

On the Importance of Being Unprincipled

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SURELY there are more political principles in active circulation today than for many a long year. One has only to open the morning paper to be caught in a barrage of them. They volley from the Right, they thunder from the Left; and even peaceable citizens, anxious to go about their business undisturbed in the broad Center, have had to lay in a generous stock in self-defense. When we look across the seas we find the atmosphere from Moscow to Madrid so cluttered up with eternal principles in irrepressible conflict that it is hard to discern any merely human beings. Even the British Lion is going through contortions in the endeavor to put on the unaccustomed armor of principle. We are all in a fighting mood today. Mere name-calling, though satisfying for a time, soon exhausts our stock of epithets; and then, grasping a principle firmly in either hand, we sally forth bravely to the fray.

Side by side with this strife of principles has gone a marked decline in what we used to regard as political intelligence. At least the political intelligence that was once enough to adjust our differences seems no longer adequate now that we disagree so much more violently and, we are sure, so much more fundamentally. Indeed we have thought up elaborate if not wholly respectable philosophies to convince ourselves that the intelligence we are certain the other fellow doesn't possess has really no place in our political quarrels and that we have got to fight it out with him, the sooner the better. In the old days when one group of us disagreed with another about what ought to be done we managed in the end to effect some kind of working

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compromise with them. Today it has come to be the fashion, in Europe at least, to shoot them instead. Why waste time trying to argue? Direct action is so much simpler and more expeditious! America has so far proved a notable exception to this new fashion. Under a consummate compromiser, a leader quite gratifyingly unprincipled, it seems to be displaying more political intelligence than any other major country. And wonder of wonders, that intelligence has made its appearance even in the steel industry!

Now there seems to be a very close connection between this decline in political intelligence and the rise of the appeal to principles. In fact most of the world's political difficulties today focus in men's preference for laying down principles and fighting over them rather than engaging in the give and take of discussion and eventual compromise. So it seems worth while to emphasize the importance of being unprincipled in political action. In political action, mind you—for in themselves principles are fine things. In their proper place of course they are quite indispensable. But that place is not to regulate the group activities of men. Men can live together and succeed in accomplishing things cooperatively only if they have the patience and the intelligence to compromise. It would of course sound less unconventional if instead of speaking of unprincipled action I spoke of "the principle of compromise," meaning thereby the principle of acting without regard to one's principles in the interest of acting with other men. And should some dialectician object that I too am advocating a single principle of compromise against all others I could not demur. For what is at issue, against all the new political faiths and certainties flying about in our world, is very close to what I conceive to be the American way. It is commonly known, in fact, by a more familiar name. It is not the name but the political method I am concerned with; I want to make clear what is really involved in what Americans conceive political intelligence to be.

Now anybody who is at all capable of learning anything from experience knows that the only way to get along with

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people, the only way to do anything together with anybody else, is through compromise. You don't need exceptional brains to realize that; you need only to be married or to have a friend. Cooperation between human beings is possible only if they are willing to compromise; and politics, the art of cooperation, of group action, is at bottom nothing but the practical application of the method of compromise. Only two kinds of men can really afford the luxury of acting always on principle: those who never act at all, who live in a sort of social vacuum, who never try to get other men to do anything; and those who have so much power they don't have to regard the wishes or habits of other men but can just give commands. These are the two kinds of men who know nothing about the art of cooperation, the impotent and the omnipotent—the college professor and the Supreme Court Justice, for example.

But of course no one ever really does act on principle alone, with complete logical consistency. For no man is so omnipotent, not even a Dictator, that he does not have to resort to all kinds of compromises with his followers to secure the power to shoot those who disagree with him. And no man is so impotent that he never tries to cooperate with his fellows at all. Should he begin to act that way we have a special institution made for him in which we lock him up—the insane asylum. Even college professors, who often have the brains to think up all kinds of principles and the irresponsibility to advocate them, are likely to forget all about them, blithely and intelligently, when it comes to college affairs where they have some power and some responsibility for action. They become good college politicians. And should they rise to be “administrators,” deans and presidents, they are notoriously likely to become the most unprincipled of men. To be sure they are apt to retain the bad habit of talking about principles. This is a little unfortunate, for it makes them seem hypocrites. It is really only an occupational disease, shared by most intelligent administrators who happen also to be intellectuals.

In general it is only intellectuals, those who think but don't

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have to act, who may understand things clearly but never really try to do anything about it, that can afford to have political principles. It is preachers, teachers, writers and literary men who can get down to the roots of things and really understand them. They are free to be political radicals. The only action such men ever have to engage in is to protest, in the name of their principles, at what other men are doing. Principles are great things for protesting. That is in fact about the only kind of action you can really accomplish with them. Such intellectuals are never faced by the problem of getting something done, of cooperating with other men. It is significant that radical intellectuals, those who have the firmest and often the most penetrating principles, are notoriously incapable of cooperating with each other; and that groups which begin by protesting against things in general are apt to end in bitter protest against each other's principles. That is at bottom why practical men, trade unionists for example, are so suspicious of intellectuals; they have too many principles which seem quite irrelevant to the problems faced in daily living. They are so unable to compromise—they have never been forced by experience to learn how! They have so little political intelligence.

