

Government by Trial Balloon

BY J. M. NOLTE

There is an increasing desire for the President to state his aims more plainly, so that in the fall elections we can know whether we are voting for "patriotism or pork"

OVER and over in the past few months we have read in press comments upon affairs at Washington something to this effect: "It is generally thought that the Administration regards the measure now pending as a trial balloon, sent up to find out which way the political wind is blowing." Echoes of such opinions have reached us in the supplementary comments of journalists on the President's "fan mail," which is evidently examined minutely by "the pale augurs, muttering low," much as the Roman priesthood in ancient times examined the flight of the birds of prophecy or the entrails of the sacrificial oxen. There seems to be more than a slightly and occasionally expressed opinion that this deliberate laying of the administrative ear to the ground (to vary the figure unconscionably!) is done not so much with the diagnostic intelligence of a physician seeking to learn through his stethoscope how his patient is reacting to treatment, as with the evasive intelligence of the fox seeking to learn where the hounds are to avoid them.

There is a nice distinction between

these possible purposes of Presidential listening which is simple, but hard to make definite. It is patently the duty of any administration to use to the utmost all reasonable means of keeping in touch with its constituency. No one may justly cavil at it. Yet the way in which information about the state of public opinion is employed by an administration may be dictated by motives so diverse as to give cause either for satisfaction or alarm—depending upon one's interpretation of what America's government should be. If a President, working to realize a definite programme, seeks to gauge the chances for success or failure of a next step by learning popular reaction to steps already taken, that is one thing. If a President, on the other hand, really has no programme except to be popular, and seeks from the reactions of voters to determine for himself and his party what they must do to remain popular, that is another thing. The difference between these attitudes asks the question whether the American idea is trial balloons for the advising of government, or merely government by trial balloons.

This, in turn, is only another way of putting a question familiar enough to all partisans of our political mode, for it re-awakens the age-old conflict between the delegated powers of a federated republic and the mandatory suggestions of a numerical democracy. In a republic, the people elect leaders who rule. In a democracy, the people themselves rule by direct vote. (The terms "republican" and "democratic" are, of course, used in this sense, and in what follows in this article, without reference to political parties.) Where is the repository of political wisdom? Is it in the "experts" in government, in those of superior judgment and capacity, to whom—following Hamilton's advice—we have entrusted the power to rule us in our interest? Or is it in the people themselves, in us as individual voters, who are competent—as Jackson insisted—to make decisions and to express judgments which are binding upon our officers, themselves our pawns in the political play?

One is likely to conclude that the attempt to answer these questions indicates an appalling confusion in the United States today. One is tempted to say that our citizens honestly do not know the answers, or at least do not know how to act upon the answers, and that our leaders oscillate between one answer and another.

II

Some critics of the Administration castigate it for subverting democracy; they look upon its works and find officious bureaucracy, unwholesome regimentation, an obstinate and haughty attempt to tell the country what is good for it. Other critics castigate the Administration for betraying republicanism, charging that our leaders are not leaders

at all except in the purely adventitious sense of being at the head of the scurrying mob; such critics insist that the leaders are mere sycophants who fawn upon the electorate. Still other critics find the Administration hopelessly entangled because its confessed politicians are vote-hungry "practical" democrats, while its self-admitted statesmen are vote-careless "academic" republicans.

The urban dweller finds in NRA and AAA thoroughgoing republican control and regimentation by an expert class. The farmer finds AAA either officious interference by meddlers, or an unblushing attempt to buy his vote, to pay him enough shekels to alleviate his distress—until after election. The meddling is bureaucratic republicanism; the bribery is degenerate democracy. One large-scale industrial leader finds NRA an unwarranted extension of republican powers; another finds it a necessary democratic expedient to establish limits for the play of rugged individualism. Most small-scale operators consider NRA oligarchical control of naturally republican functions. Many business men assert that our fiscal necessities demand dictatorial extension of republican executive power over the monetary system, the tariff and foreign debts. Other business men insist that in such a direction lie actual dictatorship and further depression and the madness of war. It is unnecessary to cite book and page for the foregoing opinions: they cry out at one from the pages of every newspaper and every journal of opinion. One is reminded of the fable of the three blind men and the elephant, except that here it is a donkey that the blind men are inquisitively fondling.

