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The Temper of the People

By

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"If I read the temper of our people correctly," said President Roosevelt in his inaugural address. What is the temper of the people? George E. Sokolsky, writer and lecturer, presents an answer based on 6,000 miles of recent travel in the United States.

SOMETIMES MY PARLOR CAR has two inhabitants: the Pullman porter and I. Yet, on a trip from Chicago to San Francisco, I rode in a fairly crowded train: buyers and salesmen taking an annual to provision their shops carefully against a late Easter and a snowy Spring. Once on a southern line, we were twelve in a day-coach: the other eleven were deadheads, company officials. Yet, in New England there seemed to be more movement of men and women in pursuit of trade. I came down from Montreal, however, on a train which carried seven of us in the parlor car, five to a funeral, a delightful young lady who was going to see her old school; and I, the one night-stander to whom a Pullman has become the nightly bed.

West of Chicago, I find more vitality than East of it. From Chicago to St. Paul the railroads still use good equipment with no chiseling to save a dollar. There is optimism in Jim Hill's old stomping ground. Milwaukee is certain of beer and is thankful that it has not suffered as others have. Yet down in some of the cities of Ohio it was practically impossible to get a five dollar bill changed except in a hamburger sandwich shop. In America such places seem to be prospering everywhere because men are no longer ashamed to live on a ten-cent meal, five for hamburger, five for a big cup of coffee.



What do we talk about, we who sit and smoke in Pullmans? We are of the middle class in the United States. We can still keep up courage and appearances. We still swank a bit. We are traveling salesmen, buyers, businessmen seeking outlets, clergymen, lawyers, artists, lecturers. We keep the balls of commerce and industry and ideas moving.

What do we talk about? Good, old raucous, smoking room tales, one almost never hears any more. Occasionally a good, salty yarn will bellow through the smoke, but not often. No matter in which part of the country one might be traveling, the talk is of economics and politics, sound, fundamental considerations of money and finance and trade by frightened Americans—terribly frightened now that the banks are in



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danger. Only lawyers and bankers talk revolution. Most of the middle class folk simply know that this country cannot, and will not, resort to revolution for a solution of economic and political problems.

That has puzzled me, and I have often spoken to the extreme left in the hope of discovering the specific American psychological reaction to revolution. It is such a curiosity to one who has lived in revolutionary countries that here there is so little talk of revolution among the middle class, for everywhere it is the bourgeoisie that starts the talk about revolution. Karl Marx and Lenin were bourgeois; Trotzky's people were Jewish traders; Sun Yat-sen was of good, Christian middle-class stock—these ideologues of the bourgeoisie usually give the laborers and coolies their slogans and philosophy; and an army makes the revolution for them.



But not in this country. Here distress calls for Congressional action; bank failures require Presidential action; actual starvation calls for municipal and county protection. Wherever I go, I am told of how many families live on the city and county. In Williamsport, Pa., a delightfully intelligent young woman explained to me how this year was different from last in that many of those who contributed to charities are now, rather quietly, taking charity. In Fresno, California, I was told how the raisin and peach industries were crippled so that owners of large ranches were altogether uncertain of being able to keep their vines and trees in condition any longer—they were finding themselves altogether without capital. But in neither city could I discover even the revolutionary doctrines of the old I.W.W. In some cities, the Government in Washington was blamed; in others, the banks; in still others, bad management of coöperatives. Nowhere did I listen to a demand for confiscation of property, for an overturn of the processes of government, for a Fascist or a Communist regime, for the shooting of officials. Such conversations would be revolutionary. They do not occur. I have heard bankers and lawyers use the word, "Revolution," but when I ask them what they mean by it, the conversation indicates change, orderly change, a return to prosperity—one chicken in the pot and a balance in the bank to pay taxes.

Why, I have often asked, does the American give the appearance of such complacency? He always says that something should be done about these distressing conditions, but does he have a program, a philosophy of action, a basic ideology? And by prosperity, he does not mean social equality but an equal opportunity to get the best in life by the sweat of his mind and the fruits of his labor. In the early days of the Russian revolution, I listened, in Petrograd, to his same class preach a redistribution of land among peasants and laborers. Here, they talk inflation so that they might be able to pay mortgages and taxes. There it was confiscation; here it is the desire to restore normal and orderly procession.



