

CHAPTER IV

On Underwriting an Evil

I VOTED for Teddy Roosevelt in 1912. I haven't voted in a presidential election since.

At first it was sheer instinct that dissuaded me from casting my ballot. I listened to the performance promises of the various candidates and the more I listened the more confused I became. They seemed to me to be so contradictory, so vague, so devoid of principle, that I could not bring myself in favor of one or the other. Particularly was I impressed by the candidates' evaluations of one another. Neither one had a good word to say of his opponent, and each was of the opinion that the other fellow was not the kind of man to whom the affairs of state could be safely entrusted. Now, I reasoned, these fellows were politicians, and as such should be better acquainted with their respective qualifications for office than I could be; it was their business to know such things. Therefore, I had to believe candidate A when he said that candidate B was untrustworthy, as I had to believe candidate B when he said the same of candidate A. In the circumstances, how could I vote for either? Judging by their respective evaluations of each other's qualifications I was bound to make the wrong decision whichever way I voted.

ON UNDERWRITING AN EVIL

I put off voting from one election to another, perhaps hoping that sometime a compelling choice would be offered me. I was, I believe, looking for a candidate who would stand for a philosophy of government, something that would be above the ephemeral. In time it dawned on me that I was being romantic, that with principles—that is, moral or philosophic concepts—politics simply has nothing to do, except as convenient slogans in the promotion of its business, which is the acquisition of power. I soon realized that the art of politics consisted in the balancing of various group interests, one against the other, so as either to attain or retain rulership over all. It was a juggling act.

This is no reflection on the intellectual integrity of the politician. His business does not call for any such quality and his supporters would be outraged if he presumed to bring it into bearing. Assuming that a candidate were a convinced free trader, or believed that veterans do not benefit from handouts, or—to go to an extreme—that the nation's bonded indebtedness is a burden on the economy, it would be political suicide for him to voice such an opinion. A candidate in the North who espoused "white supremacy" would have as little chance as a candidate in the South who did not. Were a considerable segment of the population, sufficiently large to offset the opposition, in favor of putting disabilities on Jews, Catholics or Masons, you would find candidates advocating legislation of that kind even though their private judgment were against it. The politician's opinion is the opinion of his following, and their opinion is shaped by what they believe to be in their own interest.

It was always thus. Even when kings ruled by "divine

right," the throne was held in place by the proper juxtaposition of rival and envious nobles. When the ambition of a particular noble got out of hand and an army was needed to make him respect divinity, the money-lenders supplied the war funds and received their compensation, usually a grant of land and the privilege of collecting rent from the users. In the eighteenth century the rising class of manufacturers and merchants came to the support of the king in his quarrels with his nobles, in exchange for tariffs, cartel privileges and the "rights" to foreign exploitation.

Constitutionalism and the extension of the suffrage did not alter the character of politics. These institutions merely increased the number of claimants for special privileges and complicated the art of balancing interests. In the early years of our country the politician's problem was quite simple: the pressure groups consisted of tariff-seekers, land-grabbers, money-brokers, franchise-hunters and a few others, and the balancing of interests was fixed by the size of campaign contributions. In due time, thanks to professional organizers, others got into the act, and the politician now has to consider the privilege claims of vote-laden and skillfully led proletarians, farmers, teachers, veterans—a host of articulate "minority" groups—as well as the traditional claimants. The juggling has become more intricate.

That this result was inevitable becomes evident when we consider the nature of the ballot. It is nothing but a fragment of sovereignty. It represents a small piece of the power which, in an absolutism, is vested in a single person or an oligarchy. And, just as the substance of political power consists of castles and food and pleasures for the autocrat, so does the holder of this fragment of diffused sovereignty spell

ON UNDERWRITING AN EVIL

“good times.” In short, the right of suffrage carries with it the expectation of economic welfare, and that expectation is still the motive behind the “x” set down along the candidate’s name. We vote, in the main, by our belly-interest.

The individual voter learned in time that the minuscule piece of sovereignty he held brought him no profit unless it was augmented by many other pieces, so that the total would be a bargaining power of proportions. Thus came the modern pressure group. It is the business of the leaders of such groups to convince the aspirant for office that their following cannot be ignored with impunity. It is the business of the candidate to weigh the relative voting strength of the various groups and, finding it impossible to please all, to try to buy the strongest with promises. It is a deal. Any moral evaluation of the deal is silly, unless we condemn politics as a whole, for there is no way for the politician to attain power unless he engages in such deals. In a democracy sovereignty lies in the hands of the voters, and it is they who propose the trading.

