



The Power of the Word

ONE OF the most perturbing conditions which confronts the world today is the fact that decisions must constantly be made which plunge society into a vicious circle. Disastrous experience has taught us that for a nation to be weak and unprepared is for it to court disaster—we have come a long way from the days when Theodore Roosevelt's advocacy of soft speech and the big stick could raise a storm of excitement. On the other hand, reason tells us — and psychological precept supports it—that fear itself is a precipitant of calamity and that constant insistence upon the probability of catastrophe is an active factor in bringing it to pass. The second Roosevelt proclaimed that it was only fear we had to fear. And here we are, with the legislators and the military debating the necessity of preparedness for war and the whole nation yearning for no war and desperately fearing the possibility of it. We are squarely astride a dilemma, for the debate that goes on in Congress—and necessarily goes on—rouses the fear which itself, by paralyzing confidence, weakens the hope for peace. And "fear, admitted into public councils, / Betrays like treason."

It is deplorable, no, tragic, that there should be so little acceptance on the part of the individual of his personal responsibility for peace. Unquestionably it is natural that, faced with the enormous problems, the confounding perplexities of today, the individual should feel himself powerless to influence the course of events. But he cannot afford to feel so. Nations—democracies, at least—are but the sum total of their members, and, in them, it is the pressure of the mass

which in the long run shapes official attitude. Of the ideological climate of the nation its policies are born.

Therefore is it of such intense importance that speech be not only free but considered as well. It is axiomatic that no nation founded on right should deny to its people freedom to express all varieties of opinion. It is equally true that the guarantee of that right should invest government with the power to resist the effort to overthrow it. No one who cherishes the Anglo-Saxon tradition of free speech but will burn with indignation against the attempt to abrogate it no matter from what source it comes. It is the duty of the citizen of a republic to resist attack on it whether it come from individual, or group, or government itself.

But if this is true, it is equally true that freedom of speech imposes a special obligation. Talk that is ignorant, talk that is inconsequential, talk that is reckless can be tragically disastrous. Its possibilities for harm are incalculable. There rests on every man and woman in the country in this dark present a challenge to clear thinking and careful speaking. Where all is confused and combustible danger lurks in every counsel that leads to apathy or despondency. Peace can never be won by despair; it can only be maintained by the twin reliance on a wise preparedness and a determined confidence that it is attainable. To entertain the belief that war is inevitable is to be defeated before the battle is begun. It is unrealistic to close the mind to the possibility of war, but it is enormously hazardous to settle down to the expectation of it. Out of such fatalism grows defeatism. It is the attitude that brought France to disaster in the last war. It is the attitude which will increase the likelihood of another one.

It is horrifying to hear the loose

talk which goes the rounds in all circles today. It is appalling to hear the young, so scorched and burned in the battle of which they were so recently a part, announcing their intention of seizing the passing day because tomorrow they will die. They may not really believe it—their young blood must belie what their lips proclaim—but they say it, and in the saying throw away youth's glorious impatience to remold the world. Alas, poor youth, it has fears that are denied the consolation of its elders—the remembrance of a world of peace which presents a backlog of hope, the faith that what once has been may again come to be.

But the elderly and the aged are all too often likewise at fault in their indiscretions. They at least should have won perspective from experience and come to know the ease with which national moods can be invoked, the overturns of which public opinion is capable, the far-reaching reforms which an informed and an aroused national temper can effect. If they have lost the fire of youth, presumably they have learned patience, that patience which will see some gain in the part if it cannot have the whole. It is the patience which inspired Churchill when the other day he summoned the free countries of Europe to build on a federation of sixteen nations until they could broaden it out into a federation of the world. It is a patience which should know the importance of the seemingly insignificant, which should realize on what small gains progress is built, which should know that it is incumbent on each individual to feel himself essential to the whole of society. What one man, young or old, says of war, or fear, or despair may matter little, but what each man added to the other says may mean the destruction or the salvation of the world.

A. L.

To Artists Of Every Land

(A.D. 400: A.D. 1941)

By Evelyn Scott

DESERT world, made bleak by fear and hate,
We are your ambushed, who know grief alone;
Like those lost Greeks whose sorrows gnawed the bone
In sea-bright solitudes, while, at the gate,
The Nubian war-cry ordained one blind fate
For all, and wither'd palms and sky to stone:
The ancient gods decayed, their works were gone!
Again, the Sphinx took Silence as her mate!

