

# AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IN A FASCIST AGE

WILLIAM L. CROW

*There is no trick of perpetual motion in politics any more than in mechanics.*—LOWELL.

## I

THE advent of social and economic planning in the United States has brought suggestions from several quarters that we are travelling a road which leads directly to fascism, or, if not to fascism, perhaps to communism. While the goal of communism seems to most observers too remote even for discussion, there is, however, reason for the question, What of fascist tendencies in the United States?

Democracy and fascism are two distinctive, contradictory philosophies of government when existing in their purer forms<sup>1</sup>. Democracy is slow and inefficient; the ideals of fascism include speed and efficiency. Democracy is synonymous with substantial freedom; fascism uses the censor, the prison camp, and sometimes the firing squad. Democracy gets along with a measurable residuum of obsolete machinery; the mechanisms of fascism are new and highly polished. Democracy idealizes a significant amount of individualism; fascism worships at the shrine of totalitarianism and regimentation. Democracy encourages and supports two or more competing political parties; fascism is rooted in a single group. Democracy likes the informality of business dress; fascism the formality of military uniforms. Democracy is controlled and inspired by the wisdom of the many; fascism depends upon the intelligence of a highly selected few. Democracy is like a slow-moving raft from which the riders' feet dangle in the water; fascism invites comparison with a modern, stream-lined speed-boat in which the passengers expect to be hurried to their destination.

When, therefore, the President of the United States had the support of a Congress in which the minority party had

1. What is democracy? The question is asked, but no attempt is made here to give a precise definition. The meaning of the word in the western world has changed greatly since the rise of European dictatorships. That it can be made an omnibus expression is illustrated by a statement at Berlin by Benito Mussolini: "The greatest and soundest democracies which exist in the world to-day are Italy and Germany. Elsewhere, politics is dominated by the great powers of capitalism, by secret societies and political groups, which work against each other under pretext of so-called 'inalienable rights of humanity'."

but a very feeble voice; when he asked for and obtained, without precedent in peace time, large grants of executive power; when, impatient with the conditions which prevented the quick realization of certain ideals of humanitarianism, he attempted to refashion the Supreme Court without waiting to suggest a constitutional amendment, students of government in general and critics in particular wanted to know just how close we were cutting to the pattern of fascism.

## II

There is no question that humanitarian democracy had a job to do when Franklin D. Roosevelt became President in 1933. It was not Mr. Roosevelt alone who said, when he took office, that we were socially and economically driving a horse and buggy, whereas, from a technological standpoint, we were piloting an airplane. The experts who had prepared for his predecessor, President Herbert Hoover, the mammoth volumes entitled *Social Trends* had said that "Social invention has to be stimulated to keep pace with mechanical invention". How to make the democratic machinery act in the huge task of promulgating humanitarian principles, without a breakdown of that machinery, and without too great a strain on freedom, was the assignment which Mr. Roosevelt had been given. His own words, taken from his Message to Congress in 1937, are worthy of study, for they show how precisely he limited the methods of action to the spirit of our institutions. "Ours was the task," he says, "to prove that democracy could be made to function in the world of to-day as effectively as in the simpler world of a hundred years ago. . . The times required the confident answer of performance to those whose instinctive faith in humanity made them want to believe that in the long run democracy would prove superior to more extreme forms of government as a process of getting action when action was wisdom, without the spiritual sacrifices which these other forms of government exact."

There was much to be done. Individualism, both rugged and ragged, prevailed in certain sections of the capitalistic camp. There were holding companies for holding companies for holding companies, with certain corporate empire-makers lodged like tree-sitters at the tops of financial pyramids. Certain states were blatantly advertising throughout the American nation the virtues of their extremely liberal incorporation laws.

Incorporate in State A, they were in effect saying, and do just about as you please in State B where you live. Lines of fine print in prospectuses, modest as daisies, but as individualistically brazen in their contents as circus clowns, left ground holes for the hasty retreat, in case of collapse, of the underwriters of so-called "securities". Agrarian bankruptcy was speedily developing into a national catastrophe, with farmers "on the march" to prevent sheriffs from consummating foreclosure sales. Unemployment reared its muddled head. An increase from a normal of 2,000,000 unemployed to 12,000,000 in a span of only four years was enough to make capitalists as well as indigents appeal to the government for a mantle of protection. Youths of twenty, fresh from college, as well as experienced men of sixty had their backs to a wall of economic granite. The old were defeated, and the young had no opportunity.

