

Triumvirate of Disintegration

Reaction turns for moral authority to defectors from the ranks of progress. Mumford, Frank, and MacLeish play their parts.

SOME twenty years ago, in the period after the first world war, a large publishing house held a meeting of its officers and department heads to consider a peculiar problem. "Think books," more officially though more aridly known as "nonfiction," were increasing in sales; and of the "think books," those that the president of the firm considered "radical" were the sales leaders. The warnings of writers like Keynes, Beard, Wells, Shaw, and Upton Sinclair undoubtedly had the ear of the public. This was not to the liking of the gentlemen assembled.

The remedy decided on was simple—as simple as the diagnosis, which was that the radicals were succeeding by default; the better tory minds were not giving them any competition. Let the better tory minds come forward with the ripe fruits of their wisdom and experience, and the radicals would sink through the bottom of the best seller lists.

Some six months later the first products of this intellectual muster of the right began to appear. Much of it was ghost-written and had the dressed-dummy quality of that branch of literature. The tory, facing the public "in person" instead of through his public relations counsel, suddenly appeared to feel the burdens of conscience; the one or two positive statements were so arrogant they repelled even the tory brethren. So far as I know, no similar special effort to spread tory doctrine among the intelligentsia has since been made.

Recently, however, a need on the part of the tories to acquire spiritual "face" has been felt. It has been felt, not to satisfy any spiritual hunger on their part, but to secure moral authority to enable them to lead the country into war. And just when they felt the need to be urgent, certain writers in spiritual adornment appeared with their brushes moist and held high. Mr. Lewis Mumford, Mr. Waldo Frank, Mr. Archibald MacLeish, and others arrived, denouncing liberalism, assailing some of the noblest purposes of our civilization as disintegrators of moral forces.

Certainly reaction can make good use of this reinforcement of "moral" strength. Messrs. Mumford, Frank, and MacLeish carry with them much moral prestige, partly acquired through their association with the left. They had become veritable high pressure tanks of moral indignation. And they have brought up these stores to the right at a well chosen time.

One would think that the last thing Mumford, Frank, and MacLeish would want to do would be to strengthen the hands of the American counterparts of Weygand and Churchill, of those men who, not bothering to button all the buttons of their disguises, are posing as anti-fascists in order to prepare the way for *their* fascism.

However, we have Mr. Frank calling on

us to cast away reason and science, which have been the chief sources of moral strength in our civilization and which have been among the first victims in the fascist assault upon our civilization. In their place Mr. Frank proposes that we adopt medieval salvation. This, Mr. Frank tells us, will give us that famous "sense of the whole." The fascists, we may observe, went further back for a faith to replace "reason," and they too have propounded a "sense of the whole" of their own.

On his part Mr. Mumford would have us go hysterically into action at once. We must stop reasoning, he says; we must let ourselves give way to our pure emotions; we must act! There is a war ahead; let us pile in. I should like to remind Mr. Mumford of a certain war for the return of a beautiful kidnappee which ended with a city thoroughly looted and the lady completely forgotten. Other noble wars, including the crusades, when they were led by people with a profit-and-loom habit of mind, have had outcomes depressingly different from the noble motives which had been announced. We can agree with Mr. Mumford on the value of action, but only where it could, unperversely, serve the cause of democracy.

Of all three, however, Mr. MacLeish's attack is the most insidious and most dangerous. It pays lip service to certain noble books and then proceeds to outlaw them. The procedure is similar to that by which a courteous college president gets rid of an unorthodox professor. The danger lies in the method, which is more persuasive than Mr. Frank's. Mr. Frank says a good thing is bad; Mr. MacLeish says, a good thing is good but, in the present emergency, its effects are harmful. This appears reasonable and provides a convenient formula for attacks and, ultimately, suppression of other good things.

Mr. MacLeish's statement is not only harmful, but it is wrong. He castigates certain writers as having been factors for spiritual demoralization, for paralyzing our will for action. From such minds and such books as he mentions, however, has issued one of the few streams of moral energy, that have flowed in our generation. The effect of Mr. MacLeish's statement, as the arc of inference widens, will be disastrous to anything progressive, since anything can be condemned as a factor for spiritual demoralization. I hope we shall not see the day when his statements are used to justify the burning of books.