When one turns to the politicians themselves, the confusion is worse confounded. The brain trusters shout that

they have no national plan subversive of individual rights, and thus, presumably, no plan subversive of democracy. But their works often seem to lead directly to wide-spread socialized control and regimentation, which is a straining of republicanism towards a denial of individual competence, and thus in effect a denial of democracy. President Roosevelt says there is no academic plan at all, that he knows only that we are going out of the depression with all the feathers still on the eagle, even if the eagle is temporarily "blue." Secretary Wallace, however, speaking as one of the Administration's Chautauqua staff, says that there must be a plan, a well understood plan, or we'll never get out of the depression. Congress is for the New Deal as long as it can define "deal" after the fashion of the late David Harum: Congress is jealous of the liberties of the people, but in an ambiguous sense. It cherishes the liberties when they can be fastened to the prerogatives of Congress; it resents the liberties when they tend to diminish Congressional authority and importance. Congress is republican at Washington and democratic at home.

Nor are the people themselves, as a whole, any clearer than their economic and political leaders. The blind lead the blind. In Minnesota recently, for instance, the Farmer-Labor party (which in 1930 and 1932 polled an absolute majority of the votes cast for governor, and which today runs the commonwealth) set forth in its platform for the November elections that capitalism has failed and must be abolished forthwith, and that State ownership or coöperative ownership of all economic facilities and industries must be accomplished by "immediate steps." The sanction for this attitude is taken from the national New

Deal itself, which is thus interpreted as the very utmost in democracy—a democracy so complete as to be socialistic. One swallow does not make a summer, of course, but similar expressions of socialistic sentiment are being made unofficially throughout the Middle West. On the other hand, everywhere in local elections this spring there was a noticeable trend towards conservatism, towards old-fashioned, delegated-authority republicanism. The depression-broken dreamers about the millennium are fashioning out of rainbows their ultra-democratic platforms; but the tax-ridden bourgeoisie are at last getting out the vote, and the vote is for our original republican formula, "elect a good man and stand behind him."

III

This all-infecting confusion indicates in the United States a "house divided" attitude which has decided implications for mischief. The mischief is likely to result if the Federal Administration, having set in operation grandiose long-time melioristic schemes, then "sells out" to democratic opportunism. A brief rehearsal of recent history will clarify this statement.

During the 1932 campaign, Mr. Roosevelt wisely made as few definite commitments as possible. He and his platform, however, pledged his party—among other things—to beer and repeal, to balancing the budget, to maintaining a sound currency, to the ending of oligarchical control in banking, industry and government, and to the removal of agricultural disabilities. The people voted for a clean slate, and for Mr. Roosevelt. After election, they found that the New Deal apparently meant more than they supposed. Beer and repeal arrived ahead of schedule.

The budget balancing was indefinitely postponed, and the national deficit increased. "Sound money" either was abandoned or proved to be an equivocation. Reform in government seemed at first to make great headway, but with the influx into office of thousands of Democrats to spend billions of public money, real reform became impracticable. The housecleaning activities in banking and industry, and the aid to agriculture, proceeded apace under the ægis of unusual powers granted to the executive for the emergency.

