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~p. 359~

Walter Lippmann

By JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS

AT forty-three years of age Walter Lippmann has attained a position unique in American public life both past and present. Extremely brilliant as a student at Harvard, and publishing in quick succession his first three books—"A Preface to Politics," "Drift and Mastery," and "The Stakes of Diplomacy"—before he was twenty-six, it was natural that those who knew him and his work should have predicted a great career. It was also natural that the career predicted should have been political. I well recall in 1918 discussing him and his future with a distinguished American far from visionary in his judgments. The prediction then made was that with the right turn in political events Lippmann might easily be Governor of New York or Secretary of State in Washington by the time he was forty. No one foresaw his actual career because such a career was unthinkable in the America of that earlier day.

Lippmann did not "go in for politics," as that phrase is understood among us, yet at little beyond forty he has become one of the most potent political forces in the nation. Although up to the end of 1930 his accomplishment had been distinguished, his position had not become in any sense unique. As one of the leading young intellectuals and Liberals of the second decade of the century, it was quite normal that he should have been for a while an associate editor of the *New Republic* in the most important period of that journal. During the war, he was at various times an assistant to the Secretary of War for a few months, secretary of the commission to gather data to be used at the Peace Conference, and a Captain in the Military Intelligence Division of the General Staff, seeing service abroad. His contacts with leading men were notable as were also his opportunities for reaching an understanding of the real forces operative in the war and post-war periods. Then for some years he was editor of the leading Democratic and liberal newspaper, the *New York World*. He had also published another half dozen volumes.

He had thus led a busy and interesting life but had reached no position which set his own career off from that of others. It was the disaster that overtook the *World* which turned Lippmann, the observer, writer, and journalist, into an "American phenomenon." The older generation, that of the Civil War period, had been familiar with the great editors whose opinions were eagerly looked for daily. The question then asked was not "what does the *Nation* or the *Times* or the *Sun* or the *Tribune* say?", but "what does Godkin or Raymond or Dana or Greeley think?" With the change in journalism and the growing anonymity of the editorial page this personal leadership of public opinion practically disappeared from the daily press.

The news-gatherer, indeed, had grown in personal stature, and it was rather odd that whereas the public knew the names of a dozen or more "special correspondents" who furnished the papers with "facts" they had ceased for the most part to know who it was who furnished the opinions based on the facts. For the man in the street this is as true of English and European journalism as of American.

In the older journalistic world there had been, speaking generally, a characteristic common to all the editors whose names were known to their readers. They were special pleaders for the party or the policy which their paper represented. An intelligent reader would not have looked to the editor of a Republican paper for a sound or even a fair exposition of Democratic doctrine, and vice versa. These leaders of public opinion were rather like the prosecuting attorney and the counsel for the defence in a murder case. The jury, or the public, had to hear both sides. But few people had the time, the inclination, or even the money, to read two opposing journals morning and night.

Obviously, this is not the place to enter upon a discussion of journalism in relation to public opinion, a matter which Lippmann long made a special study and on which he is today the most competent authority in America. Suffice it to say that in this extraordinarily complex world in which we are now living most of us require not only the relevant facts but some competent guide to opinion. We have, to a great extent, lost confidence in the editorial written by we know not whom. It is a deep-rooted trait in human nature in general and our American nature in particular to have a personal leader, to know just whom it is we are giving our confidence to. In view of the influence reached by Lippmann in his daily articles in the *Herald Tribune* we can now recognize that it was not only a shrewd journalistic move but an event of prime national importance when Mr. and Mrs. Ogden Mills Reid decided, when the *World* disappeared as an independent journal, to offer their own paper as a forum from which Lippmann could disseminate his ideas.

The American newspaper public was once more to have the opportunity of personal leadership in opinion, but a leadership with a significant difference from the old. The leadership was to be non-partisan and as strictly unbiassed as it is possible for the human mind to be. The *Herald Tribune* had been noted as a strong Republican organ. Lippmann had been editor of a strongly Democratic organ. He was to be given, and has been, a completely free hand. He has entire liberty, a liberty which he exercises to differ from the views of the editors of the paper as expressed on their own editorial page. That is a policy which, so



WALTER LIPPMANN

Walter Lippmann

far as I know, has never been tried by any other journal anywhere in the world. That it has been extraordinarily successful is shown in many ways. Mr. Lippmann's articles are syndicated and sold to other papers. In less than two years the number of papers printing his views has risen from twelve to a hundred and twelve. Lippmann thus speaks directly to the readers of many of the most important journals in two-thirds of all the States in the Union. He has the largest public daily of any publicist in the world. The conversation of business and professional men anywhere from New York to San Francisco reveals that he is both read and pondered. He is discussed at dinner parties and clubs, and wherever people gather, in thousands of communities throughout our country. Moreover, through the diluted editorials of probably several hundred of lesser sheets, his opinions reach readers who may never have read his own articles.

