Why Are You a Democrat or a Republican?

We Are Fortunate in Having a Permanent Election Issue on Which We May Take Sides Without Impairing Our Loyalty

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It has often been made a matter of reproach to the inhabitants of these United States that we are unduly vainglorious and that we are prone to vaunt our advantages over other nationalities, even going so far on occasion as to claim superiority above all other peoples, present and past. Boastfulness like this is never pleasant to overhear, either from an individual or from a nation; it tends to repel sympathy and to discourage mutual understanding; and it is a confession of juvenility, or at least of social immaturity. That American is fortunate who has never been made to blush either abroad or at home by the loud talk of chance compatriots encountered in his travels. But although not a few of us are now and again guilty of this puering lapse from good manners, a competent and cosmopolitan observer would doubt whether we are greater or more frequent transgressors than the French or the Germans; and he would hesitate to assert that our boastfulness, even if it may be more blatant, is really more insistent than theirs.

Furthermore, we Americans can comfort ourselves with the knowledge that in so far as we possess this unlovely characteristic, we have at least come by it honestly, having brought it over with us in the original package from the mother country. From the days of Shakespeare to the days of Kipling our kin across the sea in their island kingdom have never been successful in concealing their conviction that one Englishman could outfight five Frenchmen. Superb self-confidence, expressing itself in lofty self-appreciation, is not the exclusive privilege of any one race; it seems to be a fundamental trait of humanity; and we need not apologize that we share it with the rest of the world. Nor need we regret this, for it has its good side as well as its bad. An imperturbable belief in ourselves and in our destiny is not an evil thing in itself, even if its casual manifestations may be offensive. Occasionally this belief might be a very precious possession for any people, even if—like other precious possessions—it had to be paid for. Perhaps we may as well admit that this sort of overt self-confidence is not a little like the schoolboy’s definition of a lie—“an abomination in the sight of the Lord, but a very present help in time of need.”

Moreover, we ought to be able to see that beneath the top-lofty brags of the forthputting peoples there is likely to exist a sober basis of solid fact. The Frenchman is justified, and the German no less, in his conviction that he has obvious superiorities of one kind or another which men of alien stocks cannot emulate, even if they may seek vainly and enviously to imitate. So the lone Englishman may not be able to vanquish five Frenchmen in single-combat, and yet at sea he has been willing to give long odds without losing the fight. We Americans, in our turn, cannot help knowing that fortune has favored us and that we have had advantages denied to other peoples. Some of these advantages are the bounty of nature; some of them are the result of our remoteness from the dynastic complexity of European politics; and some again are to be ascribed to the fact that we are a selected stock, harder than others, since we are the descendants of the stalwart pioneers who fought each for his own hand in a new country with the red Indians in front of him and the white terror of the ocean at his back.

Most of the many aspects of our multifarious good fortune we have magnified greatly. Perhaps, however, there is one advantage, purely accidental as it may be, that we have failed to value as highly as we might or even to perceive as clearly as we ought, although it is a piece of national good luck that every other nation may well envy us. It is the result of the fact that we are profoundly satisfied with the framework of our government as this was made for us by the Fathers of the Republic, and of the further fact that we possess a permanent issue upon which we may take sides without impairing our unhesitating loyalty to the Constitution. In other words, we are doubly fortunate, first in our universal acceptance of our constitutional scheme of government, and second, in our perennial difference of opinion as to the proper interpretation of the Constitution, a difference of opinion which leads us instinctively to gather ourselves into opposing groups and thus create the strong and coherent political parties which are requisite for the satisfactory working of parliamentary institutions.

First then, we Americans are fortunate in our loyalty to the Constitution, that is to say, in our hearty acquiescence in the form of government under which we live. We may wish to amend the Constitution, and we may regret that the process of amendment, which ought to be difficult, is obviously, a little too difficult. But we not only accept the Constitution as a whole, we are really attached to it. This good fortune has befallen no one of the more powerful countries of Europe—whatever may be the case in certain of the weaker States, like Switzerland. In none of the larger nations is there a general acceptance of the fundamental framework of its government. In France, for example, the republic has had a forty-year fight for its life, and the Royalists, the Bonapartists, and the Clericals have been frank in expressing their detestation of republican rule and of their anxiety to change the form of government to a monarchy. In France, therefore, patriotic citizens have rarely felt free to divide on questions of policy, since they might be forced to unite in defending the very existence of the republic. In Germany the hereditary autocracy of the Kaiser is abhorrent to a very large proportion of the population, who would, if they could, substitute a different kind of rule. In Great Britain there have been of late abrupt alterations of the Constitution, such as the subordination of the upper house to the lower, and many other changes as violent must take place before an outworn and semi-feudal organization can be adjusted to the political needs of an industrial people.

