ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE
IN ANNAPOLIS

REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

Supplementary Bulletin

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND

MAY, 1941

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REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

Among the sentences written in 1787 which are required reading for Americans in the fateful year 1941 is one from the pen of Alexander Hamilton: "It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." And as if to challenge his fellow-countrymen of 1941 to reflect carefully and choose wisely, Hamilton added: "If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind."

"The People of the State of New York," to whom Hamilton addressed those words, accepted his counsel and helped set up a government by "reflection and choice" instead of permitting anarchy to grow into government by "accident and force." The Americans of 1787 met their crisis, made their decision, and elected to play their part. We, their descendants, face the perhaps graver crisis of 1941. By our conduct and example we may well decide the important question whether government by reflection and choice shall give way everywhere to government by accident and force. As I write these words, we have not to date made our decision, nor elected the part we shall act. We have calculated danger. We have washed our hands. We have given aid short of war; at the risk of war. We have studied the Gallup polls to see how many of our neighbors might be willing to play a part with or without making a genuine decision, with or without genuine reflection or real choice. We have argued the necessity to "sell" the people—a dangerous metaphor for a free people, though not a dangerous one for Goebbels. We have accused each other of war-mongering, of appeasing. Above all, we have been confused, and we have exhibited to the delighted eyes of the announced champions of government by force a sort of low-tension paralysis. For we have not achieved a clear statement of what we would be defending if we entered the war, and failing that statement, we have

failed of a true decision. The spring of 1941 will go down in American history as the spring of the paralyzed will and the spring of nightmare. For is it not in nightmares that danger steadily approaches while no finger can be lifted in defense?

Unclear statements and sentimental statements there have been galore. We have talked loudly, if not clearly, of the American way of life; but whether it meant courage to do our duty in the face of injustice and brutality or whether it meant the right to be left alone, we did not make clear. It may have meant sleeping late in the morning instead of being roused at dawn. It may have meant never walking where a car could be driven, instead of carrying a pack under shellfire. It may have meant free enterprise, the 1941 version of Adam Smith's "mercantile republic," that eighteenth-century City of God, now become the City of Salesmanship. Maybe it meant the right to abolish drunkenness by voting prohibition, abolish war by voting neutrality, abolish blood and toil and tears and sweat by voting billions for defense.

Perhaps we have been paralyzed by guilt. Who are we to throw the first stone or drop the first bomb or sink the first submarine? As President Hutchins pointed out, we have not lived up yet to our own ideals. Yet, our forefathers, when they set up a government capable of defending this republic against external aggression as against internal violence, were under no delusion that they were themselves without sin. At what point did dangerous aggression become a purely relative and merely regrettable matter? Perhaps the real origin of our paralysis is not the knowledge that we, like all men, have also sinned, but that we are ignorant of any assumptions underlying the American Constitution that are worth dying to defend. The preamble of the Constitution will not tell us, for we have lost the ability to read that kind of English. Justice, domestic tranquillity, general welfare, and the blessings of liberty? Propaganda words!—in this case, we have been taught, the propaganda of the propertied class in the American colonies. How many Americans really disagree with Thrasymachus' statement that justice is the interest of the stronger? You do what you can get away with. You get your cut. Hitler is doing no more, and you in his shoes would do no less.

Our forefathers naively thought that no republic could endure, no matter how wise its laws, unless its citizens possessed the cardinal virtues. They could name the virtues. They were justice, courage, temperance, and prudence. But we do not fall for abstract words like that. And in so far as we do not fall for them, we risk judging

that a republic can endure even if its citizens are unfair, cowardly, greedy, and foolish. But can it?

If this famous American way of life is not aimed at these virtues, or if Hitler's way is aimed at them just as accurately, why die to preserve one and destroy the other? One might vote a billion or two to preserve our way, out of pure prejudice and as a public works project; but it would be stupid to die. Patrick Henry got a good hand and a good press for choosing between death and the loss of liberty; but then he was not subject to the draft anyhow.

Maybe Patrick Henry meant by liberty what Montesquieu in the same century meant: "In governments, that is, in societies directed by laws, liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to will." That is certainly a more complicated right than the right to be let alone. Perhaps liberty was conceived by our forefathers as the precious right to act justly towards other men. Perhaps liberty is not the word in 1941 to bring us back to ourselves, since it is only a means to an end. Perhaps justice, abstract as it also is to ears attuned only to concrete things, might rouse an echo in our hearts, might move our wills. Certainly the word democracy does not seem to have roused or moved. Do we need to summon the ideas that once lay back of democracy?

