

Philosophy Under Fire

THE TEST of one's faith in a philosophic conviction is the ability to retain it as a plumb-line for thought and behavior in the face of emotional stress.

Now is the time for every advocate of a free economy to examine his knowledge of the philosophy, and to sound the stamina of his intellectual courage. To accept the basic principle of freedom in times of tranquillity requires only knowledge and reason. To retain faith in that principle, to think and act in the light of it in the storm of passion unloosed by war demands stuff of a sterner nature.

The time has come to assay the metal we are made of. The dilettante whose philosophy consists of dawdling in speculative phrases will not stand the test. He will find reason enough to betray his lack of intellectual probity; he will justify in nice-sounding sentences his kowtowing to false gods made of the clay of popular prejudice.

To measure our understanding of this philosophy and our confidence in it, let us recount the few simple tenets upon which it rests.

First, the individual is the keystone of our social structure.

Second, his life, his happiness and his liberty are the only standards by which the validity of that social structure must be gauged.

Third, he has a contract with society whereby he agrees to respect the right of others to the same pursuit of happiness which he cherishes.

And finally, any political or economic scheme that impinges on the terms of this contract is a denial of his freedom, and must result in a social structure in which a few are masters and the many are slaves.

That is all quite simple and readily acceptable. But the difficulty arises in analyzing cleverly compounded political and economic schemes and in detecting the slave mechanism they conceal. Indeed, so universal is the desire for freedom that these schemes are always wrapped in its phrases and sold to us on its promise. To penetrate the disguises is the problem. Then to denounce what is revealed, in spite of the pressure of popular opinion, is the test of one's faith in freedom.

Public opinion, for instance, has been whipped into the acceptance of certain political forms as synonymous with freedom, whereas they are at best merely attributes of it. History tells us over and over again that despotism can be co-existent with these forms. Simulations of democracy have been used by despots to entrench themselves in power.

Popular suffrage has been and can be an instrument for the enslavement of the masses. Sometimes enacted in a bath of blood, laws for safeguarding

liberty have been used to circumvent it. Thus, while democratic government and civil liberties are essential to any concept of freedom, these attributes are no guarantee of it.

Every student of the philosophy of freedom knows this. All too obvious is the fact that the character of our political structure does not determine our economy but rather is determined by it. Here in America we have enjoyed a great degree of

political freedom merely because we have had the abundance of a vast and relatively free earth for nearly two centuries.

Keeping pace with our declining economy in the past ten years our government has increased the very functions and powers against which the framers of our Constitution with deliberate forethought sought to establish barriers. Unless there is a miraculous improvement of our economy, democratic forms cannot safeguard our crumbling political freedom. Many there are who, ignorant of the cause of poverty, are indeed ascribing it to our democratic structure, and are advocating political enslavement as a means to economic security.

These are patent facts. But along comes a war, which in itself is a denial of freedom, in which both sides claim they are striving for freedom. The historic truth that wars are economic in origin and in purpose is completely and ingeniously hidden in a welter of words. Passions are aroused in favor of this or that "ideology." The organs of propaganda toiling for the interests which alone gain by war inflame the popular mind to the point where the fake is accepted for reality.

And the pity of it is that even the devotees of the philosophy of freedom are too often deceived by the propaganda. It cannot be due to weakness of intellect or even to lack of understanding; for in normal times what we have pointed out will be accepted as axiomatic. Only egregious pusillanimity will prompt a philosopher of freedom to bray "save the world for democracy" when he knows that there can be no democracy in a slave world.

Those who are so deluded might well be reminded that there is no guarantee that a war to save democracy will be successful; but it is a certainty that democracy is lost to the people when a nation goes to war. And it is never returned intact.