The vast majority of the voters are outside these pressure groups; there are too many of them, too diversified in their interests to permit of organization. I am one of them. I might vote for one or the other candidate if I belonged to some such pressure group and accepted his promise of improvement of my lot at face value. For instance, if I were a farmer in line for a government handout, I would certainly cast my ballot for the candidate who, in my opinion, could be relied upon to come through when elected. Or, if I were a member of a union, I would most assuredly trade my vote for some advantage which the gentleman in question promised to deliver to my organization; provided,

of course, that I believed him. But, I belong to no pressure group and am instinctively averse to accepting any advantage over my fellow man. What is more, I am not looking for a job in the bureaucracy, nor is my brother-in-law in line for such a job; nor am I anxious for a government contract and I do not own any land that might be suitable for a post office. That is to say, I cannot profit, directly or indirectly, from the election of either candidate. I am of the great mass of unorganized citizens and, therefore, see no reason for casting my ballot for one or the other.

Admitting that there is no difference in the political philosophies of the contending candidates, should I not choose the "lesser of two evils?" But, which of the two qualifies? If my man prevails, then those who voted against him are loaded down with the "greater evil," while if my man loses then it is they who have chosen the "lesser evil." Voting for the "lesser of two evils" makes no sense, for it is only a matter of opinion as to which is the lesser. Usually, such a decision is based on prejudice, not on principle. Besides, why should I compromise with evil?

If I were to vote for the "lesser of two evils" I would in fact be subscribing to whatever that "evil" does in office. He could claim a mandate for his official acts, a sort of blank check, with my signature, into which he could enter his performances. My vote is indeed a moral sanction, upon which the official depends for support of his acts, and without which he would feel rather naked. In a democracy the acquiescence of the citizenry is necessary for the operation of the State, and a large vote is a prelude for such acquiescence. Even in a totalitarian state the dictators feel it

ON UNDERWRITING AN EVIL

necessary to hold elections once in a while, just to assure themselves and others of the validity of their rule; though the voting is compulsory and the ballot is onesided, they can point to the large percentage of the electorate who underwrite their rule. In a free election, even though the difference between the candidates is a matter of personality, or between tweedledee and tweedledum, the successful candidate (though he might be the "lesser of two evils") can similarly maintain that he holds a mandate from the people. It is to the credit of a democracy that I can choose not to vote. I am not compelled to give my moral support to an "evil."

Getting back to the economic advantages that the candidates promise me, in exchange for my vote, my reason tells me that they cannot make good on their promises, except by taking something from my fellow men and delivering it to me. For, government is not a producer. It is simply a social instrument enjoying a monopoly of coercion, which it is supposed to use so as to prevent the indiscriminate use of coercion by individuals on one another. Its purpose in the scheme of things is to protect each of us in the enjoyment of those rights with which we are born. Its competence is in the field of behavior; it can compel us to do what we do not want to do, or to prevent us from doing what we want to do. But, it cannot produce a thing. Therefore, when it undertakes to improve the economy, it is compelled by its own limitations to the taking from one group of citizens and giving to another; it uses its monopoly of coercion for the distribution of wealth, not for the production of wealth. So that, when I vote for the candidate who promises me better-

ment in my economic condition, I am condoning and encouraging some form of robbery. That does not square with my moral values.

I would like to vote for a candidate who pledged himself to abolish taxation, *in toto*, for my reason tells me that underlying all the ills of society is this predatory institution. I would surely profit if I were not taxed, and so would all the producers; the only ones who would suffer from such an arrangement would be the drones, the bureaucrats, who would be compelled to work for their keep. But, since the abolition of taxes would put the politician out of a job and would make impossible his dispensation of special privileges, it is not likely that I shall have the opportunity of casting my ballot for such a candidate. Lacking that opportunity, I see no reason for registering my faith in the "lesser of two evils;" if memory serves me right, the "lesser" of either party who attained office has always increased the taxes I have to pay.