Something had to be done, and done quickly. It might be too late if the malcontents, with righteous wrath, began throwing monkey wrenches into the wheels of our American institutions. Disorder was democratically and otherwise expensive. A communication from the railroad brotherhoods to President Hoover in 1932 was a bit of handwriting on the wall, signalling to appreciative minds what might be in store for us. "Mr. President," said these brotherhoods, "we have come here to tell you that unless something is done to provide employment and relieve distress among the families of the unemployed, we cannot be responsible for the orderly operations of the railroads of this country—that we will refuse to take the responsibility for the disorder which is sure to arise if conditions continue. . . . We are not socialists, we are not communists, nor are we anarchists. . . . There is a growing demand that the entire business and social structure be changed because of the general dissatisfaction with the present system."

Indeed, the entire business and social structure was changed. The objectives and accomplishments of the Roosevelt régime have been in the main an alleviation of unemployment through a huge program of public works; a closer supervision of the banking system, including limited insurance of deposits; the stabilization of industries and home ownership by means of government loans; the regulation of stock exchanges and the sale of securities to the public; a greater recognition of the rights of labor and of collective bargaining; the drastic control of public utility holding companies; a provision for minimum wages and hours in industry, designed for the protection of laborers

in the lower ranks; the adaptation of farm production to a world market in which large surpluses exist; the establishment of a soil conservation program; and the inauguration of a social security plan of extensive proportions, incorporating unemployment compensation and old age assistance.

### III

Now that we are travelling on a new way, what are the longer range prospects for American democracy? Past generations produced some prophets of despair, whose general standing among the intellectuals of their time may warrant at least passing attention. Thomas Babington Macaulay, highly critical of Jeffersonian democracy, writing from London in 1857, in a letter to a correspondent in New York, forecast a future of unrest in the United States. When New England becomes as thickly settled as Old England, he went on to say, when you have your Manchesters and your Birminghams with hundreds and thousands out of work, "then your institutions will be fairly brought to the test". Thomas Carlyle was even more pessimistic in his conclusions about the survival of democracy in a machine age. "Where no government is wanted," he wrote, "save that of the parish-constable, as in America with its boundless soil, every man being able to find work and recompense for himself, democracy may subsist; not elsewhere, except briefly, as a swift transition toward something other and farther." This conclusion, it is believed, rested in part on a Machiavellian or a Napoleonic conception of the people, the Florentine designating them as "a breed . . . with animal ears plugged with Lucian's wax, inconstant, hypocritical," and the Corsican calling them "great children".

There are modern prophets, however, who believe with Carlyle that our destination is "something other and farther". The Roosevelt program has demanded huge expenditures, especially for unemployment and social security, with heavy deficit financing, leading to a rapidly mounting national debt. At the same time there is a growing demand upon the part of many people for a greater and greater liberality from the hand of government, as illustrated by the powerful Townsend group of old people, who are still looking forward with confidence to a government gratuity in the form of approximately two hundred dollars a month for every individual over a certain age. Whether it is bankruptcy or too much paternalism, makes

little difference so far as the governmental consequences are concerned. The passing of our traditional democracy would doubtless be the result. A writer in the *American Review* predicts the coming of one or the other of these two alternatives, unless we establish "something", which something might easily fall into the Carlylean "something other and farther", viz., authoritarian government. "If the New Deal," this author says, "leads us to bankruptcy, and thus delivers us over to a liberal reaction, that reaction will lead straight to a revolutionary swing far to the extreme Left, very likely within the next decade. In America, such a development could have but one result: violent civil war and the fastening upon the country of the blackest kind of dictatorship by wealth. Then indeed would the last hope for a free America be gone. On the other hand, if the New Deal does not bankrupt us, but continues to develop a disposition among the people to thrust every sort of responsibility upon the government, we shall have a gradual sovietizing of the nation, with consequences equally fatal to the hope of a free America. At one or other of these ends we must inevitably arrive, unless we exert a powerful will to avoid both, by establishing a strong *authoritarian* government which can and will destroy the enemies of human liberty on both the Right and Left."<sup>2</sup> (Italics supplied.)

