

American Choice

ON ALL FRONTS. By Ralph Barton Perry. New York: Vanguard Press. 1941. 193 pp. \$1.75.

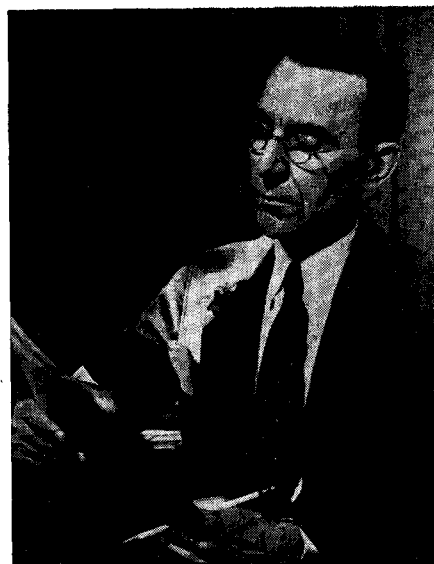
Reviewed by JACQUES BARZUN

WITH his usual lucidity of thought and expression, Ralph Barton Perry has sought to unravel, in less than two hundred pages, the confused feelings and ideas of his countrymen concerning the present war. "On All Fronts" begins with a discussion of the commonplace fallacy of false choice—"shall we be realistic or idealistic?" (as if we could not be both)—and ends with a sober statement of the character of the war, leading to a forecast, neither gloomy nor sanguine, of the fruits of immediate action. In between, the author takes cognizance of his opponents' positions and combats them with sympathy. He does not represent his antagonists as fools or knaves; he does not impute motives, but sees them as bewildered or misguided persons hypnotized by a single fact, a single point on the horizon. Their strenuous arguments err chiefly in deficient vision.

The book possesses an interest even more general than the already general one of forcing us to willingly accept war on all fronts. It is a subtle, wholly unobtrusive example of a mature philosophy applied to a concrete situation. Mr. Perry is a practical philosopher in both senses of the qualifying adjective. He combines logical thought with historical wisdom so naturally as to make one forget that it is he thinking and not the reader threading his way through that tangle of plausible and appealing affirmations which is the world's daily fare. Semantics, Democracy, Religion, Liberty, Motherhood, Perfectionism, Empire, Tyranny, and the Life of Man come up as subjects which—one would think—ought to be treated in separate volumes of great weight and length. But they fall here into their proper places with the aid of definitions that are not less exact for being casually given; and they form together a scheme of things necessarily leading to America's direct and total action on the side of Great Britain.

If any objection must be made to so persuasive and reasonable a sermon, it is that it stereotypes individual and national psychology. Mr. Perry's remarks about the French debacle lean too exclusively on Maurois's account and on a somewhat theatrical view of Frenchmen as predestined to emotional instability. This is to neglect political and social factors of great force and antiquity, and to fail to see that

France, no less than Spain, fought a Civil War not yet terminated. In the same way, the needful concentration on the Axis powers' external acts keeps out of sight the moral and historical significance of fascism for central Europe. There is indeed no reason why Mr. Perry should be greatly concerned with this historical problem, nor should any consideration of it weaken the advocacy of measures designed for the defense of the United States. But in the aftermath, to which Mr. Perry gives a generous and thoughtful glance, we shall have to understand a state of mind we can now only combat. Hence a word about this Sphinx looming ahead might have made perfect and complete an admirably philosophical aid to reflection.



Ralph Barton Perry

Liberty and Reason

NEW LIBERTIES FOR OLD. By Carl L. Becker. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1941. 182 pp. \$2.

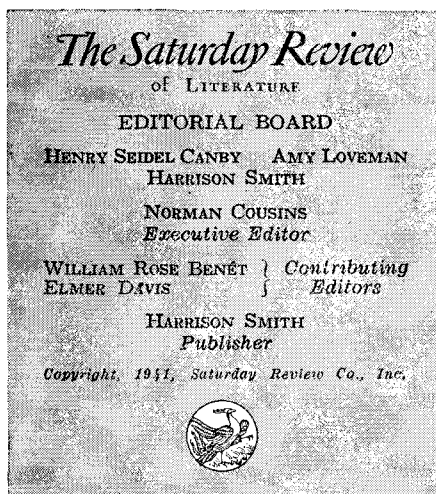
Reviewed by GEORGE N. SHUSTER

THE collected essays of a professor should ordinarily be confronted with the same careful doubt with which one approaches the poems of hitherto unpublished poets. But Carl Becker is a scintillating exception. Few Americans have so profitably invested the intellectual heritage of the eighteenth century, when thinkers were gentlemen and skeptics, writers of flawless prose, pocked with epigrams not too raucous. These papers deal with freedom, democracy, dictatorial disorder, and civic virtue. It is, of course, inevitable that during the five years which have elapsed since the first was written, the impact of events on the author's mind should have changed; and yet the thinking which underlies all the essays is of one piece, confident in the righteousness of democracy but none too sure of men's ability to keep democracy going.

Professor Becker contends that although the desire for freedom is as ancient as man himself, the notion that one could get it by simply ousting those who would not grant it and then setting out to rule oneself is the product of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Briefly stated, men of that time believed that reason could put a purely theoretical definition of human nature into political practice. They wanted Utopia because it seemed clear to them that Utopia was what men should and could have. Since their time, any number of attempts have been made to follow their recipe. And looking back, the modern spectator is

not at all sure that the job can be done. He beholds revolutions wheeling along in a vacuum; sees that demos can be as tyrannical as the autocrats of yore. All he really knows is that the world about him is streaked with the tank-tracks of those who are bent, not only on repudiating the Enlightenment, but on stamping out liberty itself. By comparison it is obvious that even disillusionment is better than surrender. "No one nation can abolish war," Professor Becker argues, "if others employ it, by refusing to fight, or demonstrating its futility by committing suicide."