All in all, I see no good reason for voting and have refrained from doing so for about a half century. During that time, my more conscientious compatriots (including, principally, the professional politicians and their ward heelers) have conveniently provided me with presidents and with governments, all of whom have run the political affairs of the country as they should be run—that is, for the benefit of the politicians. They have put the nation into two major wars and a number of minor ones. Regardless of what party was in power, the taxes have increased and so did the size of the bureaucracy. Laws have been passed, a whole library of them, and most of these laws, since they are not self-enforcing, have called for enforcement agencies, who have

ON UNDERWRITING AN EVIL

interminably interpreted the laws which created them and thus have spawned more laws. The effect of these laws is (a) to put restraints on the individual and (b) to concentrate in the hands of the central government all the powers that once were assigned to local government; the states are now little more than administrative units of the national government. Political power has increased, social power has waned. Would it have been different if I had voted? I don't think so.

Statistics indicate that nearly half the electorate—those eligible to vote—do not exercise their privilege. Whether such non-voting is due to apathy or a conscious rejection of the candidates and their philosophies of government (or the lack of any philosophy) it would be difficult to tell. Perhaps the stay-at-homes might be interested in registering their conviction if two candidates stated exactly what they stood for, without equivocation and without offering inducements to various pressure groups; but, in the absence of such an experiment, the best we can say is that a goodly number find no sense in voting.

It is interesting to speculate on what would happen if, say, seventy-five percent of the electorate refrained from casting their ballots; more than that is out of the question, for at least a quarter of the voting public are concerned with what they can get for themselves from the election of this or that candidate; their belly-interest is entirely too strong to keep them away from the polls. In the first place, the politicians would not take such a repudiation of their custodianship in good grace. We can take it for granted that they would undertake to make voting compulsory, bringing up the hoary argument that a citizen is morally obligated to

do his duty. If military service can be made compulsory why not political service? And so, if three-quarters of the citizenry were to refrain from voting, a fine would be imposed on first offenders and more dire punishment meted out to repeaters. The politician must have the moral support of a goodly number of votes.

Putting aside compulsion, what might be the effect on the citizenry and the social order if an overwhelming majority should quit voting? Such abstinence would be tantamount to giving this notice to politicians: since we as individuals have decided to look after our public affairs, your services are no longer required. Having assumed social power we would, as individuals, have to assume social responsibility. The job of looking after community affairs would devolve on all of us. We might hire an expert to tell us about the most improved fire-fighting apparatus, or a street cleaning manager, or an engineer to build us a bridge; but the final decision, particularly in the matter of raising funds to defray the costs, would rest with the town hall meeting. The hired specialists would have no authority other than that necessary for the performance of their contractual duties; coercive power, which is the essence of political authority, would be exercised, when necessary, by the committee of the whole.

There is some warrant for the belief that the social order would be considerably improved when the individual is responsible for and, therefore, responsive to its needs. He would no longer have the law or the lawmakers to cover his sins of omission or commission. Need for the neighbors' good opinion would be sufficient to induce acceptance of jury duty, and no loopholes in the draft law, no recourse to

ON UNDERWRITING AN EVIL

political pull, would be possible when danger to the community calls him to bear arms in its defense. In his private affairs, the now sovereign individual would have to abide by the dictum of the market place: produce or you will not eat, for no law will help you. In his public behavior he must be decent or suffer the sentence of social ostracism, with no recourse to legal exoneration. From a law-abiding citizen he would be transmuted into a self-respecting man.

Would chaos result? No, there would be order, without law to disturb it. But, let us define chaos of the social kind. Is it not disharmony resulting from social friction? When we trace social friction to its source do we not find that it seminate in a feeling of unwarranted hurt or injustice? Now, when one may take by law that which another man has put his labor into, we have injustice of the keenest kind, for the denial of a man's right to possess and enjoy what he produces is akin to a denial of life. Yet the confiscation of property is the first business of government. It is indeed its only business, for the government has no competence for anything else. It cannot produce a single "good" and so must resort to doing the only thing within its province: to take what the producers produce and distribute it, minus what it takes for itself. This is done by law, and the injustice is keenly felt (even though we become adjusted to it), and thus we have friction. Remove the laws by which the producer is deprived of his product and order will prevail.

