

Our Land and Our Literature ✓

Faith in the belief that the word spoken in the name of truth leads on to freedom, prompted MARGARET HARKINS, assistant editor of THE FREEMAN, to write the following article in support of her conviction that writers can make the pattern and cut the cloth for the future peace. She asserts that the long trend toward defeatism and war has now been halted by a counter-trend toward victory, and that in this interval the voice of the social scientist, proclaiming incontrovertible truths based on the operation of natural laws, will be heard and heeded.

★ IN THE BEGINNING is the word. And the word becomes manifest and dwells among us. A symbol for good or for evil, it clothes us with our environment of splendor or of poverty; the mirror of our every thought, it explains, interprets, reflects the inward in the outer; a guide and counselor, it points the way along the new directions that lead in and out of the eternal now. Freedom of the word, spoken or written, should make secure all other freedoms; that it has failed to do so generally, and has been used, in particular instances, in a perverted manner in order to achieve the opposite effect, would seem to indicate a need to reexamine mankind's common medium of thought communication, reaffirm its values, and reestimate the influence of civilization's most powerful tool—the word.

When Adolf Schickelgruber lighted a bonfire of books a few years ago he touched off an international spark of indignation that helped to set the whole world on fire. Americans were among the first to offer thanks to the kindly fate that had placed them apart in a land where such things could not happen. Wars and bombings there might be, freedom's wings might be temporarily clipped along with ration coupons, letters and radio messages that could bring aid and comfort to the enemy might be curbed, but that the insular freedoms of speech and press could ever be burned at the stake was considered unthinkable. Thus far no flames have shot forth from the pyre, but that faggots are being brought up and that there is considerable smoke in the air, can hardly be denied by even the most optimistic. The newspaper press has been forced into jealously guarding its freedom of expression, a difficult feat in time of war; various pressure groups are busy with schemes, subtle and devious, designed to lift responsibility from the shoulders of the over-burdened during the emergency, in the hope of restoring it (but on a share-cropping basis only) when peace returns.

In determining the shape of the peace to come, it is helpful to look back at the armistice period which existed between the two world wars. Freedom of speech was taken for granted then, and for more than twenty years the word was a product of free exchange among nations. No insurmountable tariff barriers were erected to stem the flow of the word; back and forth across all borders and all frontiers, the spoken and printed symbol of communication circulated freely. Its effect was

deemed so powerful that once war came, the enemy used every known method to eradicate printed literature which might be harmful to its cause, to remove certain authors and writers from society, to hunt down underground printing plants, and break up suspicious communications systems. Propaganda and counter-propaganda became the order of the day, and the thinking habits of millions of individuals were completely altered by control of the word.

Why then? it might be asked, could a force so potent in time of war, subject to all the harmful influence of control, be so ineffectual in time of peace. Granted that a free press and free speech in America have contributed enormously to the evolution of democracy in this country, still the forward movement has been slowed by continued drifting and a general state of uncertainty. A belief that this is due to neglect of the word by the people is surely not valid in a nation that boasts of the largest news press, the greatest periodical circulation, and the highest book production in the world. It is doubtless true that this enormous volume has lowered the general value and effectiveness of the word by making it commonplace, but this only serves to emphasize the apparent lack of discrimination among readers. Quality has seemed to decrease as quantity increases, although the amount of the proportionate change would be difficult to determine.

If the fault lies in the quality of the material available, the whole matter must come to rest on the doorstep of authors and writers. The prevailing belief that writers must offer wares demanded by readers is only a half-truth. In the beginning is the word, and readers are not likely to return from a flight into imagination and tell the writers what to write. The readers await the word, and then accept it in whole or in part. If the word is confused, vague, or distorted, it is apt to leave the reader in a similar state of mind. The reader assumes that the writer has studied his subject and acquainted himself with all available facts that might contribute to its lucid presentation. If the author poses a problem and offers no solution, the reader assumes, and rightly, that the answer is not known.

Wars, economic depressions, and other social evils are abnormal conditions, out of harmony with man's ethical nature, and incompatible with the forces of good. The word has been spread abroad in the land to the effect that the solution to these problems lies hidden in the future. Now and again, within rather well-defined group limits, a social scientist calls out the glad tidings that the future is here, that the solution has been found, and that the building of a free society can proceed without fear or favor. But his voice is seldom heard by the populace for the very adequate reason that the populace is busy listening to the voice of an Okie or a Tobacco Road sharecropper who is telling all at the local cinema palace. The same populace, suffering from flat feet or a cold in the head, would not expect to be cured by listening to the moans and sniffles of fellow-sufferers, but would consult a medical scientist who knows the cause and cure for physical disabilities, if the cause and cure have been discovered. If they have

not been discovered he is regarded with suspicion and pity; if they have been found and he fails to apply the proper remedy he is quickly and definitely labeled, to his immediate discomfort and often to his permanent disadvantage.

Such good fortune has not come to the social scientist. His is still but a voice in a wilderness—a wilderness which the average person envisions as a no man's land populated by deluded dreamers utterly without benefit of common sense or practical experience. What the average person forgets, or perhaps does not know, is that the philosophy which he accepts is but a reflection of what he himself actually believes. The popular books are those written by authors who have skillfully woven into words the assortment of thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and prejudices common in the minds of a great many people at a certain period of time. A book which was a best-seller ten years ago does not remain in the spotlight for the reason that the thinking habits of millions of readers have changed.

The fundamentals of social science, based on natural law and hence on incontrovertible truth, can be understood only by those who have faith in truth. This is a matter of degree. *Know the truth, and the truth shall make you free* stands as one of the noblest utterances of all time, yet its splendid promise has been largely ignored, not because individuals consider the statement false, but simply because they lack the faith necessary to make it workable. Faith is the motive power that prompts truth seeking; if faith is weak the seeker will usually be willing to settle for a half-truth, or less.

Evidence that society in general has been more than willing to settle for minor compensations, even in matters serious enough to bring on a disrupting war, is offered by the type of books, magazines, plays, motion pictures, and similar mediums accepted by the public during the last few years. The trend has been toward defeatism, toward a cynical review of existing conditions without even a suggestion that society had sufficient potential intelligence to solve the problem of its world. Truth was a commodity for which there was little demand, and the social scientist who claimed to have found truth in the guise of natural law was much like the forlorn balloon vendor who remained alone with his unsold wares floating in the air after the circus had folded its tents and departed.

Now that the trend toward defeatism has been halted by the counter-trend to win the war, the vendor of truth should have less opposition. Already there seems to be a general realization of the fact that a war is not fought with guns alone. In the beginning is the word, and long after the guns have stopped firing, the power of today's word, for good or for evil, will still be felt.

This is the golden hour for the social scientist to speak the word for freedom. *Now*—not in some far-off future day—but now, while the world is in the thick of its fight for justice, is the time to feed the men and women who hunger for a philosophy of affirmation in which they can have faith. This is the hour to proclaim that a panacea has been found—and that the panacea is freedom itself.