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Is Our National Life Corrupt?, 1924.

"IS OUR NATIONAL LIFE CORRUPT?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MARCH 2, 1924, CLEVELAND, O.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

The people of the country, said Senator Pepper not so long ago, are at this moment suffering from acute shock. The credit of public men has received a staggering blow in the eyes of multitudes of people. Public men here in Washington, quite irrespective of party, are looked upon as badly bespattered. Something like an explosion has occurred very near the foundations of the capital.

I want to speak this morning not of the oil scandal. The details are undoubtedly all too well known to you. I do not wish this morning to rehearse all the grewsome details of that moral debacle in Washington; nor do I wish to indulge this morning in purposeless indignation or denunciation of parties or of individuals, great as the temptation may be. The thing I dread most about this entire affair is that it will all resolve itself into one vast eruption of public indignation, with perhaps one or two scoundrels put behind bars, and that after the public has vented its rage and feasted upon a victim or two, it will sink back in its normal political stupor and resume the even tenors of its political drift and indifference, until another such catastrophe, moral and spiritual, will give it another opportunity to exercise its moral rigor.

I, for one, am humiliated and heartsick not so much for what happened in Washington, for the vast

betrayal of public trust, but for the system of government and the political intelligence of the American people which make such conditions possible; for this oil scandal, which seems to have bespattered with suspicion not one or two individuals but whole departments, numerous officials and prominent civilians, and to have laid bare a whole system preying upon democratic government at its very source and fountainhead,--I say, this oil scandal is not the first in our national history, nor, I fear, the last.

One need not catalogue them all--they are all too numerous; but one need but recall the moral lapses in government during the last few years to be staggered not by the incidents but by a condition which makes these incidents possible,--the Ballinger scandal during the Taft administration, the various tariff scandals, the successive and successful appropriation of public lands, of vast domains, by railway interests, the Alaskan coal field grab, the war profiteering, the Veteran Bureau scandals,--all within the last few years, and all the work not of insignificant political figures but of the highest type of our Nordics.

It seems that whenever and wherever big business touches government it corrupts government. It is, of course, true to say that whenever government is corruptible big business is corrupted, and the press is corrupted, and the legal profession is corrupted,--things which actually happened in the recent affair. But government, friends, is corruptible only when it represents a people made up of what

Mr. Frank calls "political illiterates." "We are a nation, he said, "of political illiterates. Despite our noisy devotion to popular government we are not politically minded. We display a sporadic interest in a short-lived issue, or give a fleeting loyalty to the picturesque political personalities; we organize reform movements just as bored wives embrace a current cult, but we lack sustained interest in the continuously wise management of our common life. It takes a case of clumsy treason or a presidential campaign to make us really think about government."

We are too busy making money to think of government. The only time we do think of government is when we have hard times, and then for some unknown reason we blame the government in Washington for the hard times; and we think of government, too, when our taxes are too irksome and excessive; at all other times we are content to let government alone. We resent government interference in our affairs, and so we are content not to interfere with the affairs of the government. We vote, if we vote at all, by parties, seldom stopping to reflect that neither of the political parties now has the slightest reason for existence. So that the high privilege and the grave responsibility of ruling this greatest republic on earth, of guarding and guiding the lives of a hundred and ten millions of people, are left in the hands of the professional politicians, the men who are in the work not for public service but for private gain--men most often mediocrities, ordinary persons who have

not succeeded very well in their own chosen professions or vocations, and have entered politics for the money that is in it, or the influence that is in it.

A keen observer of political conditions in America, a student of our political life, not long ago made this caustic comment upon Congress--caustic, but largely true. He said: "Go to the Congressional Directory and investigate the origins and past performance of the present members of the lower house in Congress--our typical assemblage, the cornerstone of our whole representative system, the symbol of our democracy; you will find that well over half of them are obscure lawyers, school teachers, mortgage sharks--out of almost any anonymous talent; men of common traditions, sordid aspirations and no attainments at all. One and all the members of this majority--and it is constant no matter what party is in power--are plastered with the brass ornaments of some fraternal order; one and all, they are devoid of any contact with what passes for culture; one and all, their careers are bare of civilizing influence. Such are the men who make the laws that all of us must obey, and carry on our dealings with the world. Go to their debates and you will discover what equipment they bring to their high business. What they know of sound literature is what one may get out of McGuffey's Fifth Reader. What they know of political science is the nonsense preached in the Chautauquas and on the stump. What they know of history is the childish stuff taught in grammar schools. What they

know of the arts and sciences of all the great body of knowledge that is the achieved intellectual baggage of modern man is absolutely nothing."

