doctor. But suppose the dear fellow claimed the right, every time he was called in to prescribe for a bellyache or

a ringing in the ears, to raid the family silver, use the family tooth-brushes, and execute the *droit de seigneur* upon the housemaid? Is it simply a coincidence that the only necessary functionaries who actually perform any comparable brigandage are the lawyers — the very men who, under democracy, chiefly determine the form, policies and acts of the government?

This great pox of civilization, alas, I believe to be incurable, and so I propose no new quackery for its treatment. I am against dosing it, and I am against killing it. All I presume to argue is that something would be accomplished by viewing it more realistically — by ceasing to let its necessary and perhaps useful functions blind us to its ever increasing crimes against the ordinary rights of the free citizen and the common decencies of the world. The fact that it is generally respected — that it possesses effective machinery for propagating and safeguarding that respect — is the main shield of the rogues and vagabonds who use it to exploit the great masses of diligent and credulous men. Whenever you hear anyone bawling for more respect for the laws, whether it be a Coolidge on his imperial throne or an humble county judge in his hedge court, you have before you one who is trying to use them to his private advantage; whenever you hear of new legislation for putting down dissent and rebellion you may

be sure that it is promoted by scoundrels. The extortions and oppressions of government will go on so long as such bare fraudulence deceives and disarms the victims — so long as they are ready to swallow the immemorial official theory that protesting against the stealings of the archbishop's secretary's nephew's mistress's illegitimate son is a sin against the Holy Ghost. They will come to an end when the victims begin to differentiate clearly between government as a necessary device for maintaining order in the world, and government as a device for maintaining the authority and prosperity of predatory rascals and swindlers. In other words, they will come to an end on the Tuesday following the first Monday of November preceding the Resurrection Morn.

### ***National Conventions***

JUNE, 1932

I have been going to national conventions, off and on, since 1900, and note some sad changes. One is the virtual disappearance of oratory. I recall very vividly the late William Jennings Bryan's farewell speech at St. Louis in 1904, after Alton G. Parker, a Wall Street werewolf, had been nominated. It was a truly superb effort, and veterans of 1896 agreed that it was clearly better than the Cross of Gold speech. . . .

Such gaudy harangues will never be heard again, for the loudspeaker

now reduces all voices to one metallic roar. Even the lady politicians, when they are allowed to second a motion and show off their millinery, sound like auctioneers. The crowd in the gallery quickly tires of such noise, and is not above booing it. At the Coolidge convention in Cleveland, in 1924, a bald-headed orator from somewhere in the South got on his hind legs and proceeded to loose some old-time rhetoric. The gallery began to jeer him at once, and presently even the delegates joined in. The Southern brother kept at it manfully — a lot of scarlet stuff comparing Coolidge to the rising sun, the procession of the equinoxes, the aurora borealis, and so on — but in the end the platform catchpolls had to close in on him. For his sufferings on this painful occasion he was rewarded with a federal judgeship, and is now one of the great ornaments of American jurisprudence, with a bishop's power to bind and loose. To mention his name might get me ten years at Leavenworth or the Dry Tortugas.

The average delegate never knows what is going on. The hall is in dreadful confusion, and the speeches from the platform are mainly irrelevant and unintelligible. The real business is done down under the stage, in dark and smelly rooms, or in hotel suites miles away. Presently a state boss fights his way out to his delegation on the floor, and tells his slaves what is to be voted on, and

how they are to vote. Many of them, on account of the din, cannot hear him. They cup their hands to their ears and say "Hey?" When he departs they demand "What did he say?" Sometimes, worn out by the hard benches and the deafening uproar, a whole delegation goes on a steamboat excursion, gets drunk, or decides to sleep all day. Then there is a great pother until the missing are rounded up. . . .

The selection of a President is obviously the concern of every American. Well, two things about it deserve to be noted. One is that it is done by professional politicians, and by professional politicians exclusively, and that at least nine-tenths of them can be bought, if not with downright money, then at all events with jobs. The other is that it is a purely extra legal proceeding—that there is no mention of the process in the Constitution, and that even the laws take little notice of it.

