

Every Citizen Responsible for Representative Government

By Charles E. Merriam, professor of political science in the University of Chicago and member of the Chicago City Council.

The greatest grafter is the citizen who, whether rich or poor, educated or illiterate, claims and exercises all the rights and privileges of citizenship in a self-governing community, but will assume none of its obligations. For many years most men were subjects and only a few were citizens. Citizenship was a right greatly prized by those who were fortunate enough to obtain it. Its possession differentiated the owner sharply from the subject or slave and gave him a civil dignity and privileges of great importance.

Restrictions upon citizenship were gradually broken down in the course of time. In our day, the mingling of races and the development of democracy have combined to expand the narrow limits that once encompassed citizenship and have made it practically inclusive of all persons living within the territorial limits of a state.

Citizenship is easy to cast off and easy to acquire, among Western nations at least. Place of nativity has ceased to be the main door to citizenship and the distinction between citizen and subject has been swept away by the democratic tide.

The ease with which citizenship is obtained and the universal possession of it have destroyed the exclusive character which it once possessed. There is danger that the duties and obligations of citizenship will be neglected or despised. When citizenship was something to be "bought with a great price," the incidents of the new relation were carefully weighed and considered. When it comes without effort and to practically all, it is plain that its advantages and obligations are less likely to be the subject of serious consideration.

Citizen as a Soldier.

The original and primary duty of the citizen was military in nature. It included the defense of the state against external enemies and protection by the state for the citizen. He was an active or a potential soldier.

These military qualities of early citizenship have survived without loss of force or vigor. The modern citizen is as good a soldier as his early prototype. In face of the danger of group destruction the group will display the early virtues of self-defense. The soldier side of the citizen must last while soldierly duties remain.

Within the last generation the burden of citizenship has, in many instances, proved too heavy for its bearers. The rapid increase in population, the migratory tendencies of the population, the swift and confusing changes in the forms of industrial organization have produced situations in which the obligations of citizenship have been greater than ever before. We need not say that there has been a decline in civic virtue, but it is clear that new conditions demand different standards and these have not been understood or met.

Corruption and widespread misgovernment and maladministration have been the product of the new conditions. Organized political dishonesty on a large scale is a recognized factor in American political life. Bands of political buccaneers capture cities, counties and states, plundering and levying tribute like their predecessors. Now it is some political panderer claiming his tribute; now it is some contractor fleecing a willing representative of the public; now it is some great corporation corrupting the foundations of law and justice. No man has ever been bold enough to estimate the total annual revenue from political corruption, but the sum, if known, would rank grafting among the most profitable of our extractive industries.

Duties Not Realized.

Future historians will look back with amazement and amusement upon a state of political affairs in which organized plunderers played so notorious and so shameless a part. Before the judgment seat of history what a searching examination will be made of the survivors of political barbarism. Some day the masks and the veils will be torn aside and the hidden motives brought to light, the secret alliances and affiliations made plain.

The fact is that the new obligations incident to the citizenship are not fully realized. Men who are entirely willing to suffer for their country in war are unwilling to serve it in times of peace, or remain indifferent because they do not see the connection between effort and effect in public affairs as in military service. The action of the bullet is direct and perceptible. The citizen's part in molding public opinion is difficult to trace, although none the less powerful.

If the great struggle for self-government could be dramatized and presented as vividly as the scenes of war, the result would be different. The poet, the painter, the novelist, the historian, the musician, have portrayed war in masterpieces. But song and story have not yet described the civic struggle in times of peace. The material is available but has not been employed. Judge Lindsay's "Jungle" is the nearest approach to it, and certainly his descriptions lack nothing of dramatic interest and power.

Period of Transition.

We still think of liberty as won chiefly on the battlefield; of human rights as protected mainly by the sword; of free institutions as if main-

tained by the arm of the soldier. The quiet process by which thousands of citizens formulate public opinion and provide for its execution are by no means so picturesque or attractive as the scenes of military clash and conflict.

Men to whom cowardice on the field of battle would be detestable, may be routed by a sneer in civic affairs. Men to whom desertion from an army would be a crime unspeakable, without perceiving it will abandon their plain duty in the face of critical civic occasions.

And this is inevitable in a transition stage, where we pass from an era largely or in great part military in its activities to an era wholly or largely industrial in character. A great element of difficulty in our present situation lies in transferring former types of military enthusiasm to new conditions. The citizen has the spirit and virtues of the soldier but he does not see clearly how to apply these qualities or the necessity of applying them to political and social conditions.

Citizen Is a Trustee.

We often hear the phrase, "A public office is a public trust." It is no less true that citizenship itself is a trust and every citizen a trustee. In a peculiar sense the official is a trustee for the public, but the voter is also a trustee, and the citizen, whether a voter or not, is also a trustee.

The great heritage of free government is handed down to every citizen, as well as to officials, in trust. The principles and practices of growth are in the care of everyone who lives under them. No man can escape responsibility for his part in passing on our institutions to the following generation. Nor can he impose it upon any other man. Self-government means just what it says. It involves political interest and action on the part of those who are included in the jurisdiction of the government. Wherever the individuals who constitute a commonwealth find that the task of attending to their own political affairs is too difficult or irksome, or discover other occupations more pleasant or more profitable, then others take up the task and self-government actually, if not in form, ceases.