Hitler and Mussolini repeatedly declared, long before the shooting began, that democracy was decadent. From time to time we have heartened ourselves with phrases about ballots, not bullets. We would show them. Have we? Or have they shown us? As a matter of fact, could we show them? Not, certainly, as some wise men have pointed out, by beating them at their own game, by outsmarting them at diplomacy, out-lying them in propaganda. It was Jacques Maritain who pointed out that the "moderate Machiavellianism" of the democracies could never defeat the all-out Machiavellianism of Hitler. It is just possible that democracy, as we have known it and practised it and preached it, really is dead, and that Hitler is proving it. If so, we may yet live to be grateful to our teacher. What he cannot teach, because it is not true, is that the ideas which once made democracy great are also decadent. Ideas do not decay; yet people's understanding of them can decay, all the same. And literally as sure as shooting, a free republic cannot defend itself against aggressive tyranny unless its citizens understand those ideas which make men free and guard their freedom. No free republic can fight off tyranny unless its citizens love justice more than their cut.

I suggest that it is the loss of those ideas which has paralyzed the

will of the American Republic in 1941, as it has already paralyzed the will of the peoples Hitler has subjected. If this Report numbers the consequences of that loss, it is because of the inescapable connection between the decay of liberal education and the decay of liberal government. These same forefathers of ours who could use words like justice and liberty, and make them carry meaning, were deeply aware that no government by "reflection and choice" could hope to stand unless citizens received the sort of liberal education that would enable them to reflect well and choose by the light of understanding. This will account for the urgency with which they established colleges of liberal arts, not for the purpose of teaching what those colleges teach today, specialized knowledge aimed at an immediate livelihood, at personal "success," but for the purpose of disciplining the intellectual powers of young men to the point where real reflection and therefore real choice became possible.

St. John's College, along with many other of our older colleges of liberal arts, bears witness to this most practical of public policies. When this seventeenth-century foundation was re-chartered under its present name the year was 1784, three years before Alexander Hamilton wrote the words which open this Report. It is significant that, of the men who petitioned the State of Maryland to grant our charter, one, William Paca, had signed the Declaration of Independence; and that three other signers, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, Samuel Chase, and Thomas Stone, became members of its Board of Visitors and Governors. Equally significant is the preamble of the College Charter:

"WHEREAS, Institutions for the liberal education of youth in the principles of virtue, knowledge and useful literature are of the highest benefit to society, in order to train up and perpetuate a succession of able and honest men for discharging the various offices and duties of life, both civil and religious, with usefulness and reputation, and such institutions of learning have accordingly been promoted and encouraged by the wisest and best regulated States: Be it enacted, by the General Assembly of Maryland, that a college or general seminary of learning. . . ."

Let us note that colleges like St. John's were not established to teach men "useful" ways of making more money than their neighbors, nor, on the other hand, to teach them the useless but decorative charms of "pure" culture: they were to teach them to practise the liberal arts, to use their intellects, to reflect, to make choices, in order that a free society might be able to govern itself wisely, freely, and justly, and not fall a prey to government by force. The founders of the Republic were hard-headed enough to see the high benefit of such colleges to the Republic, without seeking that benefit in the pseudo-utilities of "practical" courses.

I shall not outline here what I have attempted to outline in earlier reports: how our colleges forsook the task assigned them and prostituted themselves to other ends. I shall not point out again why liberal education is a necessity for free societies, nor why specialized training, unsupported by liberal education, is fit only for bureaucrats, slaves, and in a sense for animals. For animals, whether human or non-human, can be taught useful tasks. Already by 1910, an Address to the Trustees of Amherst College, presented by the Class of 1885, pointed out the dangerous substitution and its inevitable results for a free society. Its results are now with us.

Either Hamilton or Madison shed light on the matter in hand when he wrote in No. 51 of the Federalist: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." We twentieth-century Americans, with our anti-theological bias and our trivial blasphemies parading as common sense, are unlikely to read in that terse statement all that the eighteenth century could still read. For we think of the eighteenth century as the age of Voltaire and forget what an intimate part of its intellectual equipment Christian theology still was. Yet this distinction between men and angels we have pretty well lost, along with the distinction between men and beasts. It is worth recalling. Angels, men were once taught, have intellects but no bodies. They therefore know justice and their knowledge is never obscured by passions, by physical appetites, or, in our mock-modest contemporary terms, by their emotions. Beasts have passions, but not intellects. They must therefore be governed by force, for they cannot be persuaded by reason. But man, as the Greeks put it, is a rational animal, a logical animal, a speaking animal capable of the word, the logos.

Still, he is an animal. By nature, therefore, he can never content himself with a government for long unless it appeal to his reason. By nature, likewise, he is subject, like other animals, to his passions; and no government not armed with force, no matter how near justice it may come, can stand for long. This composite nature of man, our ancestors clearly understood and plainly analyzed. The Constitution of the United States was set up with both facts in mind: man's rationality, which demanded justice, and liberty to seek that justice; man's animality, which required rationally ordered safeguards if government is to "insure domestic tranquillity" and "provide for the common Defence." Ignorance of this composite nature of man renders the Constitution of the United States fundamentally unintelligible. It then becomes a pious hope that everybody will act like an angel, or a skilfully concealed assumption that

everybody is a mere beast. Nor does a man wittingly die for pious hopes or for concealed assumptions.

