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Principles of American Citizenship

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PRINCIPLES OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

One who is born an American citizen has a great blessing bestowed upon him by providence. One who is permitted to become a naturalized citizen has a great privilege conferred upon him by the American people. The struggle for liberty is a continuous process. No other government in the world is just like ours. No other people are just like us. Whether we should seek to impose our form of government upon others may be debatable but there can be no question that for the American people our system of government is the best that has yet been devised and it is highly improbable that a better system will be conceived by the minds of men for generations yet to come. The superstructure may be altered from time to time to meet the needs of our growing family of citizens but the foundation must be permanent if the nation is to remain permanent. That foundation rests on the bedrock of the liberty, integrity and responsibility of the individual.

Dual Citizenship

A citizen of North Dakota is also a citizen of the United States of America. He owes allegiance to the governments of the State and of the United States. These governments are created and maintained under a system of constitutions. Thus, we actually live under forty-nine constitutions; one for the federal government and one for each of the states. Taken together these seemingly separate governments form one system under which they are fused into one nation—The United States of America.

The Federal Constitution with its amendments is the supreme law of the land. It is a basic compact of government established by the people. It is not a compact between the states. Where the constitution makes definite provisions covering particular subjects, those provisions are exclusive and final and must be accepted by the states as the last word in law. The Congress of the United States and all branches, departments and agencies of the federal government are likewise bound by and must conform to the provisions of the Federal Constitution.

Constitutions of the states are also supreme laws within the spheres of state governments and are binding on the legislatures and the departments and agencies of the governments of the respective states. All of our constitutions are primarily designed to preserve and protect the rights of individuals and minorities against arbitrary action of the part of those in authority or on the part of the majorities of the people themselves.

The individual owes allegiance to his state and to the federal government and at the same time receives protection from these governments each in its proper sphere. The American system is known as one of checks and balances. The dual type of government that we have just described is one of those checks. Complete sovereignty or power to govern is not vested in either the state or federal government. The constitution of each guaran-

tees liberty to the individual. Thus, his right to protection springs from two sources while the power to govern is divided. The present tendency in our government is toward centralization. This is made necessary to some extent by modern developments in industry, transportation and communication. The danger of centralization is that it may lead to abuse of authority and the seizure of unnecessary power. The maintenance of a dual system of government tends to check such abuses. Dual government is an important safeguard of the individual and the minority. The sovereignty of the states in domestic matters is an important constitutional check on unwarranted centralization. The conduct of war and the development of internal defenses properly fall within the power and authority of the federal government. When peace comes and post-war problems confront this nation, the importance of our dual system will again become manifest. A nation of armies and armaments will revert to a nation of individuals. Foreign relations will remain the province of the federal government but states and the individual citizens within them must assume in a large measure the responsibility of determining the course of domestic America in the fields of local endeavor. In order to further appreciate the true greatness of our system of government and the appropriateness of its design for the protection of individual liberties we will continue our discussion of checks and balances as applied to both the federal and state governments and smaller governmental bodies.

Within our various states we have 175,000 local governing bodies operating in cities, villages, counties, townships and school districts. During the recent depression, the importance of these governmental units in our national life shriveled. Many became, in part at least, financially dependent upon state and federal governments. The upward shift of functions of relief and education during the depression years led to advocacy of dispensing with some of our smaller units. With the return of prosperity the movement has, to a large extent, subsided. American people love democracy. They like to participate in government and personally observe the turning of the wheels, small and insignificant though they may be. Many a citizen prefers a less efficient operation of government that he can see and understand to the operations of a distant impersonal bureaucracy.

Checks and Balances

In order that checks and balances may be preserved, the state and federal governments are divided into three main branches commonly designated as legislative, executive and judicial. The legislative branches of government make the laws and consist of Senates and Houses of Representatives. The executive branches execute or carry out the laws. The judicial branches determine rights under the laws and the constitutions. This same balance of power is carried out in municipal subdivisions of the state in mayors, city councils and magistrates.

A further balance of power appears in this system wherein the House of Representatives is balanced against the Senate and

the Senate against the House. The executive authority through the veto powers of the President and the governors are balanced against the legislatures. In the federal government the Senate is balanced against the President with power to approve or reject treaties and appointments to office. This system of checks and balances was the invention of American statesmanship and a wise and forward-looking statesmanship it was indeed. To the men who designed this government, the rights of the individual were sacred. Every effort was made to guard against the usurpation of power by either one man or any group of men. Those statesmen, no doubt, realized that there can never be a permanent beneficent dictatorship. Concentration of power begets abuses of power. It breeds favoritism and oppression. Our government, including its dual system and its checks and balances, is designed to guard against these evils. As long as this design is maintained and the system permitted to function we need not fear internal disaster.