However, this speculation on the course of events if the individual should assume the duty of looking after public affairs, rather than leaving it to an elected official, is idle, or, to use a more modern term impregnated with sarcasm, "unrealistic." Not only would the politicians undertake to

counteract the revolutionary non-voting movement, but many of the citizenry having a vested interest in the proceeds of taxation would raise a hue and cry about the "duty" of the citizen to vote. The teachers in our tax-supported schools would lecture their pupils on the lack of public spirit on the part of their parents. Propaganda would emanate from tax-exempt eleemosynary foundations, and from large manufacturers dependent on government contracts. Farmers' organizations, with an eye to government largess, veterans' societies asking for handouts, and particularly the bureaucracy, would denounce non-voting as a crime against society. In fact, all the "respectables" would join in proclaiming the movement revolutionary—which indeed it would be; it would be a revolution intended to shift the incidence of power from officialdom to the people.

We would be told, most emphatically, that by not voting we would be turning the reins of government over to "rascals." Probably so; but do we not regularly vote "rascals" out? And, after we have ousted one set, are we not called upon to oust another crew at the next election? It seems that rascality is endemic in government. Our balloting system has been defined as a battle of opposing forces, each armed with proposals for the public good, for a grant of power. As far as it goes, this definition is correct. But when the successful contestant acquires the grant of power toward what end does he use it—not theoretically but practically? Does he not, with an eye to the next election, go in for purchasing support, with the taxpayers' money, so that he might enjoy another period of power? The over-the-barrel method of seizing and maintaining political power is standard practice, and such is the nature of the "rascality."

This is not, however, an indictment of our election system. It is rather a rejection of the institution of the State; our election system is merely one way of adjusting ourselves to that institution. The State is a product of conquest. As far back as we have any knowledge of the beginnings of this institution, it originated when a band of freebooting nomads swooped down on some peaceful group of agriculturists and picked up a number of slaves; slavery is the first form of economic exploitation. Repeated visitations of this sort left the victims breathless, if not lifeless and propertyless to boot. So, as people do when they have no other choice, they made a compromise with necessity; the peaceful communities hired one set of marauders to protect them from other thieving bands, for a price. In time, this tribute was regularized and was called taxation. The tax-gatherers settled down in the conquered communities, and though at first they were a people apart, time merged the two peoples—the conquerors and the conquered—into a nation. But, the system of taxation remained in force after it had lost its original character of tribute; lawyers and professors of economics, by deft circumlocution, turned tribute into “fiscal policy” and clothed it with social significance. Nevertheless, the effect of this system is to divide the citizenry into two classes: payers and receivers. Among those who live without producing are those who are called “servants of the people” and as such receive popular support. These further entrench themselves in their sinecures by setting up sub-tax-collecting allies who acquire a vested interest in the system; they grant these allies all sorts of privileges, such as franchises, tariffs, patents, subsidies and other some-

thing-for-nothing "rights." This division of spoils between those who wield power and those whose economic advantages depend on it is succinctly described as "the State within the State."

Thus, when we trace our political system to its origins we come to conquest. Tradition, law and custom have obscured its true nature, but no metamorphosis has taken place; its claws and fangs are still sharp, its appetite as voracious as ever. Politics is the art of seizing power for economic purposes. There is no doubt that men of character will give of talents for what they conceive to be the common good, without regard to their personal welfare. But, so long as our system of taxation is in vogue, so long as the political means of acquiring economic goods is available, just so long will the spirit of conquest assert itself; for men always seek to satisfy their desires with the least effort. It is interesting to speculate on the kind of campaigns and the type of candidates we would have if taxation were abolished and if, as a consequence, the power to dispense privileges was abolished. Who would run for office if "there were nothing in it?"

Why should any self-respecting citizen endorse an institution grounded on thievery? For that is what one does when one votes. If it be argued that we must let bygones be bygones, see what can be done toward cleaning up the institution of the State so that it might be useful in the maintenance of orderly existence, the answer is that it cannot be done; you cannot clean up a brothel and yet leave the business intact. We have been voting for one "good government" after another, and what have we got?

To effectuate the suggested revolution all that is necessary

ON UNDERWRITING AN EVIL

is for citizens to stay away from the polls. Unlike other revolutions, this one calls for no organization, no violence, no war fund, no leader to sell it out. In the quiet of his conscience each citizen pledges himself, to himself, not to give support to an immoral institution, and on election day stays home, or goes fishing. That's all. I started my revolution fifty years ago and the country is none the worse for it; neither am I.