Another advocate, if not prophet, of authoritarian rule is Ralph Adams Cram, who has written a book called *The End of Democracy*. Mr. Cram is no ordinary person. At least four great American universities, including Yale and Harvard, have turned the spot light of distinction upon him with honorary degrees and other awards. In appraising democracy he has much in common with the nameless immigrant from the isle of Nevis, known in American history as Alexander Hamilton, who considered the people "a great beast", for he is of the opinion that the light of democracy was really blown out by the wind of universal suffrage. Mr. Cram would institute a new kind of democracy by proposing an authoritarian rule even less tolerant of the opinions of the rank and file than that suggested by the writer in the *American Review*. He would put very severe restrictions on voting<sup>3</sup>, making the ownership of property a prerequisite; he would remove the lower house of the national legislature from the direct control of the people by organizing "hundreds". These hundreds would vote for

2. "Liberty and Authority" by Ross J. S. Hoffman, October, 1934.

3. Compare this suggestion with the opinion of James Russell Lowell that the ballot in the hands of all the people is less dangerous to society than a sense of wrong in their heads.

an elector, who in turn would vote for a higher official, and so on until a final group would vote for the members of the lower house; the senate he would elect for life, freed from all party affiliations; the chief executive officer would be chosen for life, in a manner that would make him "the august and honored personification of the state", with such a strengthening of his office that the government would in principle be monarchic.

A strong hand will, indeed, be necessary when the crack of doom sounds, for the things that have almost become traditionally American. Listen to the explosion of the TNT, as it is set off by chain lightning from the social and economic thunder clouds, still dark and threatening in spite of the silver shafts of light from the New Deal. Says Cram: "Big business, like the dinosaur, has become too big, and will inevitably follow after its prehistoric model. International finance has become so international, it is paralyzing the nations. Holding companies cannot hold their plunder. The great cities, no longer habitable by human beings, are already so congested that the time is not far off when they cannot be traversed by traffic and will therefore be useless for business. The skyscraper (a silly device at the best) is now becoming unprofitable, machinery has man under its thumb, both economically and spiritually, while scientific and mechanized warfare promises to be the nemesis of all." Are great factories and cities, and skyscrapers, and machinery, turning out to be Frankensteins, brought into the world by what we thought were the great democratic physicians of science and business? And will these Frankensteins turn upon democracy and assist in its destruction? Apparently so thinks an American of distinction and high intelligence.

Another American, Harry Elmer Barnes, whose varied achievements give him a high place, in a recent article in *The Journal of the National Educational Association of the United States*<sup>4</sup> outlines changes in American democracy, calling these changes the "middle way" between fascism and communism, and saying that we can save ourselves from fascism only if we move resolutely within the next ten years. He is of the opinion, further, that the drastic changes he suggests give no promise of any permanent solution of the problems of capitalism, owing to the unpredictable degree of technological unemployment, and the enormous increase ahead of us in the efficiency of farming methods. He suggests sweeping changes which are both governmental and economic. His governmental changes include a weighted suffrage system, in which the vote of an educat-

4. "Education from the Standpoint of Society", April, 1939.

ed person counts for more than that of an illiterate moron. In other words, like the French statesman, he would weigh heads, not count them. He would extend the civil service system so that it cover the executive, legislative, and judicial fields. His most revolutionary change in governmental structure would be the introduction of a responsible cabinet system, saying that "there is not the slightest chance that we will be able to survive as a democratic nation if we attempt much longer to operate as three independent and balanced departments—a monstrosity taken over by the inexperienced Fathers of 1787 from a misinterpretation of the British government by an ill-informed French publicist who wrote a generation before the American Revolution." In the capitalistic field, he suggests a nationalized system of banking and credit, the ending of "sabotaging of potential production and technological efficiency by such policies as the rejection of inventions, limitation of output, monopolistic restrictions, and the like"; an overhauling of the price structure so that it will "conform with the opportunities afforded by the mass-purchasing power of the citizens"; much more extensive public works than have heretofore been provided; "farm legislation which will insure enough profitable farm production to provide everybody with a liberal diet", and a greatly extended system of social insurance, with the benefits of medical care within the reach of every person. To sum up the suggested changes, he would substitute qualitative democracy for quantitative democracy, with a decided leaning toward the philosophy of totalitarianism.