As months passed, however, and the emergency seemed to grow less acute, it was plain that the melioristic schemes for industry and agriculture required time and patience for their success. The New Deal came to mean, practically, PWA, CWA, CCC, AAA, the Federal power projects, and the Federal money-lending agencies. Excepting the first three, all of these have come to look to the future. The New Dealers, by emphasizing the long-term character of part of their programme, created for themselves a convenient "alibi" for failure of specific meliorative attempts. When short-term results were not impressive, behold! the scheme in question became part of the long-term programme. And vice versa. AAA, combined with the quantity theory monetary experiments, was to restore agricultural prices to parity with the general commodity list. After a year and a half, the goal is still out of sight. AAA is now part of a philosophical system and is on the long-term programme. In its sociological aspects, NRA, in so far as it is more than an attempt to lift ourselves by our bootstraps financially, also started in as an emergency measure and soon became an item of professed long-time policy.

Now, while we may not be concerned with the philosophical background of government in the United States simply as such, while we may not care from a philosophical standpoint whether an administration uses trial balloons to determine how much leeway it is making from a plotted course or whether it sends up trial balloons and then plots its course to follow the balloons, we are concerned with the financial and social effects of long-time meliorative schemes, and we do care whether or not our Government is actuated by a political philosophy that insures a decent chance to have the schemes carried out successfully. Such projects as TVA, AAA, RFC and HOLC, for example, require the disbursement of billions of public money; they require centralized control, long-time planning, and a high degree of technical competence in management. They may fail in spite of the best talent and the most comprehensive planning. But are they not sure to fail if they become subject to government by trial balloon, if we abandon them to any administration that lives by sublimated mob rule?

One thus returns, as one always must return, to the absorbing debate which has run through the history of our popular government from the beginning: are we the people competent to govern ourselves, are we able to decide correctly the questions concerning technical minutiae which obtrude themselves in the discussion of every phase of modern governmental activity? Or is the best that we may expect of ourselves a more or less sensitive compliance, which gives us at least the illusion of choosing devoted public servants? If the present Administration is sending up balloons and inspecting oracular entrails merely to perform hocus-pocus designed to

keep the opposition from the halls of Congress, is it likely—in view of the long-time programme now under way—that we have chosen devoted public servants? Mark you, the question is merely asked, not answered!

IV

President Roosevelt's tradition is disparate. It is country-gentleman-individualist and Mr. Ickes and Miss Perkins and Harvard, which is all to the good. But it is also metropolitan-and-Albany-politician and Mr. Farley and Charlie Michelson and bureaucratic-Washington, which is possibly not quite so good. One may without reservation applaud the evident beatitude of his aims. But one may also make a plausible case for the theory that his nobility of purpose sometimes enfranchises ignoble means. About the White House there are little ghosts that will not be laid—some of the Presidential appointments, loud lip-service to measures that the President nevertheless did not consider important enough to drive through Congress, public utterance a trifle too suave and politic. Perhaps if one could know and feel the force of all the perplexing currents and counter currents that engulf a President there would be no ghosts. Perhaps.

The tradition of the Democratic party is similarly disparate. Because of historical accident, no doubt, it has for three-quarters of a century been the victim of a defeatist or at least a "disaffected" psychology. To it have flocked irreconcilable groups, united temporarily by adversity, but in themselves fundamentally too hostile to remain long in the same tether. Differences of interest, of religion, of economic and political creeds, of philosophy—these have always managed to split the party

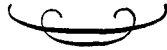
asunder. The Republicans have had the task of uniting similarly irreconcilable elements, to be sure, but they have had a background of success and of triumphant moral idealism to start with. One is reminded of the editorial in the *New York Times* on that morning in 1916 when it conceded to Mr. Hughes the election that three days later went to President Wilson. The *Times* had supported Wilson, but, convinced that Mr. Hughes had defeated him, it said, in effect, "Well, anyway, the country does more and feels better under a Republican administration." That sentiment is in the air today, just as it was in 1918 when Wilson urged the people frantically to hold up his hands by reelecting a Democratic Congress. The sentiment is by no means as strong as it was in 1918; but it has been growing for several months, and the fact that it exists at all is proof that the dissentient heterogeneity that catapulted Franklin Roosevelt to office has not yet been solidified into a real political entity. Perhaps its elements can not be fused. Perhaps the distribution of patronage and of funds was not the way to fuse them.

