

## Ideals in America's Political Democracy

IT IS EASY in America to lay one's finger on almost every one of the great defects of civilization—even those defects which are specially characteristic of the civilization of the Old World. The United States cannot claim to be exempt from manifestations of economic slavery, of grinding the faces of the poor, of exploitation of the weak, of unfair distribution of wealth, of unjust monopoly, of unequal laws, of industrial and commercial chicanery, of disgraceful ignorance, of economic fallacies, of public corruption, of interested legislation, of want of public spirit, of vulgar boasting and chauvinism, of snobbery, of class prejudice, of respect of persons, and of a preference of the material over the spiritual. In a word, America has not attained, or nearly attained, perfection.

To attempt to say what the ideals of America are today, then, is especially presumptuous. In doing so, one can hardly avoid the charge of being more dogmatic than the facts warrant; there are many currents and multitudinous dissents. It is therefore too venturesome for anyone safely to describe the American ideals beyond what seem to be the ideals of the average thoughtful, public-spirited American. How many such persons there are one can hardly venture to guess: perhaps a million, perhaps two, out of a hundred; and even they are by no means alike. But although this is so, the common denominator of their ideals is this common denominator of the ideals of America, and whether they be regarded as prime movers or as resultants of forces (for they are both), they are equally significant as an index of the movements of our great inarticulate national spirit.

Moreover, the maintenance of the routine cast of mind is served by two of the most powerful engines of general influence: the larger daily newspapers and the public school. The magnitude of the fixed capital in a large modern newspaper plant and the consequent importance of its advertising and business connections make it unlikely that any great daily will be at all persistently a force for the reshaping of political ideals. Orthodoxy on the whole is their inevitable line.

Accordingly, such movements as the Short Ballot, the central control of local administration, and the closer union of legislative and executive branches have to reckon with the rooted orthodoxy of common school teaching as a very practical matter.

Consider, then, the thoughtful minority. If a hundred average Americans were asked what was the chief of American political ideals, ninety-nine would probably answer: Democracy, the Sovereignty of the People. As yet there has been no significant dissent from the doctrine of the declaration that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. So much is

axiomatic. But if you were to ask why they were devoted to this ideal, the voices of response would grow more uncertain and various.

Slowly, however, out of the confusion might come some such reply as this: Democracy is an assurance neither of wisdom nor of virtue in our day; but it is the best hope we have of their gradual but slow emergence. This is mainly for three reasons.

First, consider the broader and the popular base on which our government rests. The more stable it is, the more stable is progress under it. All will have some reason to believe that they obey is their own will, and that the commands of law are self-imposed. All feel themselves more or less committed to the playing of the game according to the rules. Violent breaks with the past are less to be feared. It follows then that progress, though it may be slower in any given time than under the enlightened few, is likely to be more secure.

Second, democracy seems to be the only promising device for keeping government aimed straight. Since we have definitely given up the Platonic notion of a classification of human beings in respect of essential worth, and come to the conclusion that the chance for a good life for everyone must weigh equally in the scales of state, then a wide distribution of power is the best safeguard against the distortion of the purpose of equal service. Let a government be stupid or inept, and we may forgive; but if it persistently devote its powers to the service of some at the expense of others, that is the unpardonable sin. From that sin, democracy offers the best promise yet made of saving us. No critic or

opponent of democracy has offered any practical alternative whatever.

Third, democracy is the most powerful engine of general education. Learning by doing, improvement by trial and error or success, training for responsibility by the sharing of responsibility—these are phases that nowadays carry pretty general conviction. And if it is true that diverse as we are, we are nevertheless a common humanity; if, in the long run it is impossible in any civilization for any lesser part to go

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