The greatest grafter is the citizen who claims and exercises the rights and privileges of citizenship but will assume none of its obligations. Witness the man who will not register lest his name may be drawn as a juror; the man who will not vote; the man who will not perform his plain political duty lest his business be affected. These men are civic traitors. They betray not only the living but generations of the past and future. They enjoy the advantages won by generations of sacrifice and struggle. They turn these institutions to their own personal profit and advantage, and pass on to the next generation the wasted inheritance. Unmindful of the sacred obligations of the citizen, they are willing to profit by the effort of others but unwilling to contribute effort of their own. They take but do not give.

Interest Is Not Sustained.

Democracy is founded upon the assumption that the bulk of the community will give the necessary time and attention to public affairs to insure proper management of the interests of the community. Every citizen must give a part of his time and attention to the consideration of the general interest of the state.

Democracy does not ordinarily require that a man give his whole time, but it does demand that he give his living and continuous interest to public problems. We may be sure that special interests are always active and they can be offset only by substantial effort on the part of those whose chief interest is not a selfish one.

We may confidently rely upon the persistence of every man who has a personal interest in misgovernment. The dollar sign is an easy cue to follow. Unless we can reckon upon the equally persistent action of men who have no direct interest at stake, it is impossible to resist attacks upon the integrity and efficiency of the government. Another accompaniment of the change from military to industrial standards is seen in the lack of action except under unusual circumstances. After a treasurer steals a million we are duly aroused and amend the law; after a fire we revise the building code; after a series of scandals we ask for a charter. This violent action is clear evidence of a lack of sustained interest in public affairs. In all of these instances the facts were as available before as after the calamity.

Following the action comes reaction and often relapse. Laws are no more self-executing than New Year's resolutions. They are expressions of public opinion, which, for practical effect, require wise and vigorous administration. Efficient administration is, however, a result of sustained and persistent general interest and demand, and where interest can be aroused only with great difficulty and under unusual conditions, the necessary attention to public administration is lacking. The average citizen pins his faith to a law and ignores the value of public administration. It is easier to arouse a thousand men to demand a law than to interest one in its practical administration.

Governmental action is really determined, however, not by the enthusiasm and excitement of crisis, but by the

level of the everyday interest of the average man.

Cincinnatus, having served the state, could return to his neglected plow. This is what our citizen often attempts to do, but with the result that his work is undone before he has plowed a single furrow. The soldier may rest between wars, but the citizens disband at their peril. Like pioneers, they must carry their guns to the fields.

The greatest help to the citizen at the present hour and under our new and changing conditions is publicity. The existence and continuance of the present system depends entirely upon concealment of the essential facts from the public.

The problems arising out of the industrial and urban conditions of modern times are enormous. The widest possible dissemination of the facts of our political and industrial life is fundamental to any wise and permanent settlement for the future.

We stand at the beginning of an era of constructive legislation on a wider and more difficult scale than ever yet attempted. These changes are not confined to alterations in the form of government, or new adaptations of democratic institutions. They involve broad policies of social legislation which will tax not only the courage and the honesty but also the wisdom of our legislators and our citizens as never before.

Lagging far behind the great industrial states of the world in social legislation, we must advance with quickened step to keep pace with the progress of civilization and humanity. We must rescue our political liberty from the reproaches laid upon it, and we must prevent the establishment of conditions under which liberty and the pursuit of happiness are empty of genuine meaning.

Our generation has before it a task of unusual difficulty. We must restore the heritage of public liberty. We must pay off the debts and mortgages, repair the ravages made by graft and waste and set our house in order. We need safe guides. The good intentions of folly and fury may lead us far astray, while the demagogue is as dangerous as the open enemy. Public opinion is the moving spirit in all democratic government, and the more firmly this is based upon broad and wise consideration of the facts, the quicker and the better the results.

ABOLISH SPECIAL PRIVILEGE.

There are five forms of special privileges that should be abolished in order to properly regulate prices and restore prosperity to all people:

- First. The franchise privilege.
- Second. The privilege of land monopoly.
- Third. Patent-monopoly privilege.
- Fourth. Bank or credit privilege.
- Fifth. The protective-tariff privilege.

The remedy for the first is to abolish private ownership of public utilities, such as railroads, telegraph and telephone lines, gas and water works.

For the second, to exempt everything that man produces from taxation; tax land values for city, county, state and national purposes, so as to take all the unearned increment of land for public use. This would restore the land to the people and exempt all man-produced wealth from taxation; prices would fall to a natural level.

The third, the right of the inventor to the full reward due him from society for his invention. At present he often gets nothing, and the public often gets nothing, and the people go without benefits because of the suppression of valuable inventions by corporations and others. Abolish monopolistic ownership of patents and allow everyone to manufacture any patent device by payment of a royalty to the inventor, royalty to be regulated by patent commissioners.

Fourth, the Government have full control of all the banks in the country, thus taking the control of credit from private hands.

Finally, all forms of indirect taxation to be abolished, such as the tariff, internal-revenue taxes, and license tax, because the effect of such taxation is to farm out the collections of taxes to individuals or corporations.—Richard Cavelly.

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