



The False God of Politics

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FOR too many Americans, government has become the source of all good and all evil to be found in the contemporary world. If there is too much crime, if the highways are overcrowded, if the programming on television is mediocre, if jobs are unsatisfying and marriages are unrewarding, if children seem indifferent, and a sense of community seems less and less evident, then what we need, of course, is a change in Administration, a new party in power or, to radicals, a revolutionary upheaval.

Somehow we have come to believe that we do not have responsibility for our own lives but that established political authority is responsible for the good, the evil, even the ambivalence of the mod-

ern world. Where men and women once turned to the church and to the family for the inner meaning of life and the fulfillment of emotional needs, they now seek such answers from the political process. Unfortunately, politics cannot provide such answers.

Discussing the faith which modern man has placed in politics, and the futility of such an approach to life, the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, currently poet-in-residence at the University of Michigan, has provided an analysis which Americans would do well to consider.

Brodsky declared that, "I do not believe in political movements. I believe in personal movement, that movement of the soul when a man who looks at himself is so ashamed that he tries to make some sort of change — within himself, not on the outside. In place

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of this we are offered a cheap and extremely dangerous surrogate for the internal human disposition toward change: political movements of one sort or another. Dangerous psychologically more than physically. Because every political movement is a way to avoid personal responsibility for what is happening As a rule communality in the sphere of ideas has not led to anything particularly good."¹

On Changing the World

What, then, is to be said of political ideas?

Often, we are told by politicians, such as those who urge redistribution of wealth or a complete alteration of our social and economic systems, that "The world is bad, it has to be changed."

To this, Brodsky replies: "The world is precisely *not* bad; one could even say the world is good. What is true is that it has been spoiled by its inhabitants. And if it is necessary to change something it is not the details of the landscape but our own selves. What is bad about political movements is that they depart too much from their own origins, that on occasion their results so disfigure

the world that it really can be called bad, purely visually; that they lead human thoughts into a dead end. The intensity of political passions is directly proportional to their distance from the true source of the problem."

Underneath the rhetoric, what those who seek political solutions for all social and personal problems are saying is that such solutions do exist, and that, in effect, all of our difficulties can be corrected, if only *they* are given a chance to do it. Joseph Brodsky, who has recently emerged from a Communist society which tells us that *it* has all of the answers to such problems, states that, "There is something offensive to the human soul about preaching paradise on earth. Replacing metaphysical categories with pragmatic ethical or social categories is somehow a debasement of human consciousness."

The Limits of Government

The conception of government believed in by the Founding Fathers of our own country was that all the political process could or should do was to provide order and an atmosphere of freedom within which each man could go as far as his own ability would take him. A political process which attempted to do more than this, to provide equality of condition

¹ Joseph Brodsky, "A Writer Is a Lonely Traveler, And No One Is His Helper," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 1, 1972, p. 11.

rather than of opportunity as the advocates of racial and sexual quotas urge today, would inevitably end as a tyranny.

There was no doubt at that time that government had to be severely limited, and that the political process should not deal with a wide range of societal and personal problems but should deal only with certain carefully and clearly defined areas of concern. *The Federalist Papers* (Number 51) declare:

"What is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. . . . In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence upon the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government, but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions."

At this time there is a great deal of confusion about the meaning of the term "equality." What is meant by this term, in the context of our political tradition? According to John Locke, in the state of nature there exists a "state of equality, wherein all the

power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another . . ." Yet the English philosopher emphasizes that this equality is not one of condition, and is hardly absolute, even in the state of nature:

"Though I have said above . . . that all men by nature are equal, I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of equality: Age or virtue may give men a just precedency. Excellency of parts and merit may place others above the common level. Birth may subject some, and alliance or benefits others, to pay an observance to those to whom Nature, gratitude or other respects may have made it due; and yet all this consists with the equality . . . I there spoke of as proper to the business at hand, being that equal right that every man hath to his natural freedom."

When Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that, "All men are Created Equal," he was speaking of "equality" in the terms set forth by John Locke in his *Second Treatise*: not equal property, or equal status, but an equal right to be free.

A Losing Battle


We are told today that individual freedom must be sacrificed so that those who are "disadvantaged" can be given a more "equitable" place in society. Peter

Viereck has noted that, "There is a line of diminishing returns for humanitarianism. Beyond it, the increase in security is less than the loss of liberty."² Freedom, those who challenge it today should understand, has never been taken away, except for a "good" reason.

To expect the political process to make men good when God has made them otherwise, is to expect what politics cannot do. Discussing the creation of the Republic, John Adams declared that, "Whoever would found a state and make proper laws for the government of it, must presume that all men are bad by nature. . . . Human nature with all its infirmities and depravities is still capable of great things. . . . Education makes a greater difference between man and man, than nature has made between man and brute. The virtues and powers to which men may be trained by early education and constant discipline, are truly sublime and astonishing."³

A free society traditionally has sought to permit men and women

to become themselves, and each man and each woman will, and should be, different and unique. Those who urge egalitarianism in the name of "justice" must remember that every movement which seeks to make men the "same" has only made them similar in their servitude.

Politics is no panacea, and only when we begin to look not to Washington but to ourselves will our lives have any purpose and meaning. Man cannot find outside of himself what is not to be found within, though in this troubled time many are trying to do this. The end of such a futile search is the disillusionment with politics and with ourselves which is so evident today. When men discover that their idols are indeed false, they smash them with a vengeance. By then, however, it is often too late. 

² Peter Viereck, *The Unadjusted Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956).

³ Quoted in *Conservatism in America* by Clinton Rossiter (New York: Vintage, 1955).

Ingratitude

IDEAS ON



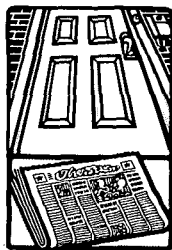
LIBERTY

IF ONCE they are habituated to it, though but for one-half year, they will never be satisfied to have it otherwise. And having looked to government for bread, on the very first scarcity, they will turn and bite the hand that fed them.

EDMUND BURKE, "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity"

Back Door

MELVIN D. BARGER



Press Control

THERE'S A NOTE of genuine anxiety in the current wave of newspaper articles and editorials protesting the recent government attacks on the press. In the past, such warnings sounded a lot like the boy who was merely crying, "Wolf." But it's now clear that many newsmen do feel threatened and are seeking public support in defending the traditional freedoms of the First Amendment.

They may be seeking the impossible. The government, long denied the right to impose direct licensing or controls on the press, may soon be able to establish press control by indirect methods. Such indirect methods grow out of Federal and state power to regulate business, professions, and industry. It is true that some businesses are not presently controlled by Federal regulations or are only partly regulated. No matter. The pattern of Federal regulation was estab-

lished long ago, and is available for immediate use whenever the opportunity to impose additional regulation presents itself.

This new threat is an ironic development because nobody can accuse newsmen of failure to stand up and be heard when *direct* attacks were being made on press freedom. Time and again, newspapers have thoroughly roasted and ridiculed government officials who tried to intimidate reporters and censor newspapers. There was mass cheering on most editorial pages when *The New York Times* won its celebrated Pentagon Papers case. Newsmen have been quick to close ranks when a maverick columnist such as Jack Anderson has been directly threatened by the government. Every journalism textbook carefully presents the case for press freedom, and there's probably not a reporter in the country who doesn't know the classic story of

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