Now, if this is true of Congress, the picture which would have to be painted of state legislatures and city councils would be even more drab and disheartening. It has been truly remarked by a speaker that the closer government gets to the people the more inferior it becomes. Now, of course we satisfy ourselves by blaming political bosses and political machines; we point a finger of scorn at Tammany Hall, and Barnes, and Penrose, and Hinky-Dink, and Taggart, and what not, and say, "They are the guilty ones; they corrupt our government." And so we absolve ourselves of all responsibility, forgetting that this is a democracy, and that these men hold their power because we willingly, wittingly or unwittingly, actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously, permit them to hold their power, and in so doing we connive with them, we conspire with them; there is no absolution possible; and as long as we do that, as long as we content ourselves with blaming this machine or that, this schemer or that, this ruthless politician or that, without supplanting him, without substituting for him ourselves, we shall be victimized and betrayed and robbed from time to time.

These democratic institutions under which we lived were purchased in blood and in sacrifice, and were handed down to us and entrusted into our keeping. The

democratic experiment is such an uncertain one, so tenuous, so delicate, that only the loyalty of the finest minds and the truest hearts of a democracy can keep it from utter failure and disaster. A monarchy, with all its failings, succeeds, nevertheless, very often in giving rise to a noble tradition of public service in a few noble families, where the art of government is cultivated, where political sagacity and administrative wisdom are cultivated and handed down as a rich heritage from one generation to another. Democracy has no such traditional excellencies and merits, no such noble families to carry on the work of government.

Democracy must call continuously day by day upon the mind and the soul of the people, and if the intelligence of a democracy shuns government, and if the people living under a democracy are indifferent to the democratic government, except as it becomes dramatic and spectacular, or except as it touches their stomachs and their purses, then democracy must inevitably fall into the hands of the marauders, of the betrayers and the schemers of the land.

We have, somehow, blandly assumed that the democratic form of government is the most perfect form in the world. It may be, but we certainly have not yet established that fact. Democracy is certainly not as efficient, as competent, as aristocratic forms of government. Democracy has certainly not yet produced a superior type of legislator or administrator, or a superior type of

judiciary. On the contrary, it seems as if democracy is reducing the standards of government to the low level of general mediocrity and incompetence. Democracy seems to pull down, drag down to the lowest possible level of the average and the ordinary and the commonplace; it seems to be stifling excellence and superior ability.

Now, I believe that democracy can make for excellence, that excellence and democracy are not incompatible. A form of government which can give rise to a Lincoln, and a Roosevelt, and a Wilson, and a LaFollette, and a Borah, and a Walsh, is not arid ground for superior men. On the contrary. Because democracy extends opportunity to all men; it can make for more and more superior men. It mines much more of the precious ore of human personality. It can do that, but not of itself--not automatically. Democracy, after all, is only an idea, a method. It is not a living thing, that cannot itself give birth to superior men. It is we, the people, living within this democratic system that can personify the idea and employ that method, and if we fail, democracy remains an irrelevant abstraction, dead--signifying nothing.

What made possible, I ask, the presence of a Mr. Denby as head of our department of navy--a man who knows less of navies than I know of Jupiter--what made his presence possible in one of the supreme and most important departments of government? What makes the presence of a Mr. Daugherty, an attorney, an ordinary attorney--a very

ordinary attorney, a man who, up to the time of the election of the president, was utterly unknown outside of his own immediate constituency; a man who is distinguished neither for his knowledge of law nor for the practice of law; a man whose only claim to the office seems to be his eagerness to get it and his tenacity in holding onto it? What makes possible the presence of a man of the type of Mr. Davis? - a glad-hand man, a hail fellow man, a Bull Mooser, a man who among all the economists of the United States, among all our universities, could find no one to act as his expert on questions of immigration, so that he was compelled to employ the services of a musical comedy artist--Lillian Russell!

It is not ludicrous; it is tragic. What makes possible the presence of a Mr. Forbes?--an adventurer, a deserter from the army, a man of shady reputation and of no capacity at all, to become the head of a Veterans' Bureau, which in one year was called upon to expend out of public funds four hundred millions of dollars. What makes possible the presence of men at the head of our government, entrusted with supreme power and confidences? - men who resign and then at once sell their prestige and their influence--not their legal acumen--their prestige and their influence for fabulous fees to oil interests and to steel corporations; Not democracy, but the people who live under democracy--you and me--we, the millions of us who vote mediocrities into office because they happen to come under our emblems. All of us who refuse to hold office, who refuse to train ourselves for

the supreme privilege of holding office, who permit this tremendous national enterprise which touches the lives of everyone of us at some point or other, to be left in the hands of unscrupulous schemers and political profiteers.

