

THE Ayn Rand LETTER®

Vol. III, No. 13

March 25, 1974

MORAL INFLATION

Part II

Here are some of the things that men had to evade in order to think up a moral atrocity such as a "National Day of Humiliation."

Self-abasement is the antithesis of morality. If a man has acted immorally, but regrets it and wants to atone for it, it is not self-abasement that prompts him, but some remnant of love for moral values - and it is not self-abasement that he expresses, but a longing to regain his self-esteem. Humility is not a recognition of one's failings, but a rejection of morality. "I am no good" is a statement that may be uttered only in the past tense. To say: "I am no good" is to declare: "- and I never intend to be any better."

One can feel nothing but mistrust, disgust and contempt for a man who spits in his own face. To drag others along into the same degradation and spit in the face of one's own country, is as base an affront to morality as can be imagined. Yet this has been the policy of American intellectuals for many decades. That it is now adopted by a Senator and approved "with no debate or opposition" by the U.S. Senate, is a measure of the extent to which moral proclamations and moral principles are not taken seriously by today's public leaders.

One may disapprove of one's country's policies, one may disagree with most or with all of its citizens, one may seek to change, reform or improve particular laws, conditions or trends; and if one finds an entire country so evil that it deserves damnation, one must leave it. But to stay here and to damn this country - this country! - on such phony, trashy allegations as "acquiescence[?] to corruption and waste[!!]" is to step out of any moral bounds.

What effect did the sponsors of that resolution expect it to have on the American people?

There still are people in this country who lost loved ones in World War I. There are more people who carry the unhealed wounds of World War II, of Korea, of Vietnam. There are the disabled, the crippled, the mangled of those wars' battlefields. No one has ever told them why they had to fight nor what their sacrifices accomplished; it was certainly not "to make the world safe for democracy" - look at that world now. The American people have borne it all, trusting their leaders, hoping that someone knew the purpose of that ghastly devastation. The United States gained nothing from those wars, except the growing burden of paying reparations to the whole world - the kind of burden that used to be imposed

on a defeated nation.

People have borne patiently the unending drain of their wealth, their effort, their standard of living - first, to help the unemployed of the New Deal era, then the war allies, then the former enemies, and now the unemployables of the entire globe. People have seen and read enough to know the subhuman squalor of human existence in other countries and the atrocities to which men submit. In their innocent, foolishly overgenerous benevolence, the American people have been willing to help, knowing that theirs is the greatest country on this ravaged earth, a blessed oasis in a desert of bloody savagery.

Then to hear a proclamation of their country's self-abasement - in this day of raucously chauvinistic boasting, when every racist tribe in every backyard of the globe, from Albania to Uganda, is proclaiming the uniquely sanctified value of the non-achievements of its non-culture - to hear that they, the American people, have not done enough and that their reward is a "National Day of Humiliation," is more than human beings should be asked to bear or understand. If, under a leadership of this kind, people are losing respect for morality and crumbling into cynicism, bitterness, helpless anger, or blind hatred - can one blame them?

Yet the altruist morality dictates such policies to the nation's leaders. Even though altruism declares that "it is more blessed to give than to receive," it does not work that way in practice. The givers are never blessed; the more they give, the more is demanded of them; complaints, reproaches and insults are the only response they get for practicing altruism's virtues (or for their actual virtues). Altruism cannot permit a recognition of virtue; it cannot permit self-esteem or moral innocence. Guilt is altruism's stock in trade, and the inducing of guilt is its only means of self-perpetuation. If the giver is not kept under a torrent of degrading, demeaning accusations, he might take a look around and put an end to the self-sacrificing.

Altruists are concerned only with those who suffer - not with those who provide relief from suffering, not even enough to care whether they are able to survive. When no actual suffering can be found, the altruists are compelled to invent or manufacture it. Observe their admission that, compared to the rest of the world, people do not suffer from real poverty in this country - they suffer from relative poverty (i.e., from envy). Observe that with the inflation of altruism into a government policy - with public cash and legislative favors pouring upon the pressure groups of newly minted sufferers - the proper, basic functions of the government are crumbling, corroded by neglect and "lack of funds"(!). Yet these are the functions required for the survival of the givers, who carry all the rest on their shoulders and are the greatest victims of altruistic exploitation: the