

Emergencies Make History

By JAMES S. GREEN

PERHAPS it would have been more exact to title these comments "Emergencies Make Politicians," for it is a matter of record that the ruler, the law-maker, always rides to power on the crest of some social disturbance. And it is also a matter of record that he never renounces the power acquired during these periods of mass fear. So propitious for his purpose are the crises during which the individual loses his sense of personal dignity—turning to the self-proclaimed "leader" for protection from the bewildering calamity—that the politician throughout history has not been above creating an emergency that he might turn to his advantage.

Most of us are familiar with the fact that Mr. Roosevelt rode into the political arena on the prancing steed of Depression. That he remained in power, that he improved on it, by creating situations which spawned the conviction of his "indispensability" is apparent to some of us; unfortunately, we cannot look down upon his career from the vantage point of history to prove or disprove this belief. But, it is interesting to try to assess modern politicians by their historical prototypes.

The career of Dionysius of Syracuse provides an example. He reigned over that Sicilian empire for thirty-eight years, beginning in 405 B.C. The heaven-sent emergency which enabled him to get and keep absolute power for so long was Carthage. With their excellent maritime equipment, the Carthaginians repeatedly crossed the Mediterranean, made war on the Sicilians and eventually established a foothold on the western part of the island. Their presence made them a constant threat, and that was the "emergency" Dionysius exploited to the full.

The essential of an "emergency" is that it should never be fully resolved. To remain the "indispensable man" Dionysius saw to it that the Carthaginians were not decisively and irrevocably defeated; with the military power he had built up at Syracuse this defeat could have been affected, had he so willed. Diodorus Siculus, the ancient historian who tells us about it (see, also, Bury's *History of Rome*, chapter 15), quotes a discerning critic of Dionysius: "And if any man will but se-

riously consider, he may easily conclude that Dionysius is more afraid of peace than war. For he knows that the Syracusans (through fear of the bad consequences of commotions at this present time) dare not attempt anything against him: but he foresees that if the Carthaginians be conquered, the Syracusans, being then in arms and encouraged with the success, will seek to redeem themselves and regain their liberty." (Bk. XIV, ch. 7.) Thus for a would-be despot there is nothing like an emergency, and of all emergencies there is nothing like a war (or the perpetual likelihood of war), as an avenue to absolute power.

JUST as Dionysius must have been profoundly grateful to his nominal enemies for assisting him to remain so long in power, so F.D.R. owed his first two terms to the emergency of the "depression" and his last two to Hitler. Even before Hitler obligingly began in fact to assist Roosevelt on his path to power, Roosevelt was preparing to turn him and Japan into emergencies by his "quarantine the aggressors" speech at Chicago in October, 1937. It is significant that when World War II broke out in 1939 F.D.R. proclaimed a "limited emergency," and at the

fall of France nine months later this emergency had become, conveniently, and in his own words, an "unlimited" one. In the months that followed, and until Pearl Harbor, two of Roosevelt's chief henchmen, Knox and Stimson, repeatedly warned the American people that it was impossible to exaggerate the danger they were in. This was probably true; but the danger came far more from the interventionist policies Roosevelt was pursuing than from the warlords of Germany, Italy or Japan, each of whom was then up to his neck in a separate and self-created emergency of his own. It is strange that all during this time neither Argentina nor Spain nor Sweden nor Turkey felt that they were in an equally desperate emergency. At least none of their statesmen said so publicly. Could it be that none of them possessed the will to power?

But Roosevelt, unlike Dionysius, did not adopt the plan of refraining from complete destruction of his en-

emies. For Roosevelt, unlike Dionysius, had allies, whose wishes had to be consulted; and neither Britain nor the U.S.S.R., being much nearer to the scene of conflict, could be expected to favor an indefinite prolongation of hostilities. Instead, the formula of "unconditional surrender" was followed, a formula which both satisfied the blood-thirsty at home and involved an enormous increase in territory and power for the U.S.S.R. Thus while the complete defeat of Germany and Japan meant that they could no longer be used as emergencies, another and entirely different emergency, much more formidable and politically effective than the other two, was created in the U.S.S.R.

This was the result of Roosevelt inscrutably wise statesmanship at Yalta, and his legacy to his successors; for by that time, January, February, 1945, Roosevelt must have suspected the natural end of his career. Dictators are not immortal, but apparently their emergencies can be endowed with a life exceeding the mortal span. Roosevelt's Yalta-created emergency is now being fully exploited by his political heirs. In the present this emergency may be said to be (to employ Roosevelt's delicately-shaded phraseology) a "limited" one. The factors which will turn it into an unlimited emergency will not be lacking when needed.

AS a footnote to emergency politics, the American brand bears an odd characteristic: the care taken by the Government to assure a great defeat or calamity at its entrance into a war. Owing to the facts that Congress, not the President, may declare war and that none of our wars in their preliminary stages have had the support of the citizenry, it is important from the Government's point of view that diversity should be welded into unity by means of a severe initial reverse. Pearl Harbor at the sinking of the *Maine* in February, 1898 (both of which we were pointedly admonished to "remember"), are recent instances of this stratagem. But other examples are found further back in our history. An astute observer of politi-

was Philip Hone of New York, who interesting *Diary* covers the years 1828-1851. The later years of Hone's life coincided with our war with Mexico, to which Hone, in common with many other Americans, was strongly opposed, and against which he wrote and spoke openly. (In those days, when America was more of a sweet land of liberty than it is now it was possible to do this without being

ing arrested.) Under date of 9 May, 1846, Hone wrote: "This war has commenced most disastrously, as might have been expected from the scanty force sent into this disputed territory . . . but it really looks as if this result was anticipated, and the American blood shed was to excite American feelings, and to make the war popular. It was so in the last war (of 1812). The disgraceful defeat and capture of Hull at Detroit was the cement which bound together friends of war and friends of peace into a united band of friends of national honor. . . . These disasters will raise the blood of the American people to the war point, and cause them to cease inquiring, What is this war about?"

The surrender of Gen. William Hull at Detroit in 1812; the initial difficulties of "Rough and Ready" Zachary Taylor between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande in 1846; the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861; the "mysterious" blowing up of the *Maine* in Havana Harbor in 1898 (260 casualties); the sinking in 1915 of the *Lusitania*, which was carrying munitions to England and on which, Wilson insisted, Americans should travel unmolested (1198 casualties, including 139 Americans); and the Japanese attack on the premeditatedly defenseless naval base at Pearl Harbor in 1941 (3000 casualties): do they not all follow an identical pattern, and can that similarity be entirely fortuitous?