Focusing from high places in the political and economic landscape tends to produce peculiar distortions of vision. It is perhaps his new eminence that has led Mr. MacLeish to locate spiritual demoralization, not where he formerly accurately placed it in the surfeited raiders of the American continent, but in one of our few obvious sources of moral integration, the writers of protest against inhumanity.

There is the fact to begin with, which Richard Aldington, one of the writers mentioned by Mr. MacLeish, pointed out: that their books, because of the publishing structure of the country, could not have had the influence Mr. MacLeish attributes to them. If there is widespread disillusionment in the country, its promoters must be looked for elsewhere. If America's youth is skeptical, it is not because they read these books—most of them read books of quite a different order—but because they have been denied a dignified and useful place in society, because they have been denied normal ambitions. It is not the writers who have denied them. The power of denial rests with those at the controls of our economic system. It is our economic system which produces skepticism and cynicism.

Above all, the writers whom Mr. MacLeish attacks were not cynics or skeptics. Cynics and skeptics do not risk life and reputation. They were of the company and of the kind who went to defend democracy in Spain and inspired others to go while the present defenders of democracy in the counting houses were embargoing democracy in Spain and keeping it from arming itself against its murderers. Such writers, whom Mr. MacLeish would have us believe to be incapable of emotion or action, gave glorious examples of emotion and action. They were conspicuous in our time as generators of moral force and enemies of spiritual disintegration.

To come a little closer home, when the New Deal was still healthy, its most enthusiastic advocates, always ready to protest and picket when it was threatened, were the sort of writers whom Mr. MacLeish has maligned. They gave the New Deal this enthusiastic advocacy because they saw it as an extension of democracy, an institutionalization of a few basic rights for labor, the first steps to protect the American people from economic disaster, and, through the WPA cultural projects, the greatest extension of culture among the people since the institution of the free public school. Who were the skeptics and cynics before this effort for democracy, whose maintenance would have much enriched our stores of moral energy? I think Mr. MacLeish will find more of them in his present than in his past company. It is there that he will find the demoralizers, the paralyzers of will. Cutting off the influence of the progressive writers in our country will guarantee the spread of apathy, a dangerous precondition of fascism.

We can now return to our beginning. Reaction has never been able to make a moral defense before the people because its relation to the people is indefensible. It turns for moral authority to defectors from the ranks of progress. These can bring only a limited moral authority—tarnished to begin with by the knowledge of the defection and frustrated finally by the fact that the old prestige cannot long survive in its new association. Very rapidly the reactionary and the former liberal or radical become indistinguishable. The moral force, generated by the toil and the struggle of progressives, is non-transferable.

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER.

The Willkie Boom Boom

Will the GOP nominate the head of a billion dollar corporation? Winsome Wendell's liberalism. Barbara Giles discusses Dorothy Thompson's favorite.

I GIVE up. Here, on the eve of the Republican nominating convention, it has become necessary to discuss seriously the candidacy of Wendell L. Willkie. I'm not Lewis Carroll and nobody else can do this job properly. The Willkie wonderland is too much for me. Consider: if the Republicans choose him as their 1940 standard bearer, it will be on the theory that he can beat FDR because they're so much alike. Mr. Willkie is a utilities magnate who appears in the *New Republic* writing about civil liberties and in *Fortune* writing about "We, the People." He heads a \$1,200,000,000 corporation and says, "My only quarrel with the Communists is that they are too reactionary." Until 1936 he had never voted the Republican ticket. His only direct political experience has been a fight with the TVA because of its heretical program to provide electricity at more reasonable rates than Willkie's Commonwealth & Southern found profitable. He has been likened to Jack London by people who are most ardent in wanting him to restore the White House to the GOP. Democrats generously recommend him to the Republicans as a candidate with horse sense, a Hoosier manner, liberalism, robustness, candor, and a coy dimple. In the last week or so the dark horse has been hitched to something like a bandwagon.