Why is the American like that? Fundamentally, I think, the American is not a fighter. He is rather a quiet, home-loving, religious person, who goes on an emotional spree occasionally, but not too often. His ancestors left the country of their origin because they were dissatisfied with conditions there and would rather remove themselves than fight over them. Whether Puritans

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or Cavaliers, whether indentured servants or the outpourings of debtors prisons, whether German revolutionists or Jewish refugees from Czarist oppression, whether starving products of Irish famines or of Italian over-population, those who came to America would rather move than fight. All of them adhered closely to religious ideals when it would have been pleasanter to switch to the dominant religious groups. Except the Negroes, all came here voluntarily to avoid the harshness of contention in the old country. Rather than rebel against economic and social conditions, they would suffer the hardships of the frontier.



Such people made up the American populations. Their traditions have remained with the American people. They are sternly conservative, sternly unwilling to make fundamental changes. The American Revolution involved no economic and few political alterations. The Civil War involved both; yet even the abolition of slavery was not an abolition of capitalism. It was merely the substitution of free for forced labor in the capitalistic system.

Much has been made of the farmer's demonstrations in Middle-western states against high money and high interest rates and cheap commodity prices. But the American farmer is no revolutionist. He resorts occasionally to direct action, as John Brown did at Harper's Ferry, or the inflationists did during the 80s and early 90s, but beyond that he does not support any tendency away from the individualism of capitalism or the democracy of the constitution. Talk Communism to a mid-western farmer and he will call the sheriff; tell him to support a Fascist regime and he will vote for Huey Long.

The phenomenon of an economically distressed people supporting an economic and political system which does not quickly relieve distress is also evident in Japan and Germany—it is the unmistakable sign of a normally conservative and profoundly religious people who fear fundamental changes more than they do hunger.

The safest man throughout the United States is one who lives in a small city or on a farm, even if he cannot meet his obligations. I found in the Middle West and in New England that the man in the small town could eat more readily than rent-payers in large cities. His roof was safe and his neighbors were pooling resources, whether by contributions to charity, or by assistance from the county. In the small towns, the atmosphere is less dismal. In Portland and Bangor, Maine; in Milwaukee, in Champaign, Ill., in Lexington, Ky., I found none of the dire distress, the utter hopelessness that is so evident in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. In fact, nowhere in the United States is pessimism as thick as in New York.

Constantly did I ask the same question: Why do you continue to live here? For instance, Grand Rapids, Mich., once had a monopoly of the good furniture business of the United States. Gradually, Chicago is absorbing the business of Grand Rapids. Perhaps a hundred furniture manufacturers, I was told, were now exhibiting in Chicago instead of at Grand Rapids. Yet, families remained in Grand Rapids under adverse conditions. Bangor was once the second largest timber port in the world; now its industries have receded to almost nothing. Yet, families remain in Bangor. Town after town exists which seems to thrive on nothing: St. Charles, Miss., for instance, is a wealthy community surrounded by fine agricultural territory, but agriculture brings no money. Evansville, Ind., is a similarly situated city; Lima, Des Moines, numerous other cities, seem to flourish under conditions which definitely indicate retrogression.

The answer seems to be that these people like to live where they live. When Henry A. Wallace's mother was asked whether she would move to Washington to be

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near the Secretary of Agriculture, she is reported to have replied: "Des Moines is my home." Everywhere I got the same reply. "This is home. Here are all my friends and neighbors. Here I stay."

Now, that was not so in the United States a century ago. Ohio was populated by New Englanders; Californians can trace back to Iowans of two generations ago. The United States was a continent of moving human beings. The covered wagon was replaced by the railroad train, and the American kept moving. Now, he does not move so much. He is slowly becoming geographically static. He is becoming part of a locality and a community. Tell a Santa Barbaran that he should live in Pasadena and he is offended; a Vermonter speaks of his snowy winters with the same religious enthusiasm that a Californian does of his oranges. We are slowly developing almost a Chinese localistic complex.



Curiously enough such an attitude makes for conservatism in economics and a form of radicalism in national politics. The man who is most concerned with local affairs grows increasingly wary with regard to his own economic interests but would take wide chances in national reconstruction—so long as his commodity is unaffected. In Denver silver is more important than national fiscal sobriety, in fact than any other issue. In New Orleans, cotton is more significant than the foreign policy of the nation. In a part of Maine, the potato looms large; in Utah, beet sugar and silver dominate human thought.

Under such conditions, it is not only those who live by a specific commodity who seek special rights and protection, but the entire community joins in support of the local economic interest. The silver senators, for instance, often appear ridiculous to New Yorkers, but the silver senators represent the solid public opinion of entire states.

Are we returning to the localistic atmosphere which preceded the Civil War? Are we faced by a states' rights tendency? Is the movement away from centralized government and beauracracy so evident in the conversations throughout the country, a new phenomenon? Is it revolutionary? Is it not rather part of the sobering reaction to excessive and wasteful wealth during the Prosperity?



