

MEDALS FOR POLITICIANS

J. T. SALTER

A RECENT news story about a soldier and a medal of honour interests me very much. It makes me wonder what a politician would have to do to have a medal conferred on him. Actually, politicians are not awarded medals:—they receive unsavory epithets, not epaulets. This is very strange, or at least regrettably unfortunate, for our soldiers fight for democracy, and democracy cannot exist without politicians; at least it has never managed to do so as yet.

While the politician does his work well, we do not need soldiers on any battlefield. It is only when government by politicians breaks down, that millions of our soldiers face suffering and death in war. It must be obvious to the dullest that all of us should do what can reasonably and effectively be done to maintain and strengthen the politician and the government. I suggest that there are just as compelling and unanswerable arguments for giving an appropriate medal of honor to a politician as to a soldier. The self-consciousness of the former is as certain to respond to public recognition as is the *morale* of the armed warrior. America must give effective recognition to both, and she will too, when we become as wise on our politics and politicians as we are on our armies and fighting men.

* * * * *

Major Richard I. Bong is the soldier in the news item. He shot down thirty-eight Japanese planes, and has been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honour. The medal was given for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action above and beyond the call of duty in the Southwest Pacific area from October 10 to November 15, 1944." The item adds that Major Bong was assigned to duty as a gunnery instructor, and was not expected to enter into combat service, but he did. Major Bong voluntarily, and at his own urgent request, engaged in repeated combat missions, and shot down eight enemy airplanes during this period.

I cannot imagine any person objecting to the distinguished recognition given to this most valuable and intrepid warrior. Yet a soldier has in a sense a more favored time than a public man. The former risks his life, but the latter may place his immortal soul in jeopardy not once, but many times. The soldier has arduous, maybe bitter days and nights living out of doors, sleeping on the ground—getting shot at, too. The politician

may work late into the night, every night, on a more perfect piece of legislation, and then see it defeated or amended beyond recognition. He may serve the people faithfully every waking minute of every day for two years, or four or more years, and then suffer defeat at the polls right in the first blush of his most creative period. He may begin to construct a super highway, or a new city plan, or in a totally different field he might work to reorganize the administrative side of our government, and just before he reaches his great objective, he is defeated. In the months following his defeat he may see the work of a lifetime overturned, come to naught. Winston Churchill tried to arouse the conscience—the mind—of England to the positive danger of war, but he failed, and yet in the months and years of his failure he saw war coming on just as he had predicted it would. The horror of that vision must be as awful as anything witnessed by soldiers in actual warfare.

The soldier has a decided advantage in that he can definitely recognize the enemy, his enemy and his country's enemy. But how can the politician recognize the people's enemy? Sometimes it can easily be done, but on other occasions the detection of truth and error, good or evil, and of their protagonists, is not easy. It may be impossible until it is too late. It was in France.

The soldier works in the field of absolutes, but the politician, like Einstein, is forever concerned with relativity. If the soldier shoots a man, the man stays shot, but the politician may make a great speech to-day, and later feel that he must make an even better speech a week from to-day or the situation is lost. A President or Governor may have a working majority in the legislature during the first part of his term, but not the last. There are no absolutes in politics. Everything is relative, and everything is constantly changing. A favorable majority in the legislature or at the polls may change overnight into an unfavorable minority. The politician must forever strive for the objective; only in war is the battle won once and for all.

The politician may hear the truth he has spoken "twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools", or he may see it unheeded or ignored as though he had never lived, never uttered a word. Yet he may know, later the history books may record and verify his truth. In fact the history books do verify and celebrate the politician's truth more often than that of the soldier. Yet the politician of all men must be recognized on the instant, on the day that the ballots are marked, or he will be denied official place: he will be defeated if he has not this positive

approval on election day. A million votes after the polls close are not worth as much as one single ballot vote before the polling ceases. As I have said before, the politician is contemporaneous. And to be that he must get attention: more than that, he must have favorable response. He must get the voter to act, and to act according to the politician's interpretation of the facts.

This means that the public man has a life of action, passion and dramatization. He must feel the passion of the day: he must be part of it. He must express it. I mean he must express the nature and significance of the issue or problem that confronts the people so that the people will better know the truth or the facts, and consequently be in a better position to work out their own salvation. For we now know, if we know anything, that if any good is achieved by the people, the people themselves will have to do it. There is no one to do it for them. The politician is an agent or tool that they use in governing themselves; the soldier is a warrior-agent that they used in defending themselves. However, it is important to remember that in case of either the politician or the soldier we have the citizen too—the citizen as politician or as a soldier, always the citizen. Only the citizen takes more naturally to politics than he does to armed warfare. He volunteers for politics, but he is drafted for war. And that is right and proper, for America has achieved its greatness under politicians, not generals. Of course we are what we are because of both our politicians and our soldiers. (And they are what they are because of us.) But the primary importance of the civil authorities, the politicians, was recognized as early as 1787 when the constitution was drafted. It provides that the military shall be subject to the non-military or civil. The President is to be Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, and not the other way around. Congress declares war—not the army. Yet we give the army medals, but have none for Congress.

The army likes its medals. In Ernie Pyle's *Brave Men* there is the remark that no matter how a soldier may joke about a medal, he never misses the ceremony at which a medal is to be conferred on him. He wants it. I think a politician might want it too, if the people ever got interested in the idea, if some institution were established to award a medal now and then for some great service to a great cause. There might even be the counterpart of the purple heart for one who labored mightily

and failed. I am not now concerned with how the committee would award the medal, or how often, or on what occasion, or with the method of selecting the committee or its personnel. Here I merely want to point out the incontestable fact that the politician deserves credit as well as censure. His cup is running over with criticism. Friends of democracy should also give him praise.

* * * * *

I say this because I want to direct attention to the political function in our democracy, and more particularly to the voter and *his* politician. I say the voter too, because the voter sets the standard and the politician comes up to it.

It is important to know that the awarding of the palm instead of the boot to the politician will work both ways. It will help the politician's *morale*; he will feel more pride in his work. This will happen because the voter's attention will encourage it. People will see their politicians or public men as individuals valuable to our democracy. Physicians and dentists are recognized as useful and necessary members of our society now; so are plumbers, ditch diggers and undertakers. Politicians are useful and necessary too, but often we fail to realize this simple fact. Our neglect costs us, the people, untold millions of dollars, for any servant that is not adequately appreciated is not able to do his best. They will more and more come to see that politics is not only one of the most strenuous arts that men follow, but it is also one of the noblest.

A George W. Norris might faithfully and effectively serve his state and his nation for a life-time; he might bring about the creation of a giant public electric system, T. V. A., a system that revolutionizes the life of a region; but near the end of his life he is defeated at the polls and goes home after a long day well spent, with great sorrow in his heart, and shortly thereafter dies.

How much nicer for America and for public men everywhere, as well as for Senator Norris and his family in particular, if he had been awarded a medal of some sort—a medal comparable to the concrete recognition a gallant soldier receives for conspicuous service to his country. It might be a Carnegie Medal or a Nobel Prize or a Pulitzer Prize. Better still, I think it should be something entirely new. It might be called *The People's Medal* or *The American Prize*. It might be awarded

to an elected person for service of extraordinary value to his country. Who will do the awarding and who will receive the award are problems to be worked out in the future. And such problems can be. The existence of innumerable prizes or medals or honorary degrees in his country now indicates that the awarding of distinctions in any number of fields can be done with great, if not unanimous, approval.

The words "conspicuous gallantry" are words beyond comparison in war or in peace. But in times of tranquillity people associate those royal words with warlike deeds. I suggest the need for symbols or royal words for the politician doing the work of the citizen—the citizen *qua* citizen. The public man cannot live by words alone, and neither can he live without them. In the days of peace ahead we might come to realize that the sympathetic understanding of the politician, in neighborhood and nation, is of public value to us and our country as truly as is the gallantry of the soldier or the honor and virtue of men and women. As Dwight Morrow well said: "The enduring institutions of a people are not made by cavalry charges. The victories of peace are to be won not in days but in centuries, and by the energy not of feeling but of thought."¹

1. Works of T. H. Green, Vol. III, p. 354. Cited by D. W. Morrow, *Introduction*; Morse, Anson D., *Parties and Party Leaders* (Boston, 1923), p. xx.