A friend recently returned to university teaching from Washington where he had been engaged in several of the many enterprises there going on. "Now that you're back again," a colleague remarked, "you can afford to be radical once more. You have no further responsibility for getting anything done." "Yes," the ex-scholar in politics replied, "now I can get back to criticizing. Why, there in Washington I was too busy trying to set up and get those important agencies going ever to ask whether what I was doing was really consistent with my principles."

The reason why principles are irrelevant to any political or cooperative action lies in the very nature of principles. Principles, as defined by Aristotle, who discovered them, are those ideas in terms of which something is understood. They are the set of concepts and axioms which make it intelligible to us.

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When once we see them then everything else falls into a consistent pattern; it all makes sense we say. Just what ideas will make a thing intelligible to us, Aristotle pointed out, depends on our experience; and we have found out since Aristotle that the same things can be understood in a great variety of ways, depending on what our experience of them has been—that is, that a single thing can be made intelligible in terms of a number of differing sets of principles, as our experience of it has varied.

Principles are accordingly instruments not of action but of understanding. Their place is not in the practical art of politics but in the knowledge that is science. The history of our science has been the history of the change and modification of the principles that enabled men to understand as their experience has been changed and enlarged. Now science or organized understanding has built up a kind of cooperative experience shared by all scientists. Therefore there is a fair measure of agreement, at any one time, on the principles in terms of which the subject-matter of any one science is to be understood, though notoriously it is these principles of explanation—the way in which the observed facts are to be understood—that form just that aspect of science about which there is most difference of opinion. There is in fact no science in which there are not various “schools,” so far as “theory” goes, various principles entertained; though on the experimental findings there is substantial agreement.

But what is a minor factor in science is the prevailing rule with practical problems. There are no two men who understand a given situation in precisely the same terms, for there are no two men whose previous experience has been precisely the same. Anyone who has ever served on a committee knows that if there are 15 members, 15 really informed men, 15 experts, there will be 15 different slants on the committee's problem, 15 different sets of principles through which it is approached. Especially is it true that there are no two economic groups, whose adjustment and cooperation furnish the major task of present-day politics, which see problems in the same

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light or which have had the same experience. How could one expect Kansas farmers, Detroit auto-workers, Lawrence mill-hands and New York bankers to understand anything in the same terms? Each group has found for itself different principles; and even should they all agree that they want the same thing—security for example—it would inevitably mean something different for each group.

In such political problems there is no possibility, that could be more than verbal, of agreement on principles, no possibility of really understanding the problem in the same way. You can never hope to get two groups, two parties to a controversy, to see it in the same light, to have it make sense in the same way, for such parties never look out on the world through the windows of the same experience. What you can hope to get agreement on is some specific measure, some concrete program of action. That program will not completely satisfy anybody or any group and each will understand it and criticize its shortcomings in the light of their own principles. But if it is a successful compromise it will give all of them enough of what they want to make them support it.

The way it actually works is familiar enough. A group, let us say a committee, meets to tackle a problem. Each member begins by laying down his principles, how it shapes up for him, his slant upon it. This takes a lot of talking. Then, if the members are good politicians and possess political intelligence, they stop talking about principles and get down to the real business of working out a compromise measure which will meet the major objections and do something to satisfy the most insistent demands. The result is finally laid before the groups concerned, who, not having been present at the previous discussion, repeat the same objections that were there dealt with. There is a new outburst of principles and criticism. If this keeps up too long the plan is modified to satisfy the loudest protests and then put into effect. In its actual operation it will have certain consequences that no one foresaw and there will be more roars. Something then has to be done to appease them;

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and so it goes on. This is the political method, the method of compromise at work. It is obviously a never-ending process. It is the only way of getting men to work together, the only way of really enlisting their cooperative interest and effort, no matter what principles they may severally have or think they have. We call this method "democratic" according to how early in the process the different groups concerned have a chance to talk, to make their wants known and to object. Under any scheme of organizing human action they will do so in the end, and if they are strong enough they will make their demands felt and have to be given something.

