

# CURRENT MAGAZINES

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## THE COMING AMERICAN ELECTION

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Will Roosevelt be Re-elected? . . . Editorial, in the *New Republic*.

America Revisited: Old Deal and New . . . Mr. F. W. Hirst, in the *Contemporary*.

Three Years of Dr. Roosevelt, . . . Mr. H. L. Mencken, in the *American Mercury*.

What's Left of the New Deal . . . Mr. H. N. Brailsford, in the *New Statesman and Nation*.

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THOSE who make a hobby of the precarious but fascinating game called "Election Forecast" have now set to work on President Roosevelt's chances for next November. We have learned to receive with respectful attention what the *Literary Digest* has to say on such a point, and the result of its last straw vote was very definite indeed. The returns it received from nearly 2,000,000 voters gave a popular majority of 62.66 per cent "against the New Deal", only twelve States favouring that experiment, while thirty-six condemned it. But, as the *New Republic* appropriately points out, this disapproval of the New Deal does not commit the voters to casting their ballot against Mr. Roosevelt, until it is shown that some competitor with a more acceptable programme will be available. Much as they dislike *N. R. A.*, they might dislike—for example—"Hooverism" still more. Or, again, the Republicans may propose "some nonentity", who has no programme except resistance and reaction. This is not a time when merely negative policies have much prospect of success, and it is the guess of the *New Republic* that the "G. O. P." will have nothing better to bring forward.

There are other considerations which subject the *Literary Digest* poll to distrust. The question put to voters was: "Do you now approve the acts and policies of the New Deal to date?" This question took no account of the diversity of reasons for disapproval, a diversity known to be so sharp that what one group of critics would assign as Mr. Roosevelt's outstanding fault another would acknowledge as his sole redeeming virtue. But plainly in the choice of an alternative, or in determining that there is no alternative which is not worse, everything depends on the ground of disapproval. At one extreme we have the representatives of "Big Business", the unholy alliance which Father Coughlin denounces over the radio as made up of "bankers, monopolist manufacturers and munition makers": their hostility to the

President is notorious. But what have they in common with the Socialists, the Communists, the Farmer-Labourites, the enraged agitators for Soldiers' Bonus, and the great mob still unemployed who are shrieking that the champion of "the forgotten man" has himself shown an unexampled faculty of oblivion? It is no small element in Mr. Roosevelt's strength that he can thus rely upon his diverse critics to answer and counteract one another's criticisms.

One cannot reasonably doubt that he has lately lost ground. But he had room to lose a great deal before reaching the danger line, and it is by no means clear that his losses are on such a scale. Not only was he elected three and one-half years ago by the largest majority on record in a presidential contest, but after he had been two years in office the Congressional elections showed his still further advance in public support. He is indeed the only President in American history who, halfway through his term, was thus found to have not only maintained but actually increased his majorities in Congress. Moreover, with six months of campaigning still ahead, the balance of popular appeal may change repeatedly. Policies have yet to be definitely announced, so that there is still time for many another straw vote to be recorded and revoked.

More important than guessing which side will win is the attempt, near the close of so eventful a presidential period, to estimate the value of what Mr. Roosevelt has done. An outsider is helped here by the American organs of party opinion, whose marshalling of facts he will receive with gratitude, while discounting their competitive attack and panegyric with an impartial scepticism.

## I

From the point of view of this country, a chief difference between Mr. Roosevelt and his assailants is the difference between the mood of international cooperation and the mood of American isolationism. Democrat and Republican are, no doubt, contrasted in other ways which we are neither entitled nor qualified to discuss. Intimate domestic considerations may be more than sufficient to outweigh the demands for either assistance or interference abroad. But with such qualification and such reserve which thus beseeem a foreign critic, one may regret that isolationism has been judged so often necessary, and one may admire the President who has urged, sometimes successfully but some-

times in vain, that the United States should venture more for the recovery of the world. Just seventeen years ago Woodrow Wilson conceived a great project that would call for the energies of all nations with goodwill working together. A resolute spirit was required to propose it: perhaps one still more resolute was required, in the inheritors of Wilson's tradition, to continue working on the same project within the limits of what had been shown practicable. It is a high fortitude which can meet a test such as this, in patient tenacious pursuit of the prosaic but possible second-best, when the inspiring glow of the ideal has been withdrawn. One recalls the argument of an old preacher that there is no bathos, but rather advance to a true climax in the verse about mounting up with wings as eagles, running without becoming weary, and finally walking without growing faint. Every national leader comes to understand how much harder is the task of the walk at the end than that of the eagle-flight at the beginning. The intermediate "run," a year ago, showed Mr. Roosevelt in increasing strength. His sharpest trial is at hand.