And yet is it not obvious that if our conception of man is dependent, as Professor Becker holds, upon an assumption that he is a being who has rights that may sometime be determined by a careful empirical study of the matter, there is mortal danger lest another conception, which need not wait, which has a drive stronger than that of the intellect, may triumph? Why should we believe that truth resides in the brain rather than in the blood, if blood and brain be all? It seems to me, in short, that if what we mean by "liberty" is really as modern as the eighteenth century, there may well be another fashion during the twentieth century. On the other hand, if the rights of man are genuinely inalienable, if they belong to his spirit and that in turn has kinship with immortality, no force can stamp out either consciousness of them or dedication to their preservation. After all, it is clear that religion is not so remote from this drama as Professor Becker thinks. For if it were, Hitler would hardly go to such pains to stamp it out. The book is certainly readable, and in the main, sound.



WE ARE AT WAR

THE above words are the words that underrun all our thinking today. For now war against the Axis powers has reached the point of open declaration. It is not that the entire civilized world, as we know it, has not been at war for months and years past with the ideology and the intentions of the Axis. But today in a great Eastern city and a great Western city we have already heard air-raid alarms, and we know we are entering upon the hard and grim facts of war; as France entered upon them, and fell part captive; as England entered upon them, and has survived; as Russia has entered upon them and has now fought treacherous unprovoked attack to a standstill.

The readers of this magazine presumably belong to the civilized folk, which means that the facts of war must be abhorrent to all the fine minds and spirits not only in the countries opposing the Axis but in the countries of the Axis itself. Now, however, we have but one choice, to fight our hardest for the swiftest victory possible; and to do this we shall have to cease entirely being upon the defensive and must devise a grand strategy of attack.

The war of today is totally different from any that has gone before. It is devastating to civilians and non-combatants; it is a war of bombing from the air; it is a war in which there are no rules in the mind of the enemy. Anything and everything goes, provided it is successful. That is what we must meet, repulse, and crush forever.

Therefore this war is the most important matter in our minds today. Therefore the *Saturday Review of Literature* shall so treat it, setting before you the most important opinions concerning it, discussing authoritatively the most important books written about it, dedicating its services to its country in every way possible. This does

not mean, however, that it will lose sight of literature as a great spiritually moving force. We shall also discuss with you the books of vision that attempt to see past the battle and build for the future.

What we need in this country is imagination. What our enemies possess is a military imagination thus far superior to any that has come against it, because for years they have been dedicated wholly to war and aggression. We are just learning the new weapons of war. We learn fast in America, but already we have met with a treacherous and disastrous surprise in Hawaii. We are a great producing nation, and the wheels are rolling, but we shall have to quicken our tempo and treble or quadruple our output. We have a high potential, but we shall need every electric atom of it, if we are to beat those who desire the world in chains.

Let us not underestimate our enemies. They regard War as the highest aim of Man. They are strong in armor and devilish in craft. They are dedicated to stark and ruthless militarism. We shall need all our strength, and all the resources of our minds.

Your President knows that just as the Axis powers interlock and work together, so must the Allies interlock and work together. We are all now, we countries that are fighting Nazism and Fascism, parts of one whole. We must adopt a grand strategy. And we as individual citizens must be prepared, each one of us, to sacrifice for the greatest good of all. We enter upon what to us is going to become a new

world—a new world of effort, a world that will bind men and women closer together; that is, even now, uniting our large land to an extent unforeseeable a few weeks, even a few days, ago.

The Saturday Review of Literature intends to bear its part. It believes that all that makes life worth living for is at stake. It believes that not only Truth, which has many guises, but all free thought and every desire toward the life of men and women of good will, is in dire and immediate peril. It is no mere theory that confronts us.

We say this so strongly in order that there may be no mistake. Our attitude is anything but Laodicean. We shall bend every effort to help make this country united in its war upon the dark ages that are trying to reassert their ruthless intolerance and cruelty. We shall do everything we can to uphold the arms of our United Services. We shall try to bring you the truth, and keep before you the highest ideals of our democracy.

We believe that great creative writing, too, is one of the strongest stays, one of the greatest ramparts for the mind and soul in the evil hour, that mankind can find. We shall keep the great creative works of the mind before you, and continue to encourage with unbiased appraisal all meritorious new work of whatever kind.

That is how we feel in this crisis. How far we can live up to our words remains to be seen. This is merely our dedication. We shall try to make the *Saturday Review of Literature* for you a strength, a solace, and an inspiration.

W. R. B.

Walker Under-Sea

By Sara Van Alstyne Allen

THE waters here are silver-quiet
Slow ripples move across the ceiling there
As the smooth surface meets the curving air.
Each motion here is measured as the tide
Is measured by the circling moon.
The body rises from the sand,
Slanting across the changing world.
The fluid walls receive the imprint now
Of glimmering hand seeking the swaying fern,
The pearled flower and the pale moon-fruit.
The wind that moves the coral bough
Comes from no mountain, brings no hint of snow.
The morning sun, bright in the certain sky,
Sends down forgotten coins of light
To drift and bend and join the water-flow.
Here is no limit for the traveler.
No road is measured and no warning star
Tells him where home and harbor wait,
Cast up like shells upon the shore of night.