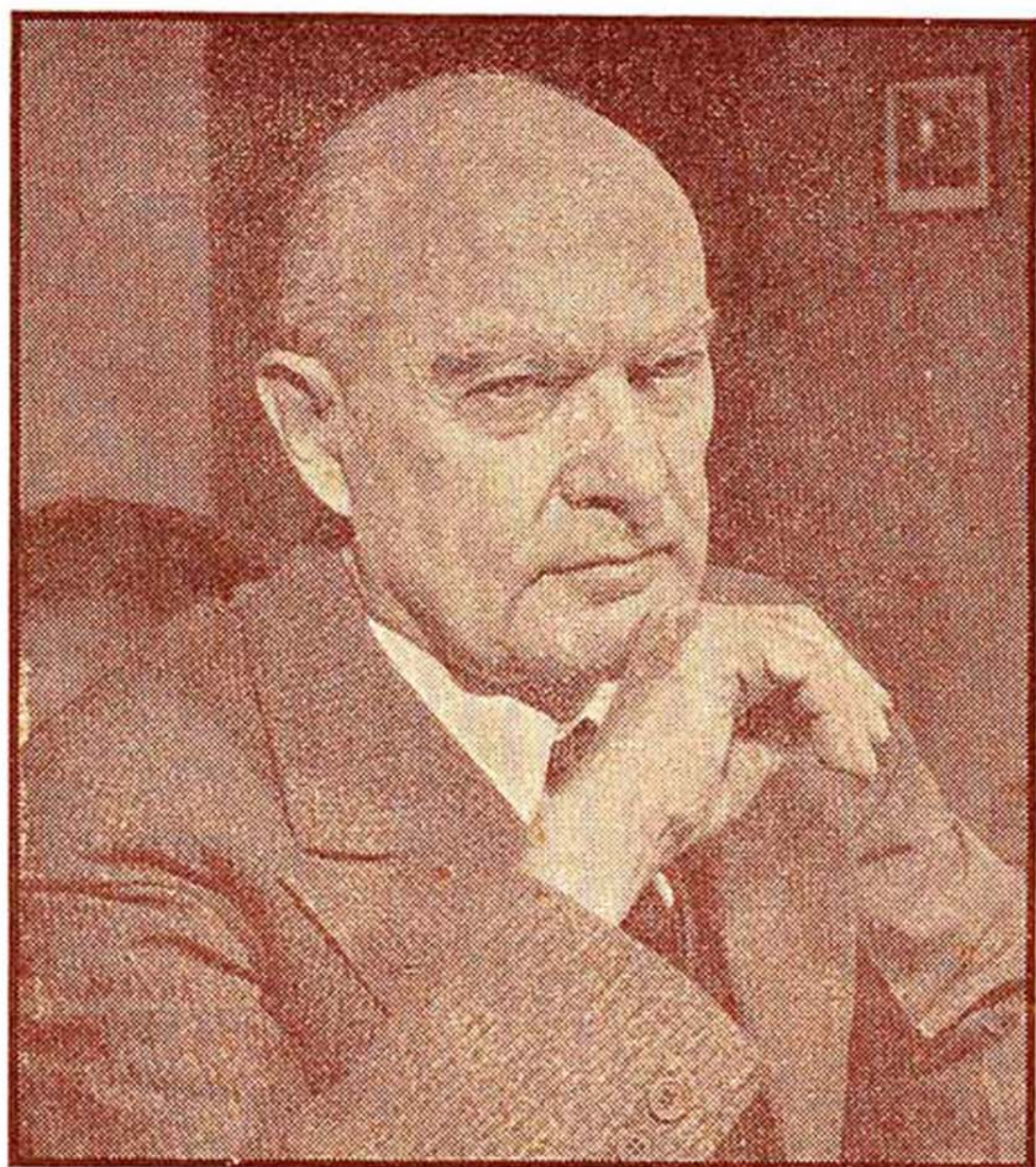


Newsweek

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Public Opinion Since Pearl Harbor

by RAYMOND MOLEY



Sumner defined what happened here

In the course of the twelve months since Pearl Harbor approximately one-third of the pieces appearing under the caption "Perspective" have been written in American cities considerably distant from New York. The meanderings thus recorded included three extensive trips to California, one to New Orleans and well over a score of others to various centers of war production. The mileage was something more than fifty thousand. This may not be the best way to study public opinion. But until the statisticians get ready to take over, some such peripatetic process must suffice.

