

Rendering Liberty Unto Caesar

I have a right to live. Or, have I? The question of conscription, and of the momentous social implications involved, rests upon the basic problem of human existence: are its terms inherent in individual life, or are they prescribed by one's neighbors? The little "T" that screamed to all the world its first proclamation of life, did it thereby announce its subservience to the will of all the other screamers in the nursery, as well as to those who by accident were born a few years before and to those who were to follow a few years later?

The question of conscription cannot be answered in any other terms. All the arguments pro and con are the vaporings of distorted mentalities, unless they proceed from one or the other premise: that the right to life is inherent in life itself, or is subject to the will, whim or power of the State, or its satellite—the Majority.

If we posit the divinity of the State then we cannot quarrel with its acts. Acceptance of that principle leads inevitably to the conscription of life and of property, and any appeal to human rights (even though they are inscribed in documents or hallowed by tradition) is pusillanimous. Once we accept the doctrine that the terms of our existence are dictated by the need or desire of the State, the dignity of individual existence ceases, and with the destruction of that dignity the omnipotence of the State—as far as its power can be exerted—is established. The end is the regime of status; the regime of contract is over.

1.

To illustrate the difference between status and contract: During the Congressional debate on the bill to empower the President to mobilize the National Guard, with provision for its possible use beyond the country's borders, it was pointed out that enlistment in the militia specifically precluded foreign service. Accordingly, in the interest of contractual honesty, it was proposed to amend the bill so that members of the National Guard could have twenty days in which to resign before the proposed law went into effect. This suggestion was rejected because it would enable the militiamen to shirk their "duty to the country." The State recognizes no contractual obligations. Its agreements with its subjects—or with other states—are entered into for its convenience, and when its convenience is

served by the abrogation of the terms, only the extent of its power to do so determines its action. That is the regime of status.

Constitutions, bills or rights, traditional codes written into the hearts as well as the history books of a nation are meaningless contracts when the divine right of the State is invoked. Forced soldiering, particularly in peace time, is the ultimate expression of this divinity, for it determines the condition under which life itself is possible. It is the means and the end of totalitarianism.

But if life itself implies the right of fixing its terms, it also implies the rights of fixing the conditions under which it may cease. I have a right to fight for my liberty, for my honor, for the sanctity of my home, for my ideals or for my property; in the exercise of that right it is my privilege to relinquish my freedom or jeopardize my existence. No life could be more noble than death met in the struggle against enthrallment. Pacifism—a merely negative behavior—is a futile flight from civilization. But, when I chose to fight I do so as a man; when I am conscripted I am a slave. A volunteer enters into a contract, while a conscript is a mere subject of the status.

It must not be forgotten that conscription is the ultimate of the regime of status. Involuntary poverty is a form of conscription; so is taxation; so are the manifold repressive conditions which an economy based on monopoly imposes on man. To oppose military conscription as a violation of natural rights is only part of the struggle for freedom. Indeed, the impounding of man is merely the final step in the whole process of his degradation, which began with his expropriation from the means of his existence.

2.

A conscript army has been defined as a democratic army, because everybody is subject to the State's call. In the first place, if there are conscripts there must be conscriptors. There must be at least one master in every slave society. If democracy involves the concept of equality, conscription is per se a denial of democracy. Second, conscription of life could not by any stretch of the imagination be termed democratic so long as the means of life—property—remains a private privilege; so long as private property is not confiscated by the State, conscription creates two classes of citizens living under different laws, another denial of democracy. Third, and

most important, the fact that everybody is subject to forced soldiering merely means that the slave class is extended; one's condition of servitude has not been mitigated by that fact. To speak of extending the State's sphere of domination over the individual as a democratic process is to juggle words into contradictory meanings.

One apology for conscription falls back on a moralism: everyone's duty to the social order to protect it from an invader. There is no doubt that the moral obligation to protect a neighbor from harm is a noble impulse. That is why he should be warned against the iniquity of conscription. That is the reason for taking counsel with him about the cause of war, to point out that the social order of which all are part is one in which injustice prevails and that this very injustice is driving us to slaughter, to urge upon him to consider, analyze and reflect. Thus one fulfills his duty to all the members of the social order of which he is a part. Duty does not imply the use of force upon my neighbors, even "for their own good," and conscription etomologically and in fact implies force.

Recruitment, when it is not a refuge from hunger or despair, involves free choice; but conscription is coercion. And, unless we adopt the ultimate doctrine of State-ism, that the dominating group knows best what is good for the dominated masses and assumes the "duty" of forcing its will upon them, which identifies morality with coercion, any attempt to give conscription an ethical value is sheer distortion. It is the dialectic to which defenders of the status quo resort to secure acquiescence in the status quo.

3.

We are told that a conscript army is necessary for modern ways of war, and that we must submit to this curtailment of our liberty in order to preserve our liberty—like taking castor oil to avoid taking castor oil. But why presuppose war as a necessity? If we can master our hysteria for a moment, let us analyze the conditions that lead to war. Are not these, in the order of their importance, persistent internal poverty with resulting unrest, international friction due to our protective tariffs and our self-sufficiency ideology? War is a result, not a cause. Remove the causes of war and the need for forced soldiering will disappear.

And what warrant have we that the present "emergency" which calls for conscription will

not be succeeded by like "emergencies"? Napoleon put forced universal soldiering on a legal basis in the name of "liberty, equality, fraternity," and France has had conscription and wars (including those against exploited Africans and Madagascans) ever since. Once this vast war industry is instituted—with millions of soldiers, with millions of tax-ridden workers depending on that army for sustenance, with financial and manufacturing interests vitally concerned with its continuance—there will never be demobilization; every effort, including the making of wars, will be directed toward its continuance as a source of profits and as a pseudo-solution of our permanent problem of unemployment. Once conscription comes to America—that America which is largely populated by the offspring of those who escaped to it from the conscript armies of Europe—it will remain as a permanent fixture until our civilization goes the way of European civilization. Liberty cannot arise from slavery; slaves must be freed before liberty can be reborn.

Let us not be deluded by the palatable phrases used by the salesmen of conscription. Let us recognize in this further encroachment of the State on the liberty of the individual the step which leads inevitably to the complete gagging of that lusty "I am" which every one of us proclaimed upon entering the world.