Hamilton and Madison and their contemporaries knew that, because of their intellectual powers, men are capable of erecting and maintaining government by reflection, deliberation, and choice. They knew also that, because of their animality, men's political "interests" must be harmonized. One of the pitiful chapters of American historical thinking is the adolescent delight with which our twentieth-century debunking historians have discovered that our ancestors were concerned with interests. Would that they had likewise discovered how deeply concerned they were simultaneously with ideas. Today our people oscillate rapidly between a sentimental faith in the goodness of man, a faith once known as angelism, and a cheaply cynical belief that men operate exactly as do other beasts. The first faith slacks toward anarchy; the second as surely forearms tyranny.

It was further known, at the time that our Republic was planned and established, that so constantly do men's passions war against their powers of reason that these powers cannot be counted upon to operate dependably, either in the political field or elsewhere, until they have been disciplined and strengthened; and the task of disciplining and strengthening the intellectual powers of men under the most propitious conditions was delegated to the college of liberal arts. That is why such colleges were conceived of, not as pleasant asylums for the offspring of the rich nor as trade schools for the servile poor, but as the very necessary bulwarks of free government. Nor would the men who wrote our Constitution have dreamed for a moment that it could endure for many decades supported only by the "liberal" education our colleges and universities now afford.

The Constitution was intended to be merely an instrument through which free men might conveniently govern themselves. Nobody supposed it could alone guarantee their freedom. Ultimately, that freedom is internal, and ultimately it is based on a discipline that is equally internal. Today, we do not possess that internal discipline in a measure adequate for long to guarantee our liberties.

If we lose at last our power to govern ourselves, we shall forfeit the right to do so. We become what the Nazis assume we are: shrewd animals. In that event, we are as donkeys are, and we must be ruled as donkeys are ruled: by a club and a carrot. The carrot is applied in front; the club, behind. If you want the donkey to reverse the direction in which the donkey is headed, you do not reason with him. You place the carrot behind, and club him in the face. Those who have observed totalitarian government closely assure us

that two things move it: threats and bribes. Ignore the intellect, and the club and carrot rule what is left: the body, with its passions and its instincts.

The most recent reminder of these simple, brutal, beastly facts about mankind may be found in Mr. Walt Disney's version of Pinocchio. The little boys who became donkeys did so merely by gratifying to the limit their physical appetite for pleasure. But some of those who saw the picture may have attached too little importance to the fact that, in order to go to Pleasure Island, they left—school. Reflection on Pinocchio will tell us why, in the case of so many of our public men who neglected to fit themselves with a liberal education, the spoken word so often turns into the telltale bray.

There is another way of telling the story. The curriculum once afforded by our "general seminaries of learning" concerned itself with ends, and the relation of ends to their appropriate means. Specialized education of the sort which has flowered in the "elective system" of the undergraduate college is concerned with means. The student first chooses what he is going to do and is then taught ways of attaining his end. There was a time when he would have been taught to criticize his choice of end. And his mind would have been freed in order that he might choose an end wisely. Free men are men who choose ends. The unfree accept the ends which are dictated to them, whether by their whim and prejudice, or by a government which arouses their fear or awakens their greed.

There is a nice test for a liberal education. Regardless of social contacts or of courses that pretend to be commercially useful, do our colleges prepare men to make fearless and responsible decisions under a Constitution like ours and—equally important, if only recently relevant—does their preparation give a man anything that would stand by him in a concentration camp? A genuine discipline in the liberal arts would meet both tests.

There are those who, not connected with St. John's College, have yet seen in the type of liberal education it has restored a return to the principles which might make democracy intelligible again—not merely pleasant or easy, but intelligible, and therefore operable. The Latin motto which the seal of the St. John's Program bears—"I make free men out of children by means of books and balances"—alludes to that faith, the faith of our forefathers: that true education in the liberal arts can bring out in young citizens the powers without which they cannot govern themselves, either through our Constitution or through any other that might be devised in its place. For responsible government is responsible not merely in the ordinary sense, that

those entrusted with political power are "responsible to the people," by way of lobby, petition, Western Union, or merely Gallup. The art of responsible government does not consist in how to please voters, how to "sell" them this political action or that. Voters, under a truly responsible government, are not customers to be sold anything, and only a nation which had largely sold out to salesmanship would suppose they were. A genuinely responsible government is answerable to truth and reason; and to that reason both leader and follower are equally answerable. Voting *Ja,* whether in a Nazi plebiscite or a rigged American election, does not constitute what was once meant by "the consent of the governed." It is the reasons for consenting that should interest a free society. The sole importance of a majority vote—of men, not donkeys—is that, by and large, Americans have believed that reasonable steps, if properly debated and deliberated upon, would commend themselves to more men than not. This faith is based on a fact that Descartes observes in the opening sentence of his *Discourse on Method:* "Good sense is, of all things among men, the most equally distributed." With this faith went once the knowledge that the reason in human beings, the good sense, must be cultivated, exercised, disciplined.