This phenomenon is as interesting as it is unique and important. Mr. Lippmann is no mere columnist to amuse or soothe the business man on his way home from a tiring day. His articles are of strongly knit intellectual texture. Most editors appear to think that it is essential to write down to the audience lower and lower with every increase in the number of readers. They should know their business, though it is not certain that they do, and this may be true of an enlarging circulation in any one community, but Lippmann's case shows us that the most unbiased, least emotional, and most intellectual of all our editorial writers has secured an audience hitherto undreamed of by any of them. Such a phenomenon can be explained only in terms of a combination of the public and the man.

With regard to the former, it may be said that the intense interest it exhibits in whatever Mr. Lippmann has to say is a most hopeful sign in a period not replete with happy auguries. In his Introduction to a volume of Mr. Lippmann's collected articles* Professor Nevins suggests that the bewilderment of the public in the face of all the complications of the present day may have had much to do with the eager attention accorded to the author. It may be added that possibly the scientific attitude of mind toward all our problems has permeated a larger section of the public than we had hitherto believed. Whatever the cause, the interest shown in Lippmann's work is an asset of major national importance.

I do not intend here to analyze Mr. Lippmann's philosophy or to discuss at length his ideas on specific topics, such as democracy, war debts, our Manchurian policy, or other matters. Those interested in these ideas who do not already know them will have no difficulty in discovering them from his writings. With most I happen to be in hearty agreement, but I have just as great admiration for Mr. Lippmann when I do not happen to be. His range is amazing, and considering that he does not confine himself, like a specialist, to foreign affairs, national finance, or other groups of facts in the general complex of today, it is remarkable not only how right his judgment usually is but how often he has been able to discern the trend and effect of events before others have. Important, however, as is the acceptance of groups of facts in the general complex of today, it is remarkable not only how right his judgment usually is but how often he has been able to discern the trend and effect of events before others have. Im-

portant, however, as is the acceptance of his ideas by large numbers of our people, even more so, I think, is the influence upon their minds of his own.

I have said that he never writes down to his readers, but he thinks and reasons and makes them think and reason. His style and method of presentation are extremely lucid because his mind is. In reaching his conclusions on the character or acts of an individual and on economic or political policies, his mind moves as simply along purely intellectual lines as if he were doing an arithmetical problem. This makes his articles singularly clear, and the reader finds himself following the process of reasoning, unembarrassed by his own emotions or prejudices to an unusual extent. It is this training of his public to reason unemotionally that is one of the most valuable services Mr. Lippmann is rendering.

On the other hand, there is nothing coldly repellent in this sheer intellectuality. There are, for example, quite obviously, Mr. Lippmann's modesty and sincerity. He does not pontificate. He makes no pretence of infallibility. One gains the impression in reading him that, like the rest of us, only with a better mind and more abundant and accurate information than most, he is striving to find his way through the difficult problems which confront us all. He reports his opinions and suggested solutions. His interests and sympathies are wide. There is a healthy element of growth in him and he realizes that a mind must develop and not be bound by the conditions, experiences, and opinions of earlier years. In the preface to his first book in 1913 he noted that he wished to "stamp upon it" his own "sense that it is a beginning and not a conclusion." The ever widening range of his sympathies is well indicated by the difference in content of that book, "A Preface to Politics," and that of his recent "Preface to Morals."

The fact that when editor of the *World* he should have written the latter is of importance for understanding him. I say this although in my opinion he has in this work displayed a certain superficiality and has failed to grasp the deeper significance of modernist striving in the churches. One may regard this striving hopefully or otherwise. Lippmann appears simply not to understand it. His exposition of it is distorted. Nevertheless the fact that he should have written with obvious sincerity a volume on ethics and on what is clearly one of the most pressing spiritual problems of the time has its significance in considering his work as a whole, and the nature of his influence. Mr. Lippmann has the philosophic as well as the scientific mind. He is, in the sense which he himself gives to that much abused term, a Humanist. He is absorbed by many and not merely by one or two subjects or aspects of life, and in his ranging he is not satisfied until, as far as possible, he has established both the exact knowledge of the scientist and the general principles and standards of humane value of the philosopher. In a period of warped specialism he has retained the sanity of the balanced mind.