#### IV

It appears, therefore, that we have travelled a long distance from the days of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose basic contention was that the appearance of character made the State unnecessary. He it was who said that the less government the better, and that there should be "fewer laws and less confided power." Now we are told that to grapple with a complex economic system, to deal intelligently with modern international tariffs, to prevent the sabotaging of inventions, to solve the mounting problems of technological unemployment, to take care of an increasing army of elders who can find no place in industry, requires the employment of the best brains available and a high concentration of governmental power, accompanied by a demand for more laws and organization and expert control.

But these tendencies do not deny hope for the successful future of American democracy. Democracy is no more static than scientific knowledge. The democracy of the next twenty years will not be the democracy of 1919 or 1939. While the people may be, and doubtless will be, farther removed from a voice in the solution of the technical problems of state, they will be most concerned with their fundamental liberties—liberty of speech and press, freedom of religion, and open channels of opportunity, although many of the future jobs may, comparatively speaking, be provided by the State. It should be remembered that only in case there is inability to solve social and economic problems will fascism fasten itself upon America. A happy, prosperous, and free people, schooled in the history and traditions of democracy, are not going to drop their system to take over another ideology. Small children may lay down what they have in response to the fascination of another toy, but the American people are not children, and they are not playing with toys. A people worshipping as they please, expressing themselves freely on the issues and officials of the day, enjoying basic liberties compatible with order, participating in a substantial measure of security, with the economic channels unlogged, receiving honest pay for honest work, have no need for fascism or any other imported ideological device.

However, tempering optimism with a knowledge of reality, we in America must be keenly aware that many big problems remain unsolved, and that the tasks remaining ahead may be more onerous than those that have been completed. Fascist propaganda we will have with us, and propagandists who would sell democratic America for a price. There will continue to be purveyors of hate and discontent.

While fascism cannot be scared away by any of the incantations of witch burners or the practices of voodooism, can anything be done for the preservation of a vital, humanitarian democracy? The answer is an emphatic "Yes".

1. Keep open the thoroughfares of economic enterprise, freed from the obstacles of monopolistic privilege, and make it possible for the most brilliant child from the poorest family to prepare himself for service and leadership.

2. Enthroned a new type of honesty in public affairs, and enshrine the ideal of wise leadership which is restrained from moving too fast toward Utopian conceptions, but which finds a divine discontent with any form of injustice.



3. Preserve the ideals of peace. Let the invisible, unfortified line between Canada and America be a spiritual monument for peoples everywhere who would renounce the sword. Remember that modern war is a termite which can undermine the foundation of democracy. Dispel all thought that warfare is a prelude to any kind of idealism. Be critical of things heard and read. Consider that explosive gases and bacteria are not confined to the material world. They may be the tools of special interests, as these interests "tom-tom" in the press and over the radio. Beware of the germ-words of propaganda, to which dramatic reference was recently made by the Duke of Windsor from the battlefields of Verdun.

4. Dwell on the blessings of liberty and the evils of autocracy. There is much virtue in recurrence to fundamental principles. A new million dollar high school in Appleton, Wisconsin, was dedicated last fall in the name of democracy, and the democratic theme was again dominant at the June commencement. There is excellence in such a program.

And what of democracy's alternative? Old Talbot in *All Our Yesterdays* speaks the words of the author, H. M. Tomlinson, in a compelling portrayal of the State we do not want: "There is another god now, the State, the State Almighty. I tell you that god will be worse than Moloch. . . It has no vision; it has only expediency. It has no morality, only power. And it will have no arts, for it will punish the free spirit with death. It will allow no freedom, only uniformity. Its altar will be a ballot box, and that will be a lie. . . It has a heart of gun metal and its body is full of wheels. . . It is nothing but our worst, nothing but the worst of us lifted up. . ."

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There is little or no honor in playing the *rôle* of prophet. Even much of the present defies understanding, let alone the future. What of the predictions that have been discussed? Macaulay was right: our institutions have been fairly brought to the test. Carlyle was wrong: democracy in America has long survived the parish-constable stage. Mr. Cram is wrong: democracy will not drift into such a system as he proposes. Mr. Barnes is partly right and partly wrong: his suggestions of weighted suffrage and a cabinet system look dreadfully foreign. The author hopes he is right when he says that he can see the star of democracy—a humanistic democracy—ascending and shining still brighter in the heavens of America's future.