

Gambling with Freedom

The democratic principle is that government derives its powers from the consent of the governed. It denies that government is divine in its origin or in its potentialities, or has any right of self-perpetuation, or any prerogative which cannot be abrogated by the people.

Whenever, by any device or for any excuse, the right of the people to change the form or personnel of the government is even temporarily denied, democracy has ceased to exist. Even though the traditional forms of democracy are retained, the substance of it is gone, and in its place there is government which owes responsibility only to itself. Call it autarchy, oligarchy or totalitarianism—it is not democracy.

The usual excuse for government under a democracy to take unto itself the power to rule the people without their consent is a "state of emergency." The assumption is that during a national crisis the government knows best what is good for the people, that the people cannot be expected to know or to judge what is good for them. At any rate, the people cannot be trusted.

War is a "state of emergency." Under this theory the principal political parties of Great Britain have agreed that there would be no elections during the war, and a tacit understanding exists that there shall be a minimum of criticism of the government. Thus democracy has been suspended. The government will act for the people, without their consent; absolutism has been instituted.

In 1864 we held a national election in this country in the midst of a great war. The totalitarian idea had not yet submerged our national character, probably because our sense of freedom had had an opportunity to develop in the free land of the West. We believed then that the people had a right to express their opinion on all matters of national importance, including war. The re-election of Lincoln was a popular confirmation of his policy, democratically pursued.

But perhaps today there are military reasons for suspending democracy. Perhaps, too, national security may dictate a temporary policy of absolutism, which includes censorship, suspension of civil rights and liberties, freedom of speech, and so on. "C'est la guerre." Since war itself

is a denial of civilization, how can we quibble over a breakdown of the political machinery which civilized people have devised for safeguarding their liberties?

There are, however, considerations of greater significance which warrant our safeguarding these liberties during a war period. It must be remembered that these liberties are always held by tenuous threads, that there are always self-seeking groups which would use the power of government to secure privileges for themselves. The struggle for freedom has ever been a struggle against governments which serve such groups. Strong government always plays into the hands of those who enjoy economic privileges; indeed, all privileges are granted by government and depend upon its power.

Therefore, if war is the excuse for vesting greater power in government, then war must ultimately benefit privilege. This logical conclusion is proved by the record of events. Every war results in an increased burden of taxation as well as an increased revenue for bondholders. Our tariff walls started to rise to their present "protection" proportions after the Civil War. English monopolists were the only gainers from the Boer War. After the World War our railroad bondholders saddled the government with the guarantee of five per cent return on their "investment." Thus war results in burdens for the people and in profits for the privileged groups which can obtain government favor.

The loss of political rights and liberties during war carries over the peacetime. Thus certain sedition laws passed in this country during the World War were not repealed until six years after peace had been concluded. Government does not readily relinquish power yielded by the people, not even in a democracy.

But political losses are significant only in that they portend permanent economic losses. We want the forms of political democracy mainly because through them we hope to attain without destructive violence the real substance of liberty—economic democracy. That is why it is dangerous to suspend any political rights, particularly the right to vote against the government, during any so-called "state of emergency." We cannot afford to gamble with freedom.