In the rough survey of public opinion in more than thirty states which I have made by actual visits from September to today, I find that the general opinion is that there has been too much Federal government under Hoover, too much domination of the country by a few large cities, too much concentration of authority in New York and Chicago. No topic elicits so much fireworks on the trains or in the lunch-rooms; no after-dinner conversation is less restrained. Jeffersonism is undoubtedly again an issue. Simplicity in government is being asked for—simplicity and inexpensiveness.

In university cities, the conversation runs in just opposite directions. Young professors and ardent students support planned social programs, favor the enterprise of the Federal government in every economic and social field. No university is too old or too conservative to harbor a group that thinks along these lines—that is interested in the Russian experiment, in the lays of the technocrats, in the writings of Stuart Chase. In both large and small cities, groups of women will be found who read plentifully, who are familiar with current political, social and economic movements and who support what they quite roughly denominate as the "socialization" of political and economic processes. They often are most active in the intellectual phases of women's clubs and are regarded as superior minds

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among their own people. These two groups, one of the universities, the other the intellectual woman, may be regarded as constituting the bulk of the Norman Thomas vote and they represent a specific phenomenon in American life. They are to be found in every city, no matter how small.

But they do not reflect American opinion in the mass which is receding from Federalism. Americans seem to be demanding economic security, and then to be let alone. They are impressing that conception on their Congressman. Mr. Hoover's unpopularity undoubtedly was, in part, due to his inability to grasp this psychological fact. Mr. Roosevelt's depends upon the degree to which he continues to emphasize economic factors first.

When Mr. Hearst used to have cartoons portraying the elder Morgan as a kind of robber baron, he reflected an American opinion of Wall Street. Today, Mr. Hearst avoids the practice. More realistic is a conversation I heard the other night on a train between Fall River and Boston. Said a laborer:

"The funny thing is the rich are outa luck too. I don't get that."

Replied another laborer:

"Well, you can't tell how rich a rich man is until he goes broke. Then maybe you find out that he never was so rich."

Now this is a new thought in the United States. It is also quite general. When the Communists marched in Chicago, their principal supporters were among the intelligentsia, not among the masses. When in a small town, a great family goes under, there is genuine feeling of regret. As one goes about New England, the tale of shut mills is told by a local taxi driver with considerable pity. "They were fine folks, when they had it."

Nevertheless, confidence in the erstwhile leadership of this country is gone. Mention the name of any of the great men of the Post-War era, and there is only derision. No banker, no great industrialist, no college president commands the respect of the American people. There are no Captains of Industry, no Leaders of Finance, no J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, no John D. Rockefeller, no Charles Eliot. For better or for worse, confidence in great men and great minds is gone.



"They were no smarter than the rest of us." A man may have been a big-shot in Wall Street, but he is just a piker to the small townsman who bought stock because a high-powered salesman sold it to him on the basis of a notable financier's name in the lower left hand corner of a visiting card. Mention any banker and the conversation runs to Insull. I was on a train from Bangor, Maine, to Boston, when the National City Bank was making headlines in the newspapers. Everybody was sorry for Charley Mitchell, as salesmen called him. "He did like the rest of them and got caught." The question of punishment elicits no desire to put anyone in jail. "He's broke, ain't he? What the hell!"

This is curious, because in other countries, there would be a desire for what might be called mass revenge. In this country, I nowhere found such a tendency. Occasionally one meets an embittered business man who curses the banks which took R. F. C. money and gave him no credit, and in the Chicago area one might listen to caustic comments about the banks which loaned money to Insull, but on the other hand, when Jerome Greene resigned from Lee, Higginson to become a professor in a Welsh University, I listened to tales of regret; and just recently, I heard in Chicago how Charley Dawes had given up the pomp of greatness to rescue the depositors of his bank.

Neighborliness plays a part in all this which no New Yorker, no technocrat, no intellectual who lives by books alone, can possibly understand. It is one's own folks

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who are going down. For years, these men were the leaders, not only of business, but of the life of the community. They contributed to art and charity; they gave public buildings to the local community; they set the social standards; they made the speeches. "Now they are out; it is just too bad." There is no hatred; there is no desire for revenge; but there is also no confidence. Three great international issues stir American minds. They are "Buy American," "Will the French pay?," "The Sino-Japanese War."