Clearly the method called "New Deal" was either conceived under misapprehension of what is constitutionally possible in the United States or was meant to make the country choose between what is *constitutional* and what is *tolerable*. That this last is a perfectly possible dilemma, that there may be no constitutional way of repairing the present disorder in American affairs, it will require more than the eloquence of "Crusaders", "Liberty Leaguers", and other hundred-per-cent Americans who assail our ears through the radio, to disprove. One cannot suppose that the long series of judgments by an overwhelming majority of the Supreme Court came as a complete surprise to Mr. Roosevelt's legal advisers, or that those who drafted the New Deal legislation for Congress were unaware of the risks it ran. Perhaps they felt that the chance was still good enough to be worth taking in so great a cause; after all, it was conceivable that the peculiar vein of reasoning which commends itself to Mr. Justice Brandeis and Mr. Justice Stone might appeal to a majority of the Court. Or, more probably, the men of the Roosevelt Brain Trust may have advised that things be brought thus to *ultima ratio*, so that, the written Constitution having been proved an insuperable obstacle to public welfare, the American public might draw the obvious inference and resolve upon the obvious steps.

One has to go back in imagination to that crisis which so many subsequent crises have made us forget, if one would judge fairly Mr. Roosevelt's adoption of such exceptional means. In

the United States four years ago the menace of Revolution was far from negligible, nor was it likely to be abated by that stern policy recommended in fashionable circles as "standing no nonsense from Labour". This time, at least, much more harm than good was to be expected from the strong measures which are notoriously the resort of weak men. The unemployed numbered 15,000,000, and it was estimated that persons dependent for a livelihood on charity were not fewer than 35,000,000. Among the ghastlier sights was that of fury in one region usually the last to be excited. The American farmer had at length been driven desperate by the collapse of prices. Holdings all over the country were hopelessly in debt, and from Iowa came news that the farmers there were waiting fully armed for any collector or sheriff who might come to mention foreclosure of a mortgage. At such a time public anger grew worse and worse as often as Mr. Hoover made another radiant speech about fast returning prosperity, and about the rugged individualism of the American people by which the return was being promoted. It was like the rage of an audience last year in a Glasgow or Dundee theatre when an actor, counterfeiting the tones and expression of Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, spoke about "prosperity just round the corner"!

Probably the disaster to the American banks was what brought the perils of the situation most vividly home to the foreign public. The last weeks of Mr. Hoover's presidency provided a spectacle at which British observers at least had to stare in amazement and horror. In February, 1933, we got news that the Government of the State of Michigan had proclaimed a bank holiday "in order to save the banks of Detroit". That sounded ominous; still, one thought it might be an isolated phenomenon, due to some local accidents which would soon be set right. Soon after we learned that the Detroit employers, under a very natural necessity to pay their wage bill, had written cheques on their accounts in Cleveland and Chicago, only to precipitate action by the Governments of Ohio and Illinois reproducing that by the Government of Michigan. Bank holidays had to be proclaimed also in Chicago and Cleveland. When this had taken place, it needed no economic expert to foresee the wild rush by depositors all over the country on the banking institutions whose doors were still open for business. Plainly most of them could not remain open long. Within little more than two weeks of the Michigan episode, the whole banking system of the United States was in chaos. It was not Mr. Roosevelt who brought this about. Such was the *damnosa hereditas* into which he entered three years ago. Mr. Hampden Jackson

has described in his picturesque style the feelings of the new President's audience when he first spoke to his countrymen officially from the microphone in the White House:

Millions of Americans who turned on the radio to listen to his inaugural address on that Saturday, March 4, were faced with the loss of every cent of their savings; travellers were stranded and housewives were unable to buy provisions for want of ready cash; the whole population was made to realize as it has never realized before that America must brace itself for a national effort towards recovery.