It is scarcely too much to say that there are powerful political parties in Great Britain, in Germany and in France whose avowed object has been not to capture the administration but to wreck the governmental machinery altogether. But there is in the United States no political party which is hostile to the Constitution as a whole, however imperative may be the demand for its amendment to conform to conditions its makers could not foresee. In this agreement of all parties in the United States upon the fundamental organization, we
But the people of the United States will continue to divide in accord with their respective affiliations for one or the other of these antithetical beliefs. The opposition between these theories is eternal; it is the opposition of the centrifugal tendency to the centripetal. It is, in fact, the everlasting and irremovable conflict between the rights of the individual and the rights of the social organization of which the individual is a constituent element. Thus the Constitution of the United States is the result of a compromise between the beliefs of Hamilton and the beliefs of Jefferson. So any social organization must be a compromise between the authoritarianism of that organization and the natural desire of every individual in it to live his own life in his own fashion.

Regardless of the needs of his fellows. Thus we see that the opposing theories which are the vital principles of the two persistent American parties are not merely local, not merely American, not even European only. They are irreconcilable now, and they have been irreconcilable ever since the proverbial axeman of man descended from his family tree and abandoned the use of that proboscis tail by theaid of which he had suspended himself from the boughs of the forest primeval.

Men have beenured more than those question marks hung themselves up before his eyes. What are the rights of the individual? What are the duties and the powers of society? How much or how little power should any government derivate in the city, in the State, and in the Nation? To the true Jeffersonian, that government is best that governs least, and, therefore, if we insist on going to the logical extreme, the least possible government might be no government at all. To the true Hamiltonian the State should ascend to the duties assigned the individual; it should intercede to help him, and as long as it can it should continue to interfere as often as need be; and, therefore, if we insist on going to the logical extreme, that government might best be which took over everything to itself and subordinated itself everywhere for the individual—and that is simply socialism.

We all know that the Democratic Party has never advocated anarchy and that the Republican Party has never advocated socialism. We may go further and say that they never will urge doctrines so extreme. But to the middle of the rising and falling plank, that the Jeffersonian and the Hamiltonian stand face to face, turning their backs on what may be behind them on the extremities of the board. The Hamiltonian believes in government by the best, by the educated leaders, competent to guide the less competent; and this is true pretension in the best sense of that absurd term. The Jeffersonian believes that the average man, however unschooled, actually knows his own business, or at least knows what he is about, better than some man can know is for him; and this is true democracy in the best sense of that altered term.

These two attitudes are inevitably antagonistic; they are two extremes, and they winnow out the most happily mediocrity. To which of the two parties, the aristocracy (that is, the Socialists of that term), or the democracy, (in the former part of that term), to which of the two any one of us shall belong in not a matter of choice. For each of us it is a part of our career of which we were born. By a native bias, beyond his control, it is natural not necessarily either a Hamiltonian or a Jeffersonian, as a just philosophy must be Platonist or an Aristotelian, and just as a novelist must be either a realist or a romanticist, or just as a case of predetermination; it is not an example of free will. We are born to vote with Hamilton and against Jefferson; or with Jefferson and against Hamilton. We may, as all of us, grow up in the wrong group and then sooner or later discover that we do not fit where we find ourselves, wherein we will go over to the other group, to remain thereafter where we belong. We may even bear the tenets of the wrong party for us and cling to it all our days, although ever impelled away from it to the other, the more and more as our utility as citizens is diminished, since we are not constantly associated with our associates.

Now, it is impossible to declarde absolute right and wrong. The stanchest followers of Hamiltonism is the character of one of the Jeffersonians, or the most fervent admirers of Jeffersonism, or of Jeffersonism, or the most enlightened minded enough to perceive the strength of the other side, and the necessity of respecting the other side, and the respect the other's point of view. Both can agree to disagree, but neither can agree to controvert. And here is where we Americans differ from the people of most of the other countries. Here also is the place where the American citizen will be more and more the benefit of an education which has liberated his mind, but which has not been necessary to purge, and which has trained him to try to understand (and even to admire) the opinions he does not share—here where the intelligent American mind may find its most and best opportunity for service to the Commonwealth.

He should take his place a little nearer to the centre of the political seamer than the extreme, natural and inevitable majority of those who hold the same beliefs. He should keep his mind free over the extreme, and thus be ready to move to the left or to the right, as the case may be—not for a little space, if he sees that the principles of the other party may be more nearly right, but that the party the other side which has done most for the national cause. That is what the Republicans in the South and the Democrats in the North, which were supposed to be the South, but who broke from their party allegiance and voted according to their consciences for the acquittal of Andrew Johnson. No single acts of Grant and of Cleveland represent the four years of their administration in more striking fashion than the sterner and rugged resistance to inflation, the one to the expansion of the greenbacks, the other to the coinage of silver. Lowell once said (correctly I suppose) that public opinion was like the pressure of the atmosphere; that when you put your hand on it, you could not tell how much was twenty pounds per square inch, and the pressure of party was really the same. But the strong men can do their own thinking and should not be forced to fit themselves into the rack of dirty resistance to this invisible force. It behoves us to cultivate that kind of independence, in which the American mind is the highest in the world.