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The Story Congress Will Tell

by George E. Sokolsky

George E. Sokolsky, a regular contributor to NEW OUTLOOK has been traveling throughout the United States listening to and gathering the comments which Congressmen at home are hearing from their constituents.

IF President Roosevelt were a Caliph in ancient Bagdad, he would disguise himself as a Congressman and wander about the country asking the man at the filling station, the hitch-hiker, the farmer and his wife, the local chairlady of a women's club—he would ask them what they thought of F. D. R., the NRA, Hugh Johnson, Brain Trusters, Jim Farley and the entire set-up in Washington.

And he would get an earful. What perhaps would surprise him most would be the paradox that while he, personally, is still quite popular among the people, everything that he stands for and everything that is done in his name stimulates increasing antagonism. He would be startled by the contradiction that whereas on all sides one hears, "Stand by the President," one also hears on the same sides, the increasingly louder comment that Hugh Johnson wants a dictatorship and that he won't get it in this country—not by a long sight.

From the standpoint of the masses, the President's task on March 4 was a simply stated one: it was to get 10,000,000 men back to work immediately. Nobody cared how he did it. Nobody was particularly concerned with fundamental social and economic issues. Nobody expected a revolution. Nobody cared for a basic struggle between Capitalism, Fascism and Communism. The people wanted work. *They did not want a fifth winter of Depression.* If Roosevelt provided work before the snow set in, they would have woolen underwear, overcoats, a Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner. That was all that the average American wanted and he was willing to follow Mr. Roosevelt anywhere in order to get it.

The American is, in many respects, a simple person. He does not like to become involved in weighty ideological discussions; he does not easily comprehend fractions of ideas. He does not care much about the philosophy of Fascism, but he admires Mussolini; he cannot even begin to bother about the generalized theories of Communism, but he can understand that Soviet Russia wants to buy



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machinery. It is not so much that the American is an intellectual dumb-bell, as it is that he thinks in terms of actions and things rather than in terms of philosophic concepts. Thus, Hugh Johnson at first appeared to him a superman, while Richberg and Tugwell and other brainy fellows confused and frightened him. Much of the President's popularity arose from a single fact, namely, that he picked up the microphone and said:

"My friends, tomorrow morning we shall take the following steps for the following purpose and we hope to achieve these specific results. If we fail, as fail we might, we shall do something else next week."

That sounded just right. It was a promise of definite action to meet specific needs. It was always concise and it was always simple.

Had conditions improved for the ordinary person, Mr. Roosevelt might have continued to hold the unimpaired personal loyalty of his people. Wherever conditions have so improved, he is as popular today as he was on March 5. For instance, I was in Memphis, Tennessee, three weeks ago from this writing. That city is the center of an important cotton industry representing three states, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Mr. Wallace's processing tax and the Government's cotton program has worked beneficially for that area. But when I was in Chicago and later in Salt Lake City, I heard different tales. Chicago has suffered from the NRA and Salt Lake City is suffering from an accumulation of causes, some going back to Mother Earth; in cities of this category, Mr. Roosevelt is growing exceedingly unpopular—not so much the President himself as his Administration.



If the NRA had not promised too much, this swing back from it might not have been either so swift or so positive, but in July and August the ordinary American, who is neither an expert economist nor a political student, felt that it was all over and that he would return to the golden days of 1928-29. In the economic history of this country, General Johnson's talks during those two months will go down as a psychological crime, and if Mr. Roosevelt finds himself with an antagonistic Congress and a divided party, when Congress meets, he can largely blame General Johnson's talks. The American people have become accustomed to expect sobriety of statement from the Federal Government, which they have tended to trust more than Congress or State or municipal Governments. In July and August, NRA ballyhoo was anything but sober. It was optimism running in the direction of delirium. And today, the reaction and the headache have set in.

In any country, a dictatorship is always in a less pleasant spot than a democratic government, because from a dictatorship the people expect immediate and favorable results. The sacrifice of democratic controls can only be compensated by startling improvements in social and economic conditions. These do not appear. Therefore, the people not only complain that they have been hoaxed but they analyze, crudely but directly, both the process of hoaxing and the results observable.



The most universal complaint is that the NRA is squeezing the middleman and the white collar man, that is, the average American in the average city, out of existence. The grocer, the butcher, the barber, the stenographer, the school teacher, the kind of people that the neighbors know and like, have not been benefitted by the NRA; they are much worse off because prices have gone up and their compensations are stationary. These folks constitute the solid elements in every city and town. They are usually the native American element in the place—the old families. They dominate the political life, and therefore, the local Congressman and Senator.