The greatest insurance against the decay of our system of government is the interested participation of the citizenry in public affairs. Patriotism and good citizenship are not always synonymous. The American people have never in any crisis been found wanting in patriotism. In time of national danger, love of country, devotion to its government and willingness to sacrifice have ever been outstanding attributes of our people. In time of peace, good citizenship has not always been as evident as is patriotism in time of war. Vigilance against internal disintegration suffers when we become too engrossed in our usual peace time affairs. We are prone to boast about the "greatest democracy on earth" and forget that it is made so by the freedom and responsibility of the individual citizen to share in the processes which affect his life, his opportunities and his happiness.

Our system of government provides for individual participation through the medium of the ballot. It is commonly misinterpreted as the right to vote. It is not a right but a duty, a duty to vote intelligently. To do this, Mr. and Mrs. Voter must display a continuing interest in the affairs of government. The duty is not discharged by going to the polls on election day and promiscuously marking a ballot or by marking it according to a guide furnished by a political organization without knowing what the candidates listed stand for. We are poor exponents of freedom if we will not pay our share of liberty insurance by devoting some of our time as well as our dollars to the upkeep of our government. Our governmental structures, like our houses, barns and factories, will fall into disrepair if not given care and attention. Decay follows disrepair. If government becomes rotten it is the direct result of indolence and carelessness on the part of its citizenry.

Education

The ballot, while the most direct and immediate method of participation by the individual in government, is by no means the only method nor does its exercise discharge the duty of citizenship. The schools of the nation shape its future side by side with

homes and churches. In America, education is a major function of government. The North Dakota Constitution provides:

"S. 147. A high degree of intelligence, patriotism, integrity and morality on the part of every voter in a government by the people being necessary in order to insure the continuance of that government and the prosperity and happiness of the people, the legislative assembly shall make provision for the establishment and maintenance of a system of public schools which shall be open to all children of the state of North Dakota and free from sectarian control. This legislative requirement shall be irrevocable without the consent of the United States and the people of North Dakota."

"S. 149. In all schools instruction shall be given as far as practicable in those branches of knowledge that tend to impress upon the mind the vital importance of truthfulness, temperance, purity, public spirit, and respect for honest labor of every kind."

Under these constitutional provisions North Dakota maintains a primary school system composed of 2,272 districts. Of all our political subdivisions these districts are closest to the people. They are governed by local officers who are neighbors of the patrons. The teachers are in close contact not only with the children but with the homes from which they come. The home and teacher contact has been developed and the interests of the home and school broadened through the activities of parent-teachers associations.

The average American feels a compulsion to pass some valuable heritage on to the next generation. He not only has an interest in the children of his own family but an interest in the youth of his state and nation. He realizes that the most valuable gifts to posterity are good citizenship and the preservation of democracy. He realizes that good citizenship is a matter of individuality and that the school along with the home and the church is the basis of the development of the individual.

In this land of liberty and opportunity, no one should be handicapped by ignorance. Every child is entitled to at least the rudiments of an education. The American people have been eager to afford this opportunity to Americans of the future. While the first public schools were for elementary training only, high schools were soon established at public expense. Public interest has now provided for many normal schools, colleges and universities throughout the land. On the whole, our educational system compares favorably with any other in the world. It constitutes a prime basis of good citizenship.

The educational system of America is a fundamental part of our democracy. It, too, must be safe-guarded by the active interest of the people. It is not enough to build modern buildings, equip them with the latest fads and devices and hire teachers and professors. The schools of America need and deserve the interest and attention of the people. We have had a tendency to view a school as a mill into which we poured the raw product and from which emerged the finished article manufactured uniformly into the polished personality of the graduate. We have come to regard diplomas and degrees as warranties of fitness for the many and varied tasks and problems of life. The mistakes concealed in this conception are being disclosed by the present war. A diploma

is merely a certificate of exposure. It is not the measure of absorption. It indicates but a contact with learning.

After the close of the war, education will undoubtedly undergo a new development which will take the direction of the practical rather than the theoretical. This change will be so important to the future of America that we must not overlook active participation in it on the part of our citizenry. It is not enough for Mr. and Mrs. Citizen to foot the bill by paying taxes. The school system will need the guidance of men and women who have received much of their education in the hard school of experience and whose voices will be needed to guide American education through the strenuous post-war period. We are approaching a modern frontier in education. Its development should not be left to theory alone. The proper and practical development of the mental capacities of the next generation are vital to the perpetuation of American democracy.

Politics

Political parties are necessary for the operation of a government by a self-governing people. The one-party system is the mark of a dictatorship. Two or more parties are the basis of the functioning of a democratic government. No party, however pure its motives, will govern a country long without becoming arrogant or corrupt or both. The fear of loss of control to a rival is an incentive to honest and efficient management of government by the party in power. In America, two major parties have dominated the political scene most of the time since colonial days. Before the Revolutionary War men were Whigs and Tories. The Whigs were insistent on colonial rights while the Tories were subservient to the crown. When war came, the Whigs became the Revolutionaries who favored a direct and absolute separation of the colonies from England. They became the majority and forced the issue of separation. They aggressively resisted oppression and set forth their protest in the Declaration of Independence adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. The precise language was submitted by Thomas Jefferson who later became the leader of a great liberal political party of the new nation. After freedom was won the preference of our forefathers for a two-party system developed the Federalists who were then the Conservatives and the Anti-federalists who furnished the opposition. The Anti-federalists later developed into democratic-republicans. This became the party of Jefferson while Alexander Hamilton was the leader of the Federalists. Thus, in the formative period of this government party lines were drawn and party organizations created that indicated a tendency in political affairs that has been evident down to the present time.