Remember that government is a collective expression and a collective enterprise, and that government can never rise above the level of a people's political interest and intelligence. Government can never rise above the moral domains of the people who are being governed.

Of course we must clean house in Washington. Of course everyone who, directly or indirectly, has been mixed up in this nefarious affair must go, and it is not at all necessary that a man be found guilty of a criminal act, as Denby and Daugherty seem to think, before his usefulness as a government official terminates. Inattention to duty, which is not criminal, laxity in the prosecution of wrongdoing, even blunders which cause a man to lose the confidence of the people, are sufficient to disqualify a man for office. Why, in the old world whole cabinets are voted out of office as soon as they lose the confidence of the people.

I say, of course we must clean house. We must try to make the cabinet more responsible to Congress and less responsible to the President. But after that is done, what then? Will that make the repetition of such humiliating things less likely? Would that change the character of our government? By no means. Unless the millions of men and women throughout this great republic

resolve henceforth to educate themselves politically, to cease being political illiterates and political morons; unless we resolve to watch government and to participate in government; unless we resolve to scrutinize the credentials of any candidate for office, to discover his mental and moral qualifications for the office he aspires to; unless we resolve that prosy, unromantic, dull and monotonous business of government day by day and continuously, our democracy will be attacked by these alert groups, these sinister influences from time to time.

I wonder whether the women of America cannot assume leadership in this political renaissance of American life. They are far ahead of the men already in cultural attainments. Many of them have moral ties, many of them are more sensitized to moral qualities. It would be a pity if American womanhood, recently enfranchised, would just add so many more millions to the ballot throwers, and just swell the ranks of the two old decadent parties. Let them assume the burden of sensitizing public opinion on questions of government; let them assume the task of educating the minds of men to think in terms of government; let them organize classes and courses in real citizenship; let them undertake the work of scrutinizing every candidate for office and every piece of legislation proposed; let them demand a voice in the political machine where our real government is determined and controlled. When we come to vote for the president it is too late. We have the choice between two

men, and most often we like neither of them. But real government is controlled away down in the political club and in the primary and in the state convention, and is where you men and women must enter and clean house--not cast out a blue devil and bring in a green devil. Clean out the old generation and put in yourselves!

American national life is not corrupt.

There is a fine moral and spiritual hardihood in the American people. This is not a decadent race, but it is a people afflicted with indifference, and therefore victimized; it is a good-natured people, and therefore easily manipulated. The time has come for the asservation of the moral spirit of the American people; the time has come for us to look to government and to apply the same discipline to government as we apply to our own business. Efficiency, ability, moral integrity, expert knowledge--these are the things that we must begin to seek and pursue, to reach out and get for our government.

This disaster in Washington may yet prove very helpful to the American people, if they interpret the facts aright and profit from the lesson; if they do not permit themselves just a period of moral indignation, an emotional displeasure, and nothing else. It is a challenge to real citizenship, and may we answer this challenge.

--o--

1. We conspire - when we contend
with slavery - & do not supplant

4. The dem. with - was purchased
in blood - our trust -

1. Tenuous - uncertain -

2. Monarchy - noble families

3. Wem. must call day by day
if people are with - dramatic
marauders

5. Wem. - most perfect - may be -

1. Mediocrity - inefficiency -

2. Can make excellence
- but we want more of - method.

3. A collection express - cannot
rise above level

6. Clean House - put them - 2
1. Educate our ppl - Women

1. I'd speak of oil scandal - details -
rehearse - indulge

1. Thing I dread most - resolve itself

2. I am humiliated - betrayal - System
of pol. intell. of Am. people -

1. This oil scandal - bespattered - not just

2. Need not catalogue. Tariffs, public
lands, Alaskan oil - war profit -
Veterans Bonus - few years.

3. Whenever Big Business - or rather

4. Govt is completely be. we are
"pol. illiterate" - Too busy making
money - Only time we think -

5. We vote by parties - or not
at all. Use of the professional politician
mediocrities - for money - or influence

6. Reed. p. 4

3. We blame pol. bosses - Murphy -
Harner - Taggard - Hunt - Wade -

1. Absolution - This is a plea

Disaster may prove helpful
— Challenge — to real citizenship

Amer. Nat. life is not
corrupt



IS OUR NATIONAL LIFE CORRUPT ?

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