They are usually very conservative. They regard Wall Street as a wicked institution, and they are still opposed to trusts. They have never accustomed themselves to the unionization of labor and regard the labor unions as a racket. They believe in "rugged individualism," go to

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church and fear other "isms" of all kinds. Mr. Tugwell's economic philosophy sounds to them like so much German.

In the Middle-west, and the South, they favor inflation because that will free them from their New York creditors. In the silver states, they want as much done for silver as was done for cotton. In California, they seek relief for the citrus industry. They resent the government's attempt to run their business although they would welcome anything the government might do to make them prosperous. They desire prosperity but not government management.

It is fatuous for Mr. Roosevelt's paternalistic philosophers to criticize the American by insisting that he wants government assistance and at the same time objects to the government in business. That is not subject to criticism because it is just what the American wants. He seeks help, but not management; assistance, but not control; coöperation, but not socialization.



It is for this reason that Henry Ford is something of a hero these days. He outwitted the NRA and instead of "cracking down" on him, the people admire him. In three cities, during lectures when I casually mentioned the name of Henry Ford, there was vociferous applause. In Salt Lake City and San Francisco, barbers' objections to the NRA fixed prices for hair-cuts symbolized the general local attitude towards price fixing—and there was applause for the barbers. In Hollywood, Eddie Cantor became the hero of the motion picture industry because he assumed the responsibility for fighting a salary fixing provision in the Motion Picture Code. Incidentally, wherever I have been during the past month, I have found that the public has already discovered that just as the gold hoarding bugaboo was a false alarm, so whoever puts up a just and stiff fight against the NRA usually has his way. Nobody admires a glass pistol.

The average American had grown weary of congressional speeches and inaction; but he has not been able to accustom himself to NRA speeches and "dictatorship." After all, he knows his Congressman; he votes for him and although he sometimes laughs at him, he can go to him for a favor. This sudden injection into his affairs of strangers, not selected by himself, wholly unaccount-



able to him, who tell him where he gets off and threaten him with economic destruction if there is the slightest disobedience or even a difference of opinion, startles an American and makes him want to fight.

In this country there is an inherent resistance to both paternalism and dictatorship. This resistance is as fundamental as the puritanism which came out of New England. No system can find root in American soil which rejects the conception of democracy as expressed in the political form of elected officials. The American therefore turns from the NRA dictator to his Congressman; he turns from the Blue Eagle to the Constitution; he turns from Hugh Johnson to Fiorello La Guardia.

The farmer, in particular, has found the New Deal difficult to understand, because he assumes that the industrial worker is in good shape and that only he, the farmer, is being ditched. This attitude is indubitably an effect of the NRA drive, and all of General Johnson's profanities will not make the slightest impression on the farmer. They knew, all the time, that the NRA was not for them; but they ask why does Hugh Johnson do all the talking for the Administration? Why is it that their own Governors and Senators and Congressmen get the cold shoulder when they go to Washington? They do not want Johnson to come to their cities to tell them where to get off; they feel that

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it is up to the Administration to listen to their elected officials—to the men they send to Washington. When the Governor of a state goes to Washington and has to sit about cooling his heels, whether it is about farm relief or an R. F. C. loan or a Public Works loan, every citizen in his state is offended. After all, a Governor of a State is some personality with his own people—and the Governors have written home from Washington telling of the frigidity with which they have been received.

Take the case of Utah, for instance. The Governor of the State and the Mayor of Salt Lake City and a delegation of important citizens went to Washington to negotiate on public works. First of all, everything moved with terrifying slowness. One of the enterprises was a library for the University of Utah. It was clear that if anything was to be done to help the unemployment situation in Utah, it should be done over the winter when the need is greatest. Negotiations seemed never to end. Then, when everything looked as though the enterprise were to be embarked upon, the State of Utah was told that a New York lawyer (one on a list) would have to go over the law of the enterprise at a fee of one thousand dollars—and that in spite of the fact that both the State and the National Governments maintain competent legal departments.

Again Utah desires reclamation work because it is losing population, but the Public Works organization apparently did not favor this project. Utah knows what it needs and wants, but it seems to have no way of getting it. It can apparently get money for what it does not need and does not want. In Salt Lake City, I listened to two full days of complaint at the workings of the Public Works organization. I heard the same complaints elsewhere. The Congressmen and Senators are also listening to them.