Politics is indispensable to the successful operation of a government such as ours. It is the prerogative of the partisan to point with pride or view with alarm. As long as this system claims the active interest of our citizens disaster will not overtake us. The more intense and direct is the participation of the people in politics and thus in government the safer the nation will be. Practical politics may have its defects as a medium for operating

government but those defects are insignificant when compared with the vices of a one-party system or a government directed by theorists who would undertake to determine what is best for the people and enforce their theories through bureaucratic edicts. The American way is for the people to operate the government through their chosen representatives and to displace those representatives when they fail to carry out the popular will. The government must ever be subservient to the people. When the people become subservient to the government, democracy is lost.

Citizenship responsibility is the key to America's future. Ours must ever be in fact as well as in theory, a government of the people. The people must carry out their duty toward that government and toward each other by participation in politics. The citizens' responsibility in this regard was aptly defined by A. K. McClure in a speech delivered 70 years ago. What he said is as true now as it was then. "If reputable citizens refrain from active participation in our political conflicts, they voluntarily surrender the safety of their persons and property, and the good order and well-being of society, to those who are least fitted for the exercise of authority. * * * * Do not answer that politics have become disreputable. Such a declaration is a confession of guilt. He who utters it becomes his own accuser. If it be true that our politics, either generally or in any particular municipality or State, have become disreputable, who must answer for it? Who have made our politics disreputable? Surely not the disreputable citizens, for they are a small minority in every community and in every party. If they have obtained control of political organizations, and thereby secured their election to responsible trusts, it must have been with the active or passive approval of the good citizens who hold the actual power in their own hands." Political insomnia is not an affliction. It is a mark of good citizenship. Democracy never sleeps. It is either awake or dead.

Trends

We have heretofore noted the upward shift of the functions of government among the political subdivisions of the state and nation, a shift that tends to take those functions away from the immediate control of the people and increase the power of major units of government through centralization. This movement tends to make government less responsive to the people. The tendency toward centralization is not peculiar to our immediate time. In 1880, the Democratic party in its political platform vigorously voiced its opposition "to that dangerous spirit of encroachment which tends to consolidate the powers of all the departments in one, and thus create, whatever be the form of Government, a real despotism."

While the functions of government were being shifted upward a contemporary movement was taking place that sought to diffuse political power more widely among the people — to make the government less representative and more democratic. Abuses of power by political bosses through the control of large sections of political parties induced a movement to vest control more directly in the people. Irked by the disregard of popular will, pro-

gressives in both major parties campaigned for the direct primary. This is a system by which the members of a party vote for and select the party candidates. It proved a major factor in destroying the power of old-time political bosses. However, its actual operation disclosed a latent defect. It heralded in a field-day for demagogues. Corrupt political organizations became less potent. They were displaced by promiscuous promises and the advocacy of sporadic movements organized solely for the purpose of securing popular support by fooling the gullible. On the whole the American voter is intelligent. Recent signs indicate that this system of campaigning is becoming less effective. An honest, sincere and intelligent electorate is an insurmountable obstacle to this type of political chicanery. The close of the war may bring renewed activity on the part of those who would un-Americanize sections of our population by making political capital of social discontent. Patriotic, service and civic organizations may well begin to fore-warn and thus fore-arm us against this threat to our democracy.

Up until 1913, United States senators were elected by the state legislators. In the movement toward more wide-spread democracy an amendment to the Federal Constitution was passed that transferred the election of senators from the legislators to the people of the respective states.

The movement for diffusion of power among the people also asserts itself in the field of legislation. Many states have enacted the initiative which is the right to originate legislation by petition of the people and to enact or reject it by popular vote. A companion legislative process is the referendum which is the right to compel by petition the submission to a vote of the people for endorsement or rejection of a law already passed by the legislature. This movement, too, has fallen far short of the realization of the high hopes of its sponsors. It has its advantages and disadvantages. Which outweighs the other is still a matter of marked difference of opinion. Here again we are given an opportunity to emphasize the main theme of this article. An honest and intelligent electorate will use an initiative and referendum to advantage. In the hands of the indolent and corrupt the initiative and referendum may be used to endanger the rights of free men.

In what has gone before we have tried to outline some of the fundamentals of the American government and the importance of good citizenship in its maintenance and perpetuation. We feel that it is not enough just to say that we live in the greatest nation on the face of the earth and stop with a statement of that great truth. Democracy is never static. The safety and permanence of this country rests on the integrity and eternal vigilance of its people. Let us ask God to bless America and then get busy and help Him preserve it for posterity.

AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP COMMITTEE

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