This desire to get to the bottom of things and at the same time to relate them to human values is conspicuous in his work. One could point, for example, to his treatment of the problem of marriage under modern conditions in his "Preface to Morals," to his essay on the tragedy of Al Smith (1925) in "Men of Destiny," or his discussion of the Dayton episode in "American Inquisitors." It is, indeed, one of his most distinguishing traits, and had he chosen to make a political career for himself in the usual meaning of the term,

*INTERPRETATIONS, 1931-1932. By WALTER LIPPMANN. Edited by ALLAN NEVINS. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1932. \$2.50.

Walter Lippmann

it would have made him the statesman rather than the politician. He not only insists upon relating events to causes and effects, taking the long view, but he is not content until he has established principles of action.

Mr. Lippmann does not see merely an unbalanced budget but its evil effects on the whole national life; he does not see in the bonus grab merely a raid on the Treasury but the danger to the whole system of our government; he does not see in the shameful lack of moral sense in our leaders in the past decade merely a distressing episode. But with all his insistence upon principles and values, he has not become doctrinaire. The associate editor of the *New Republic* of twenty years ago has not become the professional crusader or carping critic. He has grown healthily and has not been warped and twisted mentally by trying always to find something to be against. He knows that this is a second-best world and does not expect perfection in either politicians or policies. I understand that some of Mr. Lippmann's associates of earlier days who prefer to travel the uncertain paths of extreme socialism or communism have come to regard him as a backslider from the true faith and that their earlier admiration for his qualities of mind has been replaced by quite different emotions. It does not seem to occur to them that if Lippmann has preferred to remain a liberal rather than to become some of the fifty-seven varieties of radical it may be because he has a better balanced judgment than they.

We may add, finally, that his intellectualism is tempered for the ordinary reader by his effort to be fair and by his fearlessness. He is evidently without desire to frame a case or to be able to say "I told you so"; and he is quite as evidently not wishful to build any political nest for himself out of the materials of his influential position. One has only to read, as I have just done, practically the entire corpus of his writings to realize how completely he has done almost everything which he would be supposed not to have done if he had any thought of political preferment in the ordinary way.

Somewhat of all of these things I have been speaking of have entered into making Lippmann the "American phenomenon" he is today. Of the importance of that phenomenon in American, and indeed we might say in modern, journalism and life, there is no question. He is the

only national leader who has appeared in these post-war years, and his leadership is of a different sort from any we have had before. It is the leadership through the press of a scientific and a philosophic mind, stooping to none of the arts of the politician (of which he has a profound knowledge), and pandering to no emotions or prejudices. A generation ago many ordinary men eagerly followed the words of their favorite partisan editors. Small groups of intellectuals followed those of their favorite reformer. Large groups were enthusiastic over this or that man prominent in active politics. Lippmann is not a partisan; he is not a reformer; he is not an office-holder; yet he is the most important leader of American public opinion today and a genuinely great one.

This phenomenon of Walter Lippmann is, it seems to me, a fact of possibly deep significance, and the remainder of his career will teach us not a little as to what sort of world we are living into. He is, as I have said, only forty-three, and he is at the height of his power and influence. It is as impossible to predict his future as it was ten years ago, and there is little use in trying to do so; but what happens to Lippmann in the next decade may be of greater interest than what happens to any other single figure now on the American scene. If he were a business man, we might, perhaps, plot his curve, so to say, in a general way. We might be able to do the same if he were in politics as a man steadily rising to higher office; as we might also if he were an ordinary writer or journalist. But the uniqueness of his position, both in its narrower and wider sense, makes prediction impossible. Are his present post and influence merely the temporary result of a fortuitous combination of circumstances which may alter when the crisis of today has passed? Will his large public remain constant and content to follow an intellectual leader, or will he, to retain his influence, be forced into a leadership of a more active and less purely intellectual sort? Have we reached the point where a new leadership has become possible, a leadership of mind which nevertheless is effective in practical affairs? These and other questions occur as we consider the phenomenon of Lippmann and his future. As they cannot be answered we can only be thankful that we have among us a free intelligence playing over the problems of the time, without prejudice or passion, and which has won for itself a commanding position in the life of the nation.