If the members of our committee are not good politicians, if they are intellectuals without much intelligence, they will naturally keep on talking about principles a lot longer. Each will try to convert the others to his own. That will probably result in a deadlock and nothing will be accomplished. If something simply has to be done there are two chief ways out. Either the talk will go on until everyone manages to understand each other's principles and there is general agreement that each is right from his own point of view. The committee will then be able to compromise on a practical plan. Or else somebody will propose a new principle, more general than those previously argued for—so general, in fact, that each can accept it with his own private interpretation. Then they will get down to business. In either case the committee will never begin to get anywhere till the principles have been removed from discussion by some means or other. The easiest way of dealing with such principled men is to agree immediately to all their principles. It is in fact the only way of getting a man with no political sense whatever to compromise. Usually, after everybody has grown tired of talking about principles—or rather after everybody has grown tired of hearing the others talk about theirs, for no man ever wearies of expounding his own—and it is clear that the discussion is getting nowhere somebody will remark, "Now that we are all agreed in principle"—and then the real compromising begins.

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This is the method of politics. Of course if you don't really want to get men to do anything, if you don't have to solve the problem, you can stick to your principles and refuse all traffic with compromise. This will normally be either because you don't want to act at all, because you are irresponsible and don't have to, and prefer to be free to criticize; or else because you want to fight. Now principles are perfectly grand for fighting. You can't really fight well without them; at least you can't fight very long, without acquiring a set. For a principle is by definition a postulate, an assumption: it is an idea that cannot be proved by anything else or it would not be a principle. Nor can it be verified by an experience different from your own. Since you can't therefore prove it if it is questioned you can only support it by fighting for it. To call a thing a principle means that the case is closed and the argument over. You are going to act, no matter what the consequences; you are going to fight to the bitter end. It has become "a matter of principle" with you. Those words are uttered when faith burns bright and you are resolved to turn from words to deeds. And when you have made such a resolve of course you have to formulate principles to justify your intransigence.

In practical matters no particular problem is ever solved by an appeal to principles. To make such an appeal leads to a fight and is intended to lead to a fight. When the fight is over and the principle "established," or when both parties have finally got tired of fighting for their principles, the problem still remains to be solved, and to be solved by the political method of compromise and adjustment of conflicting interests and demands, in an atmosphere now made doubly difficult by the fighting psychology and the passionate devotion to principles that have been generated. The really big fights, like revolutions, usually give rise to a situation in which political intelligence, the ability to compromise, is quite destroyed. And the successful revolutionists normally start fighting among themselves over their principles until they are kicked aside by some politically-minded man who knows how to get men to com-

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promise and work together on their problems. The most famous man of resolute principle in the world today is Leon Trotsky.

Of course there is often nothing to do but fight if political intelligence be so lacking that some entrenched group refuses to admit this political method, refuses to meet and discuss and bargain and compromise. Industrial corporations have been known to act thus unpolitically toward their employees. Then the political method becomes itself a principle that has to be fought for. In fact the only thing that fighting does seem to be able to win is the adoption of a certain method, and it can achieve permanent gains only if that method be the method of politics. Experience reveals that the only principle really worth fighting for is the extension of the principle of compromise to a new area in which it has not prevailed before—to the field of industrial relations, for example, or to those problems where the Supreme Court says political compromise mustn't be applied. It is significant that our politician president has seemed willing to compromise on anything and everything except the refusal to allow compromise or to permit the political method to be employed. He seems willing to fight to enable political intelligence to function.

It is the politician who is the expert in the method of compromise. He possesses the art of getting conflicting groups and interests together in some working balance of effective forces. He helps them think out some plan to which none will object too violently. Inevitably the measures that result from his efforts are likely to be inconsistent when judged by any principle. They are always faulty, in the sense that they never do everything that any group wants; they never do all that any clear principle would demand they should. They stand always in need of amending and re-amending. They are a register of the effective demands of those concerned, worked out by pressure groups pressing and lobbyists lobbying and a final slow process of compromise. Men with principles, especially if they are irresponsible and don't have to take part in the complex process,

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are always prone to exclaim: How much better if we had real leaders with clear principles, able to force through what is so obviously desirable! If some groups don't want what I see is needed they should be made to take it and like it.

Other nations today have found such Leaders. They have swept away the politicians and substituted coercion for compromise. To be sure, even such leaders have to be politically minded and have to compromise with any really insistent demand. But most Americans would agree that there is a genuine difference. These Leaders are pretty ruthless about coercing minority groups, or larger groups that are weak and get the worst of the official adjustment of conflicting interests. Politicians and the method of politics have their virtues in comparison with Dictators and Storm Troops and the Gestapo. Perhaps the most important function of politicians is to act as a buffer in our group conflicts. They soften bitter passions and moderate the storms that without them might so easily lead to the violent coercion of weaker groups. Politicians may on occasion be less than wholly honest and veracious but they don't shoot us—and what is still more important, they keep us from shooting each other. They give us enough of what we demand to keep our principles slightly below the boiling point. With politicians in charge the way, we know, is always open to compromise. The danger begins when anything is definitely removed from politics and made a matter of principle, for then the shooting is likely to begin.

