

CURRENT OPINION

January, 1920: p. 120

OUR ARMY AS AN AMERICANIZATION AGENCY

THE war has taught us many interesting things concerning the happy-go-lucky Americanization methods of the past. Statistics of the draft army show, among other things, that 24.9 per cent. of the drafted men were unable to read an American newspaper or write a letter home. According to the last census there were nine million people in this country who could neither read nor write the English language. Of this total more than five million were native-born and could neither read nor write in any language. Such men are commonly estimated to be worth at least \$5 less per week on the payroll of any organization than men who can read and write. This means that by the mere process of educating its non-English-speaking native illiterates the United States can add \$2,000,000,000 annually to the national wealth—a sum sufficient to pay the interest on our great war debt and amortize the principal. Alive to these facts, the War Department has established a Recruit Educational Center at Camp Upton on Long Island, and is vigorously prosecuting a campaign for the rudimentary education of men formerly in the service who are illiterate. In a statement issued by the War Department we read:

"When the armistice was signed these educational centers were in progress in every camp. It was found that men brought together in this way soon forgot racial distinctions—they were all learning English; they were all members of one army; they all acquired the American view-point. In three months—and often less time—men were taught sufficient English to enable them to receive, execute and transmit verbal orders and messages intelligently, and also to read and understand ordinary written or printed matter as contained in various drill regulations, soldiers' hand-books, etc. It is because of the great success obtained during the war that the Army decided to continue this practical Americanization scheme. Under the present naturalization laws, an alien who makes legal declaration of his intention to become a citizen, and who enlists in the Army for three years, upon honorable discharge becomes a full-fledged citizen. In other words, an alien, by enlisting in the Army, may become a citizen in three years, whereas by all civil channels it takes five years. Under an Act passed in 1889, in time of peace, no person (except an Indian) who cannot speak, read and write the English language, may be enlisted in the Army. Enlistments are at the present made under the Emergency Act. In order that the enlistment of illiterates and non-English-speaking men may not cease when peace is officially declared, the War Department has prepared a bill for the repeal of the above-

OUR ARMY AS AN AMERICANIZATION AGENCY

mentioned act. This bill is now being considered by Congress. There is every reason to believe that it will pass without objection."

Few people can visualize the extent of this illiteracy problem. The total of resident illiterates is greater, according to the last census, than the population of Canada; greater than the population of the United States in 1800; greater than the population of the entire South in the Civil War. Our adult illiterates outnumber the children of school age in thirty-two of our forty-eight States. They can outvote the people of Greater New York, Chicago and Philadelphia combined, or those of all cities west of the Mississippi with one exception. Aside from the economic dangers of such a condition, is its business aspect. It is emphasized by the War Department:

"To 24.9 per cent. of our people our great investments in magazines, newspapers, books, advertizing, agricultural schools and bulletins, colleges, universities, represent gross waste. Our business enterprizes are prevented from presenting the stories of their products to nearly one-quarter of our people. Who can measure the real damage of illiteracy? Supposing fate had left our Edisons, Bells, Wilsons—our great inventors, our business leaders and our men to whom America owes its advancement—supposing these men had been left illiterate. Who could estimate the loss to the nation? Yet who can doubt that in our nine millions of uneducated there is untold wealth in invention, in science, in arts, in literature, in commerce, lying dormant and undeveloped? . . . The director of mines of the United States has just made public figures which demonstrate that the lowering of the accident rate among the foreign-born to that of the native-born would last year, in the mines alone, have saved more than seven hundred lives and nine hundred serious accidents. What is the financial gain in this field alone? To what extent are we dependent upon foreign-born labor for the successful operation of our industries? What is our strategic situation with respect to attack upon the vital affairs of this country? The truth is startling. The great basic industries of the United States are iron and steel, meats, coal mining, clothing, leather, oil and sugar. From these industries practically all others derive their raw materials. Just as an army guards most carefully its supply depots, so we must protect these our foundation industries. Yet these are the very trades in which we are dependent upon our foreign-born. Of the employees in the iron and steel trade, 58 per cent. are foreign-born, in meat packing 61 per cent., in cotton goods 79 per cent., in clothing 72 per cent., in leather 67 per cent., in oil refining 67 per cent., and in sugar 85 per cent. Instead of the heel of America being exposed, we have placed the backbone of our industrial life in the hands of men only a small portion of whom are naturalized and a great portion of whom are illiterate—men with whom we cannot reason intelligently, men who are subject to invidi-

OUR ARMY AS AN AMERICANIZATION AGENCY

ous propoganda which we are helpless to counteract."

From the Army standpoint, the soldier is trained and instructed in English for about three months and the Army gets the services of the soldier for the remainder of the three-year enlistment period. Thus it is a practical business proposition. From the standpoint of the people, the plan is meeting with nation-wide approval, since it makes for better citizenship and a higher order of Americanism.