I find as I go about the country that there is little real criticism of the accomplishments of the Roosevelt Administration; the objection is to the Fascistic threats of coercion, the assaults on rights which antedate the Constitution, the general blustering attitude of the new officialdom. Whenever one gets down to brass tacks on actual accomplishments, the consensus of opinion is that, notwithstanding many mistakes, conditions are no worse than before March 4, and there seems to be a tendency to resent any suggestion that the country might have been better off had Hoover been elected. That argument wins no ready response.

But when one asks about freedom of the press, there is a veritable explosion in any part of the country. And it does not arise from any love for the newspapers, but resentment rises to choler at the mere thought of bureaucrats trying to keep the people in the dark. Nothing that the Roosevelt Administration has done has got them in wrong with the average American as has the steps that have been taken to keep things out of the papers—and that gets into the papers. The impression is getting around that the Administration is tricky, that it has something to hide.

When this is combined with the fact that everyone close to the President is broadcasting at a salary and writing in the magazines and that Mr. Moley and Vincent Astor have started a *Rigierungsblatt*, men just wonder whether some European system is not being put over on the American people.

Congress will undoubtedly raise this issue because it is one of the most discussed questions in every part of the country. It will be remembered that William Jennings Bryan was severely criticized for accepting lecture fees while Secretary of State; this criticism is alive with the people of the country today. The sentiment seems to be that the Administration is attempting to use the press and the radio to put views forward and that it will fight with all its formidable power even the tiniest person who happens to oppose some picayune idea of a petty bureaucrat. In this country, such an attitude breeds contempt.

One hears of a coalition of Southern inflation and Western silver senators against the Administration. The silver states control fourteen votes in the Senate. The Southern inflationists control from ten to twenty votes—say a minimum of ten. This *bloc* of at least twenty-four will probably hold the balance of power in the Senate. Although

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it seems to be doubted that they can undo the Roosevelt program, they can investigate and give publicity to the conduct of that program in a manner embarrassing to the President. It is expected that that will be done.

I have just been on the trail of Senator Wheeler, who has been barnstorming in these parts stirring the people to favor silver legislation. Although I personally have no enthusiasm for Senator Wheeler's program, I must testify to the brilliant impression he makes on his audiences. In various parts of the country, the people are being brought into line to support a money policy much to the left of the President's, and the Senators will not be bound by any honeymoon amenities. Rather will they seek to prove to their constituencies that, even if they could convince neither the President nor the Administration, they nevertheless stood by the people. It is necessary for all Congressmen and Senators to make that clear before the next election.

One fact stands out clearly to me on this trip across the country, namely, that the average American resents bulldozing more than he does bad economics. If Mr. Roosevelt produced an economic paradise, he would still have to put a lock on General Johnson and Donald Richberg and Professor Tugwell and all the little, weeney Johnsons all over the country, because sooner or later the American people are going to crack down on them and it will not be pleasant.



Was it Karl Marx who said that there could not be a revolution in Germany because it was *verboten*? Well, the American is not like that. If it is *verboten*, by heck, he'll do it, just to show that he is a free man. That was his reaction to prohibition; that is his reaction to the NRA. But in the Roosevelt Administration, he finds that the people who are telling him what to do are outsiders, of whom he has never heard, associated with Government by nepotism. He will take no lip from that sort of folk.

Take for instance, the man who is drawing up the Motion Picture Code, Sol Rosenblatt. Nobody in the industry knows much about him, except that he was associated with the theatrical lawyer, Nathan Burkan, and that he got most of his information from one of the Warner Brothers after one of the usual Hollywood raiding rows among the studios. Why, they ask in Hollywood, did not the Government ask such men as Irving Thalberg, or Eddie Cantor, or Douglas Fairbanks, or a group of them to draw up the code? Why was the code, in its final form, handled by an outsider? The same question is being asked about other codes in other cities—particularly in one—industry cities. In a word, who are these outsiders and why do they chisel into an industry?

It will be tragic if an entire program of economic rehabilitation is scuttled by bad manners, ballyhoo, wild language and impudent bureaucratic methods. Mr. Roosevelt is probably unaware, as great men so often are, of the impression which his adjutants are making upon the men and women who elected him President of the United States, but he will know all about it after Congress meets, because every Congressman and every Senator is going to get it into the Congressional Record, for free distribution, that he fought for the rights of the people against the bureaucrats and the brain trusters. It is going to be made clear that Congress is not Fascist. And that is what the people want. They don't mind Republicans and they can tolerate Democrats, but they are not going to be governed by a smarter-than-thou bureaucracy that frightens honest folks.

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