"Buy American" represents a universal reaction from internationalism. The attitude represents more than the slogan: it represents opposition to entanglements in Europe; it includes a public repudiation of the European policy of Wilson, Coolidge, Harding and Hoover; it is a movement back to non-entanglements. To one who has lived abroad, it is a startling movement because whereas its façade is economic, its structure is political and psychological: Americans don't want to have anything to do with Europe, anymore. They don't want to have anything to do with Asia. From an economic standpoint, it is a dangerous doctrine because it may become sufficiently potent to impede foreign trade. From a political standpoint, it may be even more dangerous because it may hamper the liquidation of all the post-war problems including the tariff and debts; it may hamper Mr. Roosevelt's leadership by making Congressmen and Senators afraid to follow his program. From a psychological standpoint, the movement is inevitable because Americans are fed up with international politics.

In Hollywood, I saw a sign:

*"Hearst is Right
Buy American!"*

*We are selling valuable European furniture and
works of art by auction to get rid of them.
Buy American."*

The dealer was a psychologist. He knew that there was no objection to buying European goods at cheap prices, but that there was a distaste for Europe. In many cities, department stores do not carry stocks of European accessories because women do not like to buy them. In one shop, I asked whether a certain commodity were Japanese and the reply was that it was Oriental. "Buy American," is not a movement to jest about—it is a reality in American life. It is the average American going back into his shell.

No people has ever been so suffused with propaganda to make them internationally-minded. Tons of literature, thousands of lecturers, editorials in newspapers, the very trend of news, functioned to bring the American close to Europe, to make him a part of the international system. Although the United States is not in the League, during the whole of Mr. Stimson's administration of the State Department, we were even more of it than many members. Organizations exist to stir the American government to function as though it were a member of the League.

All this effort hasn't taken. The American is not internationally-minded; he is not even nationally-minded. More and more, he tends to think in terms of his own locality. He is not angry with France for defaulting; he really does not like France. He does not like any foreign country. He does not like Europe. He also does not dislike them. He wants to be let alone.

I listened to more anti-French than anti-Japanese conversation. On my way to Fresno, I was politely put in my place by a Los Angeles lady when I suggested that Californians are anti-Japanese. In Santa Barbara and Selma, I found no anti-Japanese sentiment. At Princeton and Dartmouth, there was a strong anti-Japanese current, also anywhere in Chicago and New York, but not on the Pacific Coast.

In 1931, when I encountered anti-Japanese sentiment, it arose from a sympathy with China. "Why don't the

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Japs stay at home and let the Chinese alone." In the beginning of 1932, it seemed to be less pro-Chinese than pro-administration. There was a resentment at a foreign country flouting our government. Today, it is quite clear that nobody wants to go to war. In colleges, at Foreign Policy Association meetings, Japan has become abhorrent, an outlawed nation because the League of Nations has spoken. Among other Americans, the issue is quite simple: "We don't want to get involved."

The attitude is a reflex of the "Buy American" movement, of the antagonism toward France. The American does not want to be bothered with the affairs of other countries. I am asked by lecture audiences what would happen in certain eventualities. I state the alternatives and one of them is inevitably war with Japan. I can almost *feel* the reaction in the audience. They don't want to go to war with Japan or with anyone else. They don't really care who holds Jehol (how do you pronounce it, anyhow?). They don't want to take sides. Any lecturer can get a laugh out of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, whether it is at a lecture or in the smoking room of a Pullman. That document was once described by a traveler as "the family entrance to the League of Nations." It is a side-door to internationalism.

To me this has all been surprising, because if one stays in New York, it is difficult to realize that the average American does not read a newspaper which devotes its principal first page space to foreign news. In New York, international news is big news. In the rest of the country, it often is filler. Even in Chicago, it is not very important unless a foreign country does some-

A cynicism has taken hold of the people. Who are you to know more than the next man? Where do you get the inside stuff? No man can be trusted to know more than his neighbor. "I heard that plenty," you will be told when you obiter dicta. The great and the small are just the same—pikers caught in the market. Money, the mark of greatness, is gone: nobody has as much as he had; nobody really was on the inside track; they all got caught.

Little despair is evident in the places I go to. Rather is there discouragement, uncertainty, a sense of futility. Still, on they go trying to make a dollar. An American would rather earn a dollar than fight for it; he would rather have prosperity than a new world order. He thinks that he might get that again, very soon, in some way, by some means, probably by an act of Congress. At any rate, he seems to be readier to trust to an act of Congress than to a revolutionist, an expert, or a technocrat. For he can still laugh and a Congressman makes a good speech. He likes a side show like Huey Long; he likes "Eleanor Blue" and Louis Howe. He likes the humanity of "I'm glad it was me, not you."

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