

# Half Truths

by ROBERT TIDEMAN

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THE Hunters Point [San Francisco] riots spring from two great half-truths. Each is plausible. Each is supported by fact and logic. Each is half a lie.

First is the half-truth (how true! how false ) that everyone is responsible for himself, succeeding by his virtue and industry, failing through his faults. This is the doctrine of "Liberarians," of "Objectivists," of self-made men who take all the credit for their success, of the wealthy and the powerful who want no questioning of a comfortable status quo. These pillars of rectitude tend to side with the dutiful officer who chased and shot the suspected thief as he fled from the stolen car on Griffith Street. "Order must be maintained. Violators must be punished." "We will not," said the Mayor, "have one law for blacks and one law for whites."

The other half-truth is that society is responsible for what men become, that environment shapes us all. This doctrine is favored by "Socialists" and "Liberals," by dropouts who shift all the blame for their failures, by vengeful terrorists who "get even" by punching Whitey's nose or burning his store. These lovers of social justice tend to side with the frightened fleeing boy who reacted with natural hostility to the hostile environment that produced him.

Both sides are right. Both are wrong. Each person is indeed responsible for himself. Over and over again has the human will proven its power to overcome environmental obstacles. Lincoln read late by candlelight. Carver was the son of a slave. The man who assumed no responsibility for his own condition would in a few days die of thirst. Individual responsibility is inescapable.

Yet no one can escape his environment. Ayn Rand herself would fast succumb in a waterless desert. Together the doctrines of individual and social responsibility make sense. Each is responsible for himself. Each is also responsible in part for the environment of others.

Why, then, do so many of us lean to one view or the other? Ask your neighbors what they think about Watts or Hunters Point. Nine out of ten will reveal a bias before you can catch your breath. Either the rioters are to blame or the police are to blame. Why can't we admit both individual and social responsibility? Why are we slanted?

The reason, I believe, is that we want to avoid responsibility. We don't want to admit our share of the blame.

"We get pushed around everywhere!" shouted the angry Negro woman as helmeted police herded away a group of 25 who demanded entry into a grocery store where a window had been smashed. Here is a classic evasion of responsibility.

But is it not equally evasive for comfortable people to accept no share of blame for the environment of laws and institutions that make others poor? The well-fed like to assume that our institutions favor the poor already, that the rich earn all they get and a lot more they don't get. John Galt is a man of industry and service. The poor are lazy and incompetent.

The assumption does not bear analysis. Most of California's new fortunes have been made not through industry but through mere land speculation—that is, through fencing labor and capital off a piece of the earth, then collecting toll to get out of their way.

Within a mile of Hunters Point are enough vacant lots and other speculative landholdings to employ every

idle hand in the district. The reason this land stands idle while the unemployed tramp about looking for work, or give up in despair, is that it is under-assessed and undertaxed. Washington and Sacramento, through subventions and grants-in-aid, relieve the city from the necessity of calling upon landholders to pay full value for the state-created privilege they enjoy.

Everyone shares the responsibility for bad laws, especially the rich who profit from them. But do not expect them to admit it any more than you would expect the angry Negro woman to admit she was part of a looting party.

Responsibility is the most important word in the English language. Its meaning is yet to be learned.



## New Trustee — New Dimensions

THE Board of Trustees and New York staff of the Henry George School welcomes, as a new trustee, H. Jan Ritscher, vice president of Volkswagen of America, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. He comes from a banking background and is in charge of his company's financial, insurance, traffic and personnel operations. Of Austrian extraction, he was born in Alexandria, then British "protected" Egypt, where his father was in charge of a bank owned by German and Austrian interests.

Mr. Ritscher received his education chiefly in Germany, where he was graduated from the Commercial University of Berlin with a master's degree. He recalls that his main teacher in political economy explained carefully the problem posed by the steadily increasing share of ground rent in the total social product. This was to have special significance for him 25 years later.

In a lecture at the Henry George School in February, 1965,\* Mr. Ritscher spoke of Henry George and Rudolf Steiner, and traced parallels in their thought. Henry George's philosophy had relevance for him because he had trained his thinking according to methods developed by Rudolf

Steiner for a deeper comprehension of human and cosmic activity. "This might seem pretentious," he said recently, "but was it not Henry George who pointed out that cosmic activity and cosmic laws are involved in political economy, and that this is the reason why it is a true science?"

"Conversely, if we do deal with cosmic activity in political economy, is it not logical that we search for and develop cosmic activity within us if we would comprehend our subject matter more deeply and seek true solutions of social problems?" What *is* cosmic activity, he asks, and how, if it exists, can it be trained and strengthened in individuals?

This is a theme dealt with in many of Rudolf Steiner's writings and lectures. Mr. Ritscher believes that if the two streams of students, those of Henry George and of Rudolf Steiner, were to combine their knowledge in mutual respect, they would immensely further the work begun by two outstanding teachers of humanity. He regards his recent election to the board as an honor, but also as "a great gift of destiny in return for many years of meditating on social problems."

\*See HGN, April, 1965.