On the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, the United States was a seriously divided country. Two years of intense debate on the question of American participation in the war had made deep lacerations in the American mind. That the grim crisis of the war brought unity has been said many times. It is a truism, and a rather trite one. But the change is really less simple than that.

The pre-Pearl Harbor issue has been liquidated not because of an act of national will power. It has faded before the immediate tasks of war. The new year brought so many jobs to do, so many problems to grapple with, that there was no time to remember 1941. Hence, appeals based upon the old issue fell on deaf ears. Closing the books on this issue re-

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established many an old friendship, silenced many angry voices and opened once more channels of mutual respect and good will. It suffices now that right for us all is on the side of our arms.

At no time in the year has there been a real failure on the part of Americans to appreciate the gravity of the war job. The public has needed no propaganda agencies to build morale. It has been passionately interested in following the war news—interested and concerned even to the point of doubting that the government is telling it enough. The propaganda agencies will be making a great mistake if, as is reported, they flood the country with pep speakers and canned speeches next year. Now that there is scarcely anyone at home without ties to the millions in the services, the war is close and vivid. A people so aware of reality is impatient with synthetic offerings.

The public lost interest in many other pre-Pearl Harbor preoccupations. Schemes for social amelioration, like those with which some states were teeming for half a dozen years, lost their allure. Full employment has swept away most of their followers. But, in a broader sense, such schemes no longer interest people because they haven't either the heart or the time to bother about small devices for security when the basis of all security is threatened.

Nothing in the whole year of war so irritated the public as the early fandangos of the OCD. Its efforts to tie up the grim business of warding off submarines, bombers and saboteurs with petty frills seriously hurt the Administration's prestige. The country overruled its government here. It made it unmistakably clear that first things must come first. All this was a part of a growing mood of deadly seriousness.

Another expression of this mood has been the deep concern of all sorts and conditions of people with the cost of government. The Tax Foundation, a privately supported agency, which has undertaken to get public support for "better government at less cost," set out to acquaint people with the facts about war finance during the early summer. Working through many state and local taxpayers' leagues and cooperating with members of Congress, this organization found a public interest in the sober subject of taxation probably without precedent in this country. It is not without significance that, in drafting tax legislation, Congress rejected the Administration's recommendations almost in toto. The members were hearing from home.

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And finally, as autumn wore on, public alarm about inflation drove the Administration to a belated repudiation of all its earlier theories of control.

On issue after issue, in fact, the government has been behind, not ahead of the people. This phenomenon is the culmination of generations of growth in the practice of self-government. The high literacy of the people, the billions spent on education, the ever-expanding means of communication through the press, the radio, the public platform and the motion picture—all these have contributed to the self-confidence and assertiveness of Americans. Traveling through the country, meeting and watching people, hearing their questions, reading their letters, leaves no doubt of their sense that their will is supreme. In the crisis they have quietly and simply taken over.

The fact that there were so many surprises in November's elections shows that most of the experts were not truly aware of the import of this silent undercurrent of feeling. The election was not, as many people believe, a negative thing. Its results were far too selective for that. It was a bad election for visionaries, for promisers and for extremists. From Massachusetts to California men of a conservative bent were elected. After the returns were in, a balance of political power had been achieved for the first time since 1930. In January, Republican governors will be in office in 22 states with a total population of about 75,000,000. Democrats will be governors in 25 states with a population of 52,000,000 people. Wisconsin, with 3,000,000, will have a Progressive governor.

The year has proved that the people of this republic can hold elections, change officeholders, discuss public questions, cuss each other a little, make mistakes and still carry on a successful war.

Perhaps the best definition of what has happened here at home was given last week in a speech before the House by that grand old Texas Democrat, Hatton Sumners. "God Almighty has intended that people shall be free to run their own business and be the masters of their own government," said Sumners. "In the goodness of God Almighty He has put somewhere in the nature of people, a sort of instinct, that seems to warn them when they are in danger of losing their ability to govern, to get down and stand on their own feet and exercise their capacity to govern before they lose it by its nonuse. That is what has happened in America."