

Mistakes Don't Work

A Sermon

By JANET RANKIN AIKEN

While continuing to be very active in the support of what we consider right things, we may profitably pause to reassure ourselves philosophically from time to time, lest we fall into defeatism, despair, and a futile complaining which is almost worse than either. Perennially we need to have a few basic ethical facts restated.

1. People are sufficiently intelligent to perceive and to follow their own benefit.

2. Social means determine social ends.

3. People cannot be scared into heaven.

Number one we consider—but often only in regard to selfish interests. The landowner we are too likely to feel knows enough to perceive and to attain his own ends—but not the Georgist. Predatory interests, we tell ourselves, are skillful, while altruistic interests are inept. I want to submit that this is not true, and that believing it to be true is the only sure way to the defeat of the Georgist cause.

Number two is the opposite of the principle on which is based the thinking of totalitarians of all shades of misguidedness. Their "economic de-

terminism" is the doctrine that the end justifies the means—that you can make a good cake with mouldy eggs, or a good chair with rotten sticks. Does it work? Look at Russia with its armies in retreat before determined, active, unintimidated independence; or look at Germany, with its people disintegrating into slow starvation and privation caused directly by the errors of its economic thinking. The plain fact is that mistakes don't work and the only circumstances under which they can seem to work are (a) if we are ignorant of them, (b) if we are afraid of them.

Number three is most important because scaring society into heaven is so precisely what many of us in the HGSSS are trying to do. Scaring people into heaven, enslaving them into heaven, is what the Communists have for years been trying to do. It may be effective in securing temporary power, temporary dictatorship, for the head scare-monger. It never can work in getting us rank-and-filers closer to heaven.

Taking the short view, we often see mistakes rampant and effective. Very well, we must take the long view, never deluding ourselves into

thinking that we or society have not got enough time to improve in. We have eternity in which to establish justice, and the inevitable, deliberate, grand processes of justice march on and work where the petty futility of evil moulders into oblivion.

We must refuse to get excited or dismayed by mistakes. After all, past ages have seen mistakes apparently rampant, landowners in supreme power, absolutists being absolute—and then a Magna Charta or a Reform Bill or a French Revolution has come along and sowed a whole new crop of rightness and mistakes. Society has survived the mistakes. Society is tough.

Society is tough, but society is not impervious to progress and education. Moreover, selfish interests are inept just because they are selfish, and the more successful they are, the more glaringly their mistakes are certain to appear. Too often we talk as if greed and selfishness knew more than common sense and freedom. Well, sometimes it may seem that they do, but it is only appearance. It is not true.

Sometimes it pays to have good aims and to keep quiet about them. The "Readers' Digest" has built up an all-time largest periodical circulation by stressing the constructive and playing down defeatism and faith in evil. But it never advertises the fact.

We can see that our Socialist and Communist brothers are beating a straw man in their doctrine of class warfare, since in fact the interests of producers are identical, whether they call themselves capitalists or laborers. But can we see that the interests of land owner and tenant are basically identical, since each must profit by prosperity and freedom in the community? Do we all realize that it is ignorance first last and all the time which is our enemy, and not any individual or organization? Do we recognize in all humanity, including landlords, the urge toward social progress and well-being which needs only to be instructed and enlightened in order to insure the establishment of Georgist principles?

Mistakes never work. That is the essential nature of a mistake.