The painter of the Haz-Awarra school
Resigned, with freedom, the forbidden tool
Of art; and on this frontier of the brain,
The poet, wringing from his lyre, his pain,
Heard each star singing, swanlike, through the night,
The proscribed word his pangs released to flight.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Stacking Cards

SIR: The peculiar complaint that I have is the brief biography of Frank Altschul [SRL April 17] at the end of his review of "Toward World Peace" by Henry Wallace. You yourself become a propagandist when you state simply "author of 'Let No Wave Engulf Us,' is president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and director of the Council of Foreign Relations." But what is the daily occupation of Frank Altschul? Could it possibly be that he is a member of "the Street"? And if he is, I think your readers would like to know in whose hands the presidency of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and a directorship of the Council of Foreign Relations resides. You stacked the cards when you stated "president of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation" but failed to give his business connections. That is what I call fighting dirty and below the level (supposed to be highly literary) of the editorship of SRL.

HORACE J. FULLER.

EDITOR'S NOTE: SRL had little space to identify Mr. Altschul but no intent or need to propagandize. He is president and director of General American Investors Co., Wall Street.

A Challenge

SIR: I'll match my irreligious, materialistic, state-subsidized education against anything Dreamer Weaver [SRL Apr. 10] cares to offer a young woman.

I'll stick to my emasculated friends with their "party-line" liberalism and their fatuous belief in the equality of man.

I'll stack up my particular bourgeois Joe against any lousy supertype, anytime, anyplace, no ideological holds barred.

And I'll bet that a guarantee of those tired old Four Freedoms to every individual on this crude earth would be a pretty worth-while step in the right direction.

To hell with Mr. Weaver's exquisite language.

CONSTANCE DAMON.

Tilton, N. H.

Thumbs Down

SIR: Seldom, if ever—even in your magazine—have I seen a reviewer reveal such a childish sullen miscomprehension of the intentions of a book, of the meaning of courage, and of the nature of art as does Oliver Harrison, in his review of John Cobb's "The Gesture" [Mar. 13]. Well, now, what are we to think of Mr. Harrison's dismissal of the author's quite clear moral position by snarling that better men than he died in the war? There are so many things the man named Harrison needs to be told:

(1) Not only were there many good men killed in the war, but also many bad men and many in-between men. This Harrison might be amazed to observe the careless indiscriminate with which the ax falls, particularly when a heavy bomber carries ten men who may range the moral gamut from saint to jerk, with all inter-



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"It's an insult to Her Majesty's Navy. People will never stand for it!"

mediate stages, and whose selection for immortality depends not on their own skill or valor but on a delicately chaotic combination of an infinite number of factors beyond their or anybody's control.

(2) It is not feasible to fight a war and save the world, simultaneously. If any war is of any use—which I doubt—it is only as a means of securing the right to go on saving the world in your own way, after it is over. Playing with combinations of these two purposes is dangerously inefficient for the realization of either.

(3) It is infinitely more difficult to live like a hero than to die like one. Major Harris was capable of the latter but not of the former, because he did not know anything, nor did he care to know anything, about how human beings operate. You can die heroically as an individual; but you must live heroically in relationship to other people. This is terribly important, for this reason: any man's ethic is suspect until he has proved himself as a human being, until he has achieved self-knowledge and, concomitantly, human understanding of his fellow men. Too many people of all sorts—Communists, reactionaries, Fascists, escapists, do-gooders, and other political immoderates—unconsciously select their ethic, whatever it may be, because of some psychic inadequacy. Obviously, this was true of Willie Turk; certainly it was equally true of Major Harris, though it seems to have escaped the man Harrison's attention, probably because it is true of him. Only for Cobb, and because of his last four words—"But am I saved?"—at which Harrison sneers so resoundingly, is there hope.

As long as I'm started, I may as well point out that one reason the man Harrison may be subject to his peculiar delusions is that the whole moral aroma of your magazine has come to be that of windy but vacu-

ous "liberalism"; and its connection with literature has become more and more remote. If such irrelevancies as Trade Winds, Your Literary I.Q., Seeing Things, record supplements, cartoons, articles on radio, civil rights, the United Nations, and every other unrelated topic increase your circulation, I suppose you cannot be expected to attach any importance to my complaint; but you would favor me and the cause of truthfulness in the representation of a product by excising the last two words from the name of your magazine. Without checking back, I would be very surprised to find that you have printed half a dozen articles of any consequence on the subject of literature in the last year; and when you inaugurate a series of articles on "What's Wrong with American Literature" with one by Louis Bromfield, you stand self-revealed as being in utter ignorance of the appropriate decencies of criticism. There has been scarcely an intelligent word spoken in that whole series of articles, which is quite reasonable when you consider that no one with any slightest qualifications to be heard has been involved. For a wholly adequate summary of the sorely-abused subject, I commend you to old man Hemingway, as quoted in *Time* some time ago: "Good literature is very rare always."

ROBERT H. K. WALKER.

"Intrigue"

SIR: Let William Seifriz [LETTERS SRL Apr. 17] look up "intrigue" in "The American College Dictionary"—latest issue. He will find that SRL and "society women" (his designation) use the first meaning which disturbs him so greatly. His favorite use of the word does not rate until fifth place and thereafter.

HELEN B. NESBITT.

Clearwater, Fla.