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The Tribute Money

By Milton Mayer

Excerpts:

I cannot see why I should not persist in my folly. Like every other horror-stricken American I keep asking myself, "What can a man do? What weight does a man have, besides petition and prayer, that he isn't using to save his country's soul and his own?" The frustration of the horror-stricken American as he sees his country going over the falls without a barrel is more than I can bear just now. He tries to do constructive work, but all the while he is buying guns. I have thought as hard as I can think. I have thought about, for example, anarchy. Not only am I not an anarchist, but I believe in taxes, in very high taxes, and especially in a very high graduated income tax. I realize that a man who believes in taxes cannot pick and choose among them and say he will not spend 50 per cent of them on guns just because he doesn't need guns. I realize that anarchy is unworkable and that that is why the state came into being. And I realize, too, that the state cannot be maintained without its authority's being reposed in its members' representatives. I realize all that. But in this state — and a very good state it is, or was, as states go, or went — I cannot get anybody to represent me. My senators will not represent me. My congressman will not represent me. I am opposed to taxation without representation.

Don't tell me that I am represented by my vote. I voted against the national policy. Having done so, I am constrained in conscience to uphold my vote and not betray it....

If my offense is anarchy — which I dislike — I can't help it. If the preservation of society compels me to commit worse evils than anarchy, then the cost of preserving society is too high. Society is not sacred; I am....

My first responsibility is not to preserve the state — that is Hitlerism and Stalinism — but to preserve my soul. If you tell me that there is no other way to preserve the state than by the implicit totalitarianism of Rousseau's "general will," I will reply that it is the state's misfortune and men must not accept it. I have surrendered my sovereignty to another Master than the general will — I do not mean to be sanctimonious here — and if the general will does not serve Him it does not serve me or any other man.

In so far as there is any worldly sovereign in the United States, it is not the general will, or the Congress, or the President. It is I. I am sovereign here. I hold the highest office of the land, the office of citizen, with responsibilities to my country heavier, by virtue of my office, than those of any other officer, including the President. And I do not hold my office by election but by inalienable right. I cannot abdicate my right, because it is inalienable. If I try to abdicate it, to the general will, or to my representatives or my ministers, I am guilty of betraying not only democracy but my nature as a man endowed with certain inalienable rights.

I have thought about all this, in the large and in the little. I have thought about my wife and children and my responsibility to them. War will not even save them their lives, not even victorious war this time. And it will lose them their most precious possession, their souls, if they call a man husband and father who has lightly sold his own. I have thought of

the fact that better men than I, much better men, disagree with me. That grieves me. But I am not, in this instance, trying to emulate better men.

I have thought about my effectiveness. A man who “makes trouble for himself,” as the saying is, is thought to reduce his effectiveness, partly because of the diversion of his energies and partly because some few, at least, of his neighbors will call him a crank, a crook, or a traitor. But I am not very effective anyway, and neither, so far as I can see, is anyone else. If anything is effective in matters of this sort, it is example. I go up and down the land denying the decree of Caesar that all able-bodied men between eighteen and twenty-five go into the killing business and urging such men as are moved in conscience to decline to do so. If a million young men would decline, in conscience, to kill their fellow men, the government would be as helpless as its citizens are now. Its helplessness then would, I think, be at least as contagious abroad as its violence is now. Other governments would become helpless, including the Russian, and thus would we be able to save democracy at home *and* abroad. Victorious was has failed to do it anywhere.

But how can a million old men who themselves will not decline to hire the killing expect a million young men to do it? How can I urge others to do what I do not care to do myself?

...

Of course the government doesn't want me for military service. I am overage, spavined, humpbacked, bald, and blind. The government doesn't want me. Men are a dime a dozen. What the government wants is my dime to buy a dozen men with. If I decline to buy men and give them guns, the government will, I suppose, force me to. I offer to pay all of my taxes for peaceable purposes, the only purposes which history suggests will defend democracy; the government has, I believe, no way, under the general revenue system, to accept my offer. I like the out-of-doors and I do not want to go to jail. I could put my property in my wife's name and bury my money in a hole or a foreign bank account. But I am not Al Capone. I am... an honest men. And I am not mathematically minded; if I did try deceit, I'd be caught.