Politicians can perform their function of effecting compromises and softening clashes only if they have no principles of their own. Their most engaging quality, in fact, is that they are so largely unprincipled themselves and can therefore get down to business so easily. At least they keep their principles for their speeches and rarely let them interfere with their work. And the whole political process can go on only if men are willing to grant that every group knows its own problems and its own needs better than anyone else and is therefore entitled to get as much of what it wants as it can. Once get the

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idea that you know better than other men what is really good for them, once get faith in some principle which will tell you just what the nation must do to be saved and just what every man ought to be working for, and you will have little stomach for the political method. What you see clearly as the one thing needful will seem so important that you will have no patience with those who see incorrectly. If you have the virus of political principles you will always be losing your patience with the fools or the rascals who see something else. Impatience is the characteristic mark of the over-principled. They cannot wait to persuade or educate—or learn. They have to act right away, on principle. They have to get other people to act; they have to force them to act. Any means and any method will be justified by your principle: that is where single-minded devotion to political principle always ends up. Such a man will naturally hate the very thought of compromise; he will much prefer to shoot or even to get shot. Europe is full of just such men of principle today; and with so many principles and such intense faith in them it will be very lucky to get off without fanatical religious wars on a grand scale. It has very little political intelligence left: it has lost the ability to compromise.

In America we have not reached such a desperate state as yet. We do not take up arms after an election because our side has lost or won. It seems that not even the Liberty League believed in its principles. The nearest approach to such intensity of faith is probably to be found in some of our Communist friends. But I have never known a Communist in this country who seemed really capable of shooting; and if they persist in their present policy of a united front (that is of politic compromise in action) they are bound sooner or later to lose their principles—though it is too much to expect that they will ever stop talking about them.

What we Americans are prone to call our “principles”—such things as freedom, security, equality, democracy and the like—are really not so much ideals to be debated and fought over as problems to be worked out by political methods in

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particular instances. Absolute freedom and absolute security are not given to mortal man. Human freedom and human security are specific problems to be dealt with in specific cases. They can be solved only if they are made questions of fact, of inquiry about the means of securing them, of getting compromises not too unsatisfactory to those concerned. They can be solved only if the conditions are established that will transform conflict and debate into inquiry into a problem: only, that is, if the political method of compromise is enabled to function. Any solution of our social and industrial difficulties will therefore depend on our becoming as a people more politically minded, on our developing more political intelligence. We need more actual experience in compromising on measures for dealing with particular problems under particular conditions; we must become less rather than more content to take refuge in general principles, to sit back, criticize, protest and fight.

There is great hope for the spread of such political-mindedness in the countless boards and committees of the agencies set up by the present administration. The A.A.A. was peculiarly successful in this political education but even the N.R.A. played its part and the training it gave seems to have had a good deal to do with the political intelligence recently displayed by both the C.I.O. and employers. The spread of labor organization, especially along industrial lines, in which countless locals and boards really face the problems of their industry as a whole, cannot but be a factor in generating further political intelligence. Only with such political-mindedness can America hope to escape the devastating effects of the essentially unpolitical class-struggle that has afflicted Europe. That is the very antithesis of the method of politics, the method of compromise and political intelligence: it is the method of fighting for principles and of ruthless coercion for the vanquished. And lest some troubled soul rise at this point to ask whether America really can escape the fate of Spain or Germany let me anticipate his query by insisting that I do not know and that I know that he does not know, nor does any one else. But I do know that to

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act on the principle that America cannot escape is the surest way to destroy political intelligence. There will doubtless be many particular fights to establish the conditions of political compromise; there will be a general fight only if both sides abandon politics for principles.

What I have been calling "political intelligence" and "the method of compromise" is usually called "democracy." I have preferred not to use that term, for democracy is usually taken as an ideal, a goal, a principle—that is, as something quite meaningless and irrelevant to political problems. I have been considering what is implied in democracy taken concretely as a method, a method of dealing with particular problems by the active participation of as many as possible of those concerned and there hammering out a working solution to be revised in the light of further experience. The democratic method does not consist in sending men to Washington with a majority to install some scheme which will usher in the millennium. That is not the democratic method at all; that is the method of Hitler, all except the millennium.

In our struggling world the problems are largely set for us—set by what different groups of men want and by the opportunities and the limitations of the natural and technical materials we have to work with. We possess the technical skill to give men what they want in abundance. We already possess a surprising amount of economic intelligence: we know how to go far in relieving our economic insecurity. The great problem is how to get men to apply this skill and intelligence, how to get them to agree to use the intelligence now available in our society. Our pressing need is for political intelligence. The means which Americans have the chance to employ is the method of democracy—the method of politics, of compromise on particular measures, in disregard of our principles, however dear.