This last fact is very curious. We live in the most law-ridden country on earth, and yet we manage to select our candidates for its highest office in a wholly informal manner, without the slightest aid from courts and policemen. A national convention is free to change its rules as it pleases. It may expel a delegate at will, and seat another. It may increase or diminish the representation of a state. It may seat delegates, if it chooses, from Turkestan or the

moon. To be sure, certain states have passed laws regulating the election of delegates, but the number to be elected is still determined by agencies quite outside those states.

The system has been in operation for nearly a century, and on the whole it has worked pretty well. There have been no great scandals about it. There is nowhere any active desire to bring it under the protection of statutes. No one proposes seriously that it be abandoned. There is even no general talk about reforming it. What all this proves, it seems to me, is that government is far less necessary than many people think. When men are really in earnest they can get on very well without it. If national conventions were legalized, then the only effect would be to bring the politicians who now run them under the heel of even worse politicians.

### ***The House and the Senate***

DECEMBER, 1932

Why anyone should want to belong to so stupid and disreputable a body as the House of Representatives is more than I can make out. Maybe the answer is that people of any sense seldom do. The average member is a lowly party hack, and nothing more. Behind him lies a long record of incompetent service in minor offices, not infrequently starting with that of court bailiff, town constable, or principal of the

village high school. Many Congressmen, at one time or other, have been prosecuting attorneys, usually in country towns, which is only another way of saying, commonly, that they have learned how to draw out and sophisticate the law to their own advantage. At Washington they continue their education in that science. They vote aye when it will profit them with their constituents, or with the political manipulators who run and own their constituents; they vote nay when it seems likely to do them hurt. Beyond those simple alternatives they have little if any interest in the art of government. When they hesitate, it is only because they can't see clearly which side of their bread is buttered. Their one and only concern as statesmen is to hold their jobs. In romantic moments they dream of getting better ones, but taking one day with another they are content to keep what they have got. . . .

The Senate, thirty years ago, used to be appreciably superior to the House. It was then full of high-toned magnates (or the attorneys thereof) in plug hats, and the saying was that it was the best club in the United States. But it would take a lot of arguing to convince any fastidious man that it is a good club today. The direct primary has got

rid of most of the magnates, with their educated taste in wines and liquors, and substituted for them a gang of needy quacks burning white mule. . . .

It has, of course, a few really civilized members; so, indeed, has the House. But they tend to diminish in number as year chases year. The visitor to the gallery misses sorely today the Rabelaisian mien and humor of Boies Penrose and the colossal forensic skill of James A. Reed. When Dr. Reed retired he left a hole in the Senate as large as the crater of Vesuvius. He not only has no successor; he hasn't even an imitator. In the late campaign he did some horrible execution upon poor Hoover on the stump, but his right place is not the stump but the Senate floor. There, with the flower of American imbecility directly under his guns, he used to perform such prodigies that the archangels in Heaven must have rocked with delight. On one occasion he actually sent a fellow Senator from the floor in tears. The victims of this bombardment were wont to complain bitterly that he was only a killer, and hence somehow immoral, but I can recall no occasion when he shelled anyone who was neither a fraud or a jackass, and nine times out of ten his butts were both.

# ***CRISIS in*** **SOUTH AFRICA**

**Serge Fliegers**

**O**NE HOT FEBRUARY MORNING a little African boy in Cato Manor, the native settlement that festers outside the city limits of Durban, South Africa, ran crying to his mother.

"What happened?" his mother asked, wiping away his tears.

Another Negro boy, passing by, heard the question.

"Oh, one of those Indian traders in town probably beat him up," he said jokingly.

"An Indian trader —" the mother cried.

"Beat him up?" her neighbor shouted.

The huts in Cato Manor are crammed together. Sound filters through their burlap walls, rings

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off their tin roofs. The words, in soft, clipped Bantu, spread as swift as light.

In a matter of minutes Cato Manor was a bedlam. Zulus and Bantus ran out to meet each other, grabbing spears, knives, clubs, and broken beer bottles. They didn't know what it was all about, but it meant the release of long-pent-up resentments. Some of them crouched around an empty oil barrel and, jungle fashion, beat out the half-forgotten call to war. The Zulu cry rang out from a thousand throats.

And then the Zulus ran amuck.

First, they attacked the Indians, who lived in their own slum settlement a short distance away. Twenty-five thousand Indian men, women, and children dashed madly off into the bush. The Zulus followed, massacring them left and right. Then a flood of death and destruction rolled across the country.