

The War, The Public Debt, Taxes and Courage

THIS IS A WAR of production, of current production, the day by day, week by week and month by month turnout of military equipment.

The next generation cannot do anything about it because the next generation is not as yet, and calling upon future generations to bear part of the cost of this war is absurd and pregnant with much harm to our free institutions.

The device alleged to accomplish this passing on of cost is known as the Public Debt. In building up a public debt the *present* owners of wealth, or claims upon wealth, are induced to give up what they have *today* on the promise that they will be repaid through future taxation. There is no more nor less than a promise to redistribute the wealth yet to be produced by our progeny.

That a Public Debt is an immediate and painless way of acquiring presently existing wealth no one will deny. Political aspirants with an eye to repeating their incumbency resort to it when their other eye is on the popular indignation generally aroused by direct taxation.

But the present generation has no moral right so arbitrarily to affect the distribution of the wealth of unborn people. Had your great-grandfather contracted a debt with my great-grandfather and I sought to collect it from you, you would ignore my demands and your position would be upheld by courts of law. The Public Debt, merely an enlargement of the above illustration, works to compel collection which is illegal when applied to individuals.

Yet it is our duty to win the war for reasons we of this generation alone can comprehend at the moment. While in metaphor it may be gratifying to dedicate our efforts to posterity, we presume upon *their* right of self-determination when we contend that our ideas and actions would be theirs. Not having the right to presume what they shall determine, we have no excuse to presume upon their right to distribute the products of *their* labor by any legal commitment from or of the past. Nor is it necessary to conjure posterity to support our rationalizations. Our courage arises and can only arise from what is known today. As individuals we should accept direct taxation to see this war through; as legislators we should advocate direct taxation regardless of the political consequences to ourselves. We should do so for valid present day reasons, the same reasons which were anticipated

and so well outlined by Henry George in his *Social Problems* written before the turn of the century:

"... A great public debt creates a monied interest that wants 'strong government' and fears a change, and thus forms a powerful element on which corrupt and tyrannous government can always rely as against the people. We may see already in the United States the demoralization of this influence; while in Europe, where it has had more striking manifestations, it is the mainstay of tyranny, and the strongest obstacle to political reform."

As citizens of the freest nation in the world, who hold the democratic form of government to be superior to any other form, we must be on our guard to avoid this pitfall. We can only defend our free institutions successfully by meeting the enemy and accepting the economic as well as the human expenses of such conflict with equal courage. And the material expense should be met and can only be met in *this* way through direct taxation. To succeed on the battlefield in our endeavors to preserve a cherished way of life and to fail at home, spells for us defeat and the loss of that *modus vivendi* which those who die seek to preserve—Freedom.

GEORGE B. BRINGMANN



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