Assuming all this, and assuming that the curriculum St. John's introduced four years ago will furnish the exercise and discipline it has already furnished through many centuries, it yet remains true that what is being done at St. John's, even should it spread again to colleges throughout the land, may be too little and too late. We have lost valuable decades in the American tradition of liberal education. A generation has grown up that shows an understandable sympathy for the principles on which totalitarian society rests, rather than for the principle that all men are rational and therefore basically equal. It will be years before the work being done now at St. John's, or similar work that any other college might immediately undertake, could bear the fruit in political and economic action which would save the American way of life in the sense in which our forefathers would have used that phrase. Is there time for that?

Whether there is time or not for our people to find again in liberal education the strength and understanding they once found there, the College must perform its task. From a practical point of view, its uncompromising acceptance of that task has affected more persons than the undergraduates who attend it. The parents of those undergraduates have been enabled to make a choice for their sons which they could not otherwise have made. Those of us who teach in the College draw from that choice daily strength for our task.

You on the Board who have labored to make it possible for us to teach have thereby shared in the common enterprise, as have the hundreds of men and women, scattered throughout the country, who have made financial sacrifices in order that this work might be done. It is in the nature of such undertakings that those who participate derive strength from each other. In their joint effort they find the liberty that is the right to do what they ought to will. It was of this liberty, proof against external catastrophe and the vicissitudes of human life, that George Washington spoke when, discussing the necessity to submit a good Constitution whether it were accepted or rejected, he enjoined: "Let us raise a standard to which the wise and honest may repair. The event is in the hands of God."

Finally, the educational program of the College was never based upon a grandiose design to save the nation. There are indeed signs that the nation may shortly need saving. There is plenty of evidence that the sort of thing which St. John's is doing is in the long run necessary if our kind of society is to be saved. But although free men may know, as they have often known, that true liberal education safeguards free republics, it would be misunderstanding liberal education to suppose that the proper purpose of a liberal arts college is to support free government. It would be nearer the truth to say that the true end of free government is to make liberal education possible.

Lest I be supposed to say here that the purpose of the United States Constitution is to support colleges, I may be allowed to observe that colleges are not the only places in which men perfect their intellectual processes. Were that the case, our people would be today in an even sorrier plight than they are really in. But it is most true to say that if the purpose of government is to preserve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the first two of these objects are ordered towards the third. We live and enjoy liberty that we may pursue happiness, and the man who penned this triune phrase was perfectly aware of where that happiness lay: in the fullest possible development, and use, of man's most human powers, the powers of the intellect.

Under our Bill of Rights Congress may not prohibit you or me from worshiping God—but suppose we know no God to worship? It may not forbid us to speak our minds—but suppose we have no minds to speak? It may not prevent our daily paper from telling us the truth—but suppose our paper does not know how to tell us the truth, or which truths are worth telling? Congress may not prevent you and me from peaceably assembling—but why assemble if we have nothing worth saying to each other? It may not in certain

cases take from you or me our right of trial by jury—but suppose no good men and true can be discovered? In an important sense, the Bill of Rights is negative: it states that Government shall not by force take from us the essential liberty of doing things we ought to do: to deliberate, debate, exchange ideas, judge each other as peers. Nowhere does it, can it, or should it tell us either the list of things we ought to do or how to do them. That, in the opinion of our ancestors, was the business of liberal education. That, in their opinion, was an arduous process; for it is harder to develop in men their native powers of self-control, their native powers of thinking through, their native powers to follow up with courageous and just action than it is to tug and drive them, with club and carrot. Tyrants forbid citizens to do their duty as free men. Free government permits them to do it. Liberal education enables them to do it.

STRINGFELLOW BARR

Annapolis, Maryland,
May, 1941.

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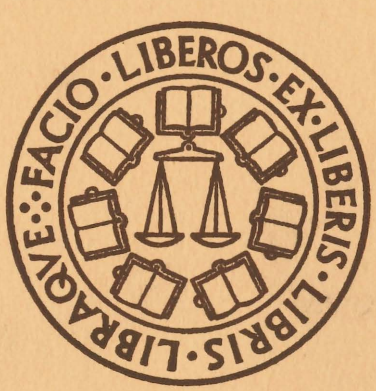
Copies of this Report may be had on request. Address:
The Registrar, St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland.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