How America braced itself under the new leadership is now a matter of record. The first fierce blow of economy, by which the ex-Service men's pensions were cut down, and a saving of \$500,000,000 was thus effected in federal expenditure, was borne not only without a murmur, but with applause. Assuming responsibility for the country's banks, the President carried out an investigation with such speed and effectiveness that within a week he was able to order a re-opening of the closed doors, and confidence was found to have come back with such a flood that the clerks had to wait upon queues of people eager not to withdraw but to increase their deposits. Armed with extraordinary powers to spend at his discretion, Mr. Roosevelt set hundreds of thousands of the unemployed to forest work, rescued multitudes of farmers from imminent foreclosure of mortgages, carried out in Tennessee Valley what has been called "the most far-reaching adventure in regional planning ever undertaken outside Soviet Russia", and began many other enterprises some of which proved sound, others the reverse, but in the aggregate restoring millions of the idle to productive industry. The statement in last *Message to Congress*, that at least 5,000,000 more persons were at work in the United States in December, 1935, than in March, 1933, does not seem to be challenged. A much higher claim of progress would probably be justified.

What particularly impresses the British or Canadian observer in the sequence of such events is neither the conspicuous success of one group nor the conspicuous failure of another. These, like the ups and downs of warfare, have to be appraised in the light of the total result, and too much of the criticism of *N. R. A.* has been like an account of a battle based solely upon inspection of the casualty lists. Many an experiment that cost much to try has shown that social reconstruction is not attainable by that method, and the New Deal directors had the courage as well as the candour to abandon it. What they never abandoned, however, was the

belief that by *some* method the collective strength of the American people must be used to rescue those whom the Depression had hit hardest, and that for this purpose it would be needful deliberately to create by executive act a new balance of financial advantage. The metaphor in the words "New Deal" is, like nearly all metaphors, inadequate. Not only were the cards to be reshuffled; they were to be so redistributed that those who had habitually drawn low ones in the Old Deal were now to be assured of a better allocation (at the expense, of course, of their opponents). If this seems to mean a dishonest shuffle, altogether scandalous in politics as in poker, the reply is that the poker similitude can at most reflect only one aspect of this case. Public administration is not altogether like a card game, nor can human happiness be thus left indefinitely as the plaything of chance. Mr. Roosevelt was resolved to intervene on the side he judged to need intervention, and in scorn of those vetoes, couched in the proverbial wisdom Mr. Hoover so loves to quote, whose value (if they were ever valuable) the changed times have rendered obsolete. If the forms of the Constitution, cracked and strained by evasive ingenuity, can no longer be made to meet America's need, a truly new crisis has arisen. And in such a dilemma it is surely not America's need which must for ever be sacrificed.

## II

Against this record of achievement one has to consider the chorus of denunciation which comes from strident voices all over the country. Of these I shall take two, which may surely be regarded as not only typical but authoritative. If anyone can give effective journalistic expression to a grievance, it is Mr. H. L. Mencken, whose talent for incisive writing is exercised against the New Deal in the March number of *The American Mercury*. And if anyone is entitled to speak for Republicanism, it is Ex-President Hoover, who has taken pains to set forth the complaint of his party against his successor's administration, not merely in the rapid invective of the platform but in the measured paragraphs of a book.

Mr. Mencken writes on "Three Years of Dr. Roosevelt", with a playful suggestion that America in her last sickness fell into the hands of a sorry quack. The unfortunate patient, it seems, was scared into the mood which quackery can exploit, and what is now needful is to prevent the fraud which so successfully ex-

aggerated the peril from being followed by a further fraud which will reap glory from a fictitious cure:

It began with a din of alarming blather about the collapse of capitalism, the ruin of the Republic, and the imminence of Revolution, and it is ending with claims that the failure of these catastrophes to come off has been due to the medicaments of Dr. Roosevelt and his Brain Trust. In neither half of this imposture is there any truth whatsoever. The disease, in fact, was not a tenth as bad as the patient was induced to believe, and the medicines administered to him were almost wholly fraudulent and ineffective. If he now staggers toward recovery, it is not because of them, but in spite of them.

Varying the metaphor, Mr. Mencken describes how the President likes to turn a Christian Science smile upon the snares and ambuscades of his job, how he keeps on his face an ingratiating look like that of a snake-oil vendor at a village carnival, and how he chose for the management of his gigantic enterprise "the sorriest mob of mountebanks ever gathered together at one time, even in Washington". Readers of the *American Mercury* know that this writer has never relied on the strength of the under-statement. And of course we hear again his long familiar mockery of the professional uplifters, the out-of-work Y. M. C. A. Secretaries, the vapid young pedagogues and "the banal lunacy called idealism". Mr. Mencken, sparkling as he is, might with advantage develop a new sort of sparkle. His jest at the More Abundant Life would be more effective if it were not repeated several times in the same short paper. Few pleasantries will bear a strain such as that.