Before the autumn elections, the leaders of the Administration are likely to be forced to decide whether they are trial-balloon democrats or old-fashioned republicans. It is almost unthinkable that they should choose to be the former, yet stranger things have happened in American history. Their strongest appeal, it would seem, is not to the unblushing self-interest that has been "greased" heretofore by the distribution of patronage and of public funds, nor even to the hopelessness bred of penury and woe. The most powerful appeal of President Roosevelt to date was his bank holiday radio address. Since that occasion his popularity—although it is

still tremendous—has dwindled. America is confused; it doesn't know itself whether it is for republican delegated authority or democratic you-go-to-Washington-and-do-as-we-tell-you attorneyship. But the imminence of a general election and the mounting pressure of public debt will compel it to a decision shortly, and from most indications one may assume that it will favor the traditional and constitutional philosophy. President Roosevelt has a present opportunity, by modifying some "radical" tendencies of the New Deal and by asserting again the necessity of carrying out his long-time programme under competent auspices, to turn this bourgeois republicanism into a dynamic help to his party. But this conservatively liberal element is not likely to follow trial balloons. It demands an outspoken definition of the limits of socialistic

bureaucracy under the New Deal, and a reaffirmation of the President's promise that he will conduct our affairs in the permanent interest of the majority of our citizens—including the taxpayers.

One may hope, therefore, that the emphasis on trial balloons in the Washington dispatches is misplaced, and that the Administration is going to stand for the fall elections, in so far as it has a part in them, on the high ground of courageous and adaptable measures of political reform under such direction and control as derive from the principles of the Constitution. Win, lose or draw, it will be better for the country to have the issue clean-cut and plainly drawn between patriotism and pork, between self-assertion and drift, between bona fide representative government and opportunist compliance with popular whims.



Soviet Russia Between Two Fires

BY G. E. W. JOHNSON

*Japan in the East and Germany in the West are disturbing
Kremlin composure, and there is a question whether
they may not join forces*

THE year 1933 saw a very significant change in Soviet Russia's attitude toward other countries. For years Russia had regarded herself as the spearhead of the proletarian revolution, which all the capitalist nations were conspiring to overthrow. This doctrine was a natural heritage of the days of the Allied intervention in 1918-20, when the powers had extended military and financial support to the anti-Bolshevik forces. In the years that followed there was a mutual repulsion between Russia and the outside world. The Soviet Union saw in every move of the "bourgeois" governments a move against Russia; the bourgeoisie of the world regarded the Soviet Union as a vast malarial swamp from which there continuously exuded a noxious miasma that bade fair to pollute the whole of their civilization.

But a train of events set in which, after rapidly gathering momentum in 1932, came to a culmination in 1933 and in a surprisingly short time effected a radical transformation in the Russian attitude to foreign countries. Instead of the vague suspicions directed indiscriminately against all capitalist powers, Russia's fears have been definitely fo-

cused upon two nations from which the danger of attack has become very real. The Japanese conquest of Manchuria in 1931-33 and Hitler's conquest of Germany in 1933 are two concrete facts which are full of ill omen for Russia's future, menacing her at the eastern and western extremities of her six-thousand-mile expanse of territory.

Russia is, in a territorial sense, one of the satisfied nations of the world. Including Siberia, she comprises the largest continuous tract of the earth's surface under one sovereignty; she has within her own borders all the territory she needs to meet the requirements of her large population. But it is her misfortune to be situated between two of the most land-hungry nations of the world—nations which are also most formidable in their capacity for military effort. What is more natural than that Japan and Germany, searching for an outlet for their rapidly increasing populations, should fix their eyes upon the vast, thinly peopled expanses of the Russian plains, which cover one-sixth of the land surface of the globe? Both countries have had their appetites whetted by decisive victories in the recent past. Japan demolished the myth