PROPHET KROCK

Only one thing sustains me. This is a sort of quiet, betting interest I've had for some years in how often Republican strategists will act on the tips that Arthur Krock of the *New York Times* hands them in his column on the editorial page. It was Mr. Krock who first suggested, on Feb. 23, 1939, that Wendell might be willing. He did it, as he explained later, only "lightly," in the form of an imaginary conversation between some jolly politicians. But the Willkie idea caught on. Last November Gen. Hugh Johnson, a fellow fifth-columnist of Mr. Krock's, declaimed to the Bond Club of New York that here was a man, by God. Five months later Dorothy Thompson took up the torch. Miss Thompson, who is less capable than Mr. Krock of light touches, went "On the Record" for her man in an outburst of trills that started with his "winsome temper" and ended with his "hatred of persecution." Russell Davenport resigned as managing editor of *Fortune* to promote the Willkie boom. Oren Root Jr., grandson of Elihu, began collecting "Willkie for President" petitions. Clubs bearing the candidate's name blossomed throughout the nation. Mr. Willkie himself, insisting the whole thing was a frolic that he wouldn't think of taking seriously, clambered on plat-



Wendell L. Willkie

forms and talked earnestly through microphones. On June 14 Arthur Krock was able to announce with pretty confusion that he felt as Alexander Woollcott must have when Alec recommended a little known book that turned into a best seller.

Let's be sensible about this. Do you really want a long, documented analysis proving that this man isn't any more liberal than Roosevelt or Herb Hoover? Or one dissecting his charm? There's nothing complicated about the latter. Mr. Willkie is a big, genial man, just forty-eight, with an intelligent face, a nice smile, and an exceptionally good voice. His language has a faintly literary quality of simplicity and flexibility. He speaks with a vigor that does not seem affected. In short, he makes little Tom Dewey look like a vaudeville punk, and Vandenberg and Taft like puppets left out in the rain. Miss Thompson made plain that she thought the Republicans would be fools to pass up a man whose highest qualification was his unlikeness to other Republican candidates. He was not a Babbitt, Miss Thompson said; he had "natural artistry . . . a provincial air combined with anything but a provincial viewpoint . . . plenty of humor about capitalists." In fact he was so good that when Dorothy turned around and nominated FDR as her savior of Western civilization, she gave Wendell second place on the ticket. The *New York Post* has also wondered why, since Mr. Willkie claims to be so liberal, he doesn't run with the Democrats. One might ask the *Post* in turn why Mr. Roosevelt doesn't run with the Republicans—but this brings us back to wonderland, and we're trying to keep things simple.

About the Willkie liberalism. Recently he made a speech in St. Louis which the *Post-Dispatch* of that city printed in full (with an editorial titled "He Has 'It'"). The candidate said that we must not overrate Hitler or the fifth column. He explained that Hitler was merely a man who had come to power "by exploiting for his own purposes forces that were working for him every day, in every democracy of the world, before the present war." Which is just what liberals say. But wait—Mr. Willkie was talking about the French Popular Front, which "demoralized" industry by raising wages and lowering hours. He was talking about British statesmen who weren't "honest" enough to offer the people, as Churchill did, nothing but blood, tears, toil, and sweat. Most of all, he was talking about the United States. The "fifth column" is national disunity, with the country broken down into "hostile groups, capital, labor, economic royalists, each fighting against the other." The defense program will "actually cost ten times a few billion dollars" and working hours may have to be increased. We should avoid "candystick theories" of the old New Deal and any promises but the honest Churchill kind. "The curse of democracy today, in the United States as well as Europe, is that everyone has been trying to please the public."

Does that give you a clear picture of the forces in every democracy that helped Hitler to power? Mr. Willkie, who has been FDR's drummer boy in the "short of war" campaign to help the Allies, proposes simply that we fight fascism by taking it to our bosoms. Of course the byline on this plan is not Mr. Willkie's exclusively. He gave Winston Churchill due credit. There were others he might have mentioned: Roosevelt himself, for example, except that Willkie is trying to run against him. Besides, the Hoosier boy has never forgiven the old New Deal for fussing so long before TVA paid him \$78,600,000—a few million less than he wanted—for his Tennessee utility properties. Mr. Willkie still likes to pretend there's a "New Deal" which goes about devouring widows and orphans.

THAT LIBERALISM

Sam Insull would have been proud of this liberal. Remember Willkie's fight with TVA? It all comes back to me—the goldplated lobbyists, court injunctions, broken contracts—when I read Wendell's pleas for a *business-like* administration of social reforms. Chattanooga's only liberal paper, the *News*, was one casualty of that battle. Supporting TVA, the *News* tangled with the Tennessee Electric Power Co., a Commonwealth & Southern subsidiary. Willkie's men helped create a *Free*