There is only one other alternative, and that is no alternative either. That is to earn less than \$500 a year and be tax-free. I'd be paying taxes anyway on what I bought with \$500, but that doesn't bother me, because the issue is not, as long as I am only human, separation from war or any other evil-doing but only as much separation as a being who is only human can achieve within his power. No, the trouble with earning less than \$500 a year is that it doesn't support a family. Not a big family like mine. If I were a subsistence farmer I might get by, but I'm a city boy.

I would be hard put to answer if you asked me whether a man should own property in the first place, for a government to tax. If I said, “No, he should not,” I should stand self-condemned as a Christian Communist. It is illegal, under [the McCarran Act](#), to be either a Christian *or* a Communist, and I don't want to tangle with both the Internal Revenue Act and the McCarran Act at the same time, especially on the delicate claim to being a Christian. Still, the Christian Gospels are, it seems to me, passing clear on the point of taxes. When the apostle says *both* that “we should obey the magistrates” *and* that “we should obey God rather than man,” I take it that he means that we should be law-abiding persons unless the law moves us against the Lord.

The problem goes to the very essence of the relationship of God, man, and the state. It isn't easy. It never was. History, however, is on the side of us angels. The primitive Christians, who were pacifists, refused to pay taxes for heathen temples. They were, of course, outlaws anyway. The early Quakers, who were pacifists, refused to pay tithes to the established church and went to prison. But the war tax problem seems not to have arisen

until 1755, when a considerable number of Quakers refused to pay a tax levied in Pennsylvania for the war against the red Indians.

The Boston (and New York and Baltimore and Charleston) “tea parties” of the 1770’s were, of course, a vivid and violent form of tax refusal endorsed, to this day, by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Seventy-five years after the Revolution, Henry David Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax because the government was waging both slavery against the Negroes and war against the Mexicans. Thoreau was put in jail overnight, and the next day Emerson went over to Concord and looked at him through the bars and said, “What in the devil do you think you’re doing, Henry?” “I,” said Thoreau, “am being free.” So Emerson paid Thoreau’s poll tax, and Thoreau, deprived of his freedom by being put out of jail, wrote his essay on civil disobedience. Seventy-five years later, Gandhi read Thoreau’s essay and worked it into a revolution. It could happen here, but it won’t. The place was propitious for Gandhi, a slave colony whose starving people had no money or status to lose, just as the time was propitious for Thoreau, a time of confidence and liberality arising from confidence. Totalitarianism was unthinkable and parliamentary capitalism was not in danger. The appeal to the rights of man was taken seriously, and McCarthyism, McCarranism, and MacArthurism were all as yet unborn.

I doubt that anybody will be able to bring me more light in this matter than I now have. The light I need will come to me from within or it won’t come at all. When George Fox visited William Penn, Penn wanted to know if he should go on wearing his sword. “Wear it,” said Fox, “as long as thou canst.” I hasten to say that I feel like Penn, not like Fox. I know I can’t say that you ought to do what I can’t do or that I’ll do it if you do it. But I don’t know if I can say that you ought to do what I do or even if I ought to do it. I am fully aware of the anomaly of refusing to pay 50 per cent of my taxes when 50 percent of the 50 per cent I do pay is used for war. I am even fuller aware of the converse anomaly of refusing to pay 50 per cent of my taxes when 50 per cent of the 50 per cent I won’t pay would be used for peaceable purposes. In addition, if the government comes and gets it, and fines me, as I suppose it might, it will collect more for war than it would have in the first place.

Worst of all, I am not a good enough man to be doing this sort of thing. I am not an early Christian; I am the type that, if Nero threw me naked into the amphitheatre, would work out a way to harass the lions. But somebody over twenty-five has got to perform the incongruous affirmation of saying, “No,” and saying it regretfully rather than disdainfully. Why shouldn’t it be I? I have sailed through life, up to now, as a first-class passenger on a ship that is nearly all steerage. By comparison with the rest of mankind, I have always had too much money, too many good jobs, too good a reputation, too many friends, and too much fun. Who, if not I, is full of unearned blessings? When, if not now, will I start to earn them? Somebody will take care of me. Somebody always has. The only thing I don’t know is who it is that does it. I know who feeds the young ravens, but I know, too, that the Devil takes care of his own.