But if the pleasantries were omitted from the article, what would be left? It is entertaining to read about Messrs. Baker, Williams and Gill who were entrusted with the Civil Works Administration, though they were not sufficiently notable to have their names included among 31,081 in *Who's Who in America*. It is piquant to find the essence of the New Deal set forth as the assumption that

Any man who worked hard at some useful task, husbanded his money prudently and tried to provide some security for his old age and some heritage for his children was a low and unmitigated scoundrel, with no rights in law or equity.

No doubt what this means is that in devaluing the dollar Mr. Roosevelt bore hard on those with small savings and on public employees with a small fixed salary, while he chose poorly qualified men for such intricate and momentous administration as he had

in view. But the article does not assign any real evidence for these charges, quotes no proof of mismanagement to show that the wrong men were in control, and does not even hint at an alternative remedy. To borrow the writer's own metaphor from medicine: we know the crafty physician who claims credit for what was due to the healing hand of Nature, but we know at least equally well the unsuccessful physician who explains away as accident or coincidence the recovery which began when his patient passed into other hands.

Mr. Mencken dispenses himself from trouble with the remark that there is no need to review the operations of the New Deal in detail. Unfortunately in this matter it is the details that have all the significance, and one turns with hope to Mr. Hoover, who at least specifies particular acts to which he takes exception. It is a more restrained indictment that we meet in *The Challenge to Liberty*, and one with at least more appearance of supporting examples, but not less definite and clear. We find here nothing like Mr. Mencken's suggestion that if President Roosevelt thought cannibalism gave promise of popularity with voters "he would begin fattening a missionary in the White House backyard come Wednesday". Such invective is a little too raw for one who was the President's predecessor and hopes to be his successor. But, without sacrifice of official dignity, Mr. Hoover manages to be pointed enough. *The Challenge* arraigns Mr. Roosevelt as habitually impatient where composed deliberation is essential, as too quick to see fundamental wickedness in "the American System" where it is no more than a casual lapse that has to be deplored, and as rushing often to some violent expedient against ills that are only slowly curable.

Mr. Hoover's accusation is impressive, all the more so because of the acknowledgment he makes that in certain respects the country has derived benefit from *N. R. A.* He acknowledges that child labour has been reduced by the Codes, that in some trades they have made an end of "sweating", and that States which have been notoriously slow in controlling evil business practices have had a wholesome (though at times unconstitutional) stimulant from Washington. But on the other side of the account we are asked to realize what it has meant to the country that the whole protection of the anti-Trust Acts was virtually withdrawn both from consumer and from small trader; that the minimum price and the restriction of output so desired by the would-be monopolist were at length imposed by law!



A fault in Mr. Hoover's indictment lies just here—in the frequent call it makes upon us to realize what such and such a change has meant, while it omits to help us towards this realization by citing actual cases. Moreover, the help it does give is, in the main, by marshalling types of infringement of some abstract principle, without showing how anyone was injured either in body or in estate. Take a passage such as this:

Although I hold that emergency neither necessitates nor justifies departure from fundamental liberties—and incidentally will in the end retard recovery itself through disturbance of confidence in the future—I am not here dealing with temporary actions as such. Overshadowing temporary actions, whether wise or otherwise, is the far larger issue. An emergency program for recovery is one thing, but to implant a new social philosophy in American life, in conflict with the primary concepts of American Liberty, is quite another thing.

Surely from time to time, in all countries, an emergency when acute enough dispenses the Government, at least for a time, from preserving even those liberties in general held fundamental. The time limit imposed upon *N. R. A.*, the strictly temporary and revocable powers entrusted under it to the President, showed how remote was any purpose to “implant a new social philosophy in American life”, unless indeed it can be called new to acknowledge that docility to ancient formulae must sometimes be overcome by the desperate needs of a new situation.

And so the attack, despite all the vivacity of phrase with which Mr. Hoover has so entertained and stimulated his followers, leaves one wondering whether, if he had been elected in 1932, he would really have persisted in this doctrinaire fulfilment of old maxims. One suspects that his practice would have been better than the theory he has stated with the reckless emphasis of a leader in Opposition. But at least his onslaught has added to literature. We chuckle with merriment over what he says of the bureaucrat who rushes headlong into visions of the millennium and sends the bill to the Treasury; of the wild method in national housekeeping which cannot kill rats without burning down the house; of those fine blossoms of enterprise and invention among which the encumbering weeds should be extirpated by patient labour, not obliterated with a sudden blight of tyranny that will make an end of the whole garden. There are, of course, in Mr. Hoover's present rhetoric the purple patches usual on such an occasion—about Runnymede and Gettysburg, about *habeas corpus* and *Bill of Rights* and the progress of mankind through the long corridor of time. It is safe to guess

that Mr. Roosevelt enjoys this as much as any other listener or reader. Here and there one finds a lapse into the peculiar sort of confidence that used to be imparted to us by Mr. Coolidge: for instance,

That some individuals receive too little and some too much for the services they perform is a certainty.

But Mr. Hoover seldom forgets himself like this. Much more characteristic is the passage about those economic wounds which, like wounds of the body, need the repair of cells under careful nursing and antiseptics, not through surgery or patent medicines; about the difference between economic wounds and economic disease; and about the frightful peril of economic hypochondriacs.

Just so. It is forcibly and picturesquely said. But what, exactly, would Mr. Hoover have done if he had been returned to the White House in 1932? And what, exactly, would he do now? Aye, there's the rub. Echo answers "What?"

### III

Not only does "Echo" give this answer. It came also with pressing insistence from the lips of Mr. Roosevelt in that recent *Message to Congress* which his opponents called no Message, but a campaign speech. It came in his explicit challenge to the Republicans to say whether, if they should win at next November's poll, they will reverse the measures which rescued the farmer from bankruptcy; whether they will send children back into the factories; whether they will obliterate the new safeguards of Labour for collective bargaining and representation by spokesmen of their own choice. The "company union", children tending machinery when they ought to be at school, agricultural prices and farm mortgages as they were in 1933—is this the anti-Roosevelt programme, or part of it? And if it is not, then what are the practical methods (as distinct from the rhetorical phrases) by which it is to be avoided, with the certainty that so many interests now clamouring for "a change" will be enraged unless they secure just these opportunities of self-enrichment? This is pointed attack, and the observer in a country which has its own frequent thrust and parry between party leaders will watch with keen interest for the defence, followed by the counter-stroke. If the Democratic contention has been here emphasized more clearly than the Republican rejoinder, I may plead that the material so far supplied by Mr. Roosevelt lent itself more easily than that of his critics to such statement. One looks,

however, for a developing fray, in which—unless this contest is very singular indeed—the honours will not fall wholly on one side.

As spectators of the conflict, we in Canada are less interested in the guesses of party strategists regarding strength here and weakness there, than in certain great issues of policy that seem to be involved. No doubt multitudes of ex-Service men will vote against the Democratic President who so lately vetoed their bonus and against whose resistance that bonus was at length triumphantly won. But ex-Service men are also just now in the army of the unemployed, with no pleasant memories of the last Republican at the White House, who called their delegates ex-convicts and sent the police to break up their encampment. A great deal is made of the defections among veteran Democratic leaders, and they do indeed look ominous, but some at least of them admit of easy explanation which robs them of significance for popular sentiment. It is notoriously difficult in politics to get credit for disinterestedness even when it is deserved; so the defeated candidates for Democratic nomination in 1932 must expect to have their present anti-Roosevelt activities rather heavily discounted. These, however, are but the trivialities of the contest. What intensely interests the outsider is this coming fight in the United States on an issue fought out some time ago in other places, and decided there, perhaps wisely, perhaps unwisely, but at least definitely. *Laissez-faire* is making a resolute stand. The policy that has made Labour for the first time a self-conscious, organized force in American public life, doubling within two years the membership of the American Trade Unions and much more than doubling their influence, has to confront the rival policy that Labour shall be put back where it was, or even a little further. Is the Roosevelt emergency programme a deterrent or an incentive of Revolution? Not the United States alone, but every country in the world must be interested in the great debate that has begun, and one hopes that capacity to argue will not be monopolized by either side where there are good reasons available on each. At least the aphoristic exchange may be stimulating. To Mr. Hoover's maxims of American Liberty perhaps the most fitting retort is in the immortal summing up of *Laissez-faire* by the philosophic Sam Weller: "Everyone for himself, as the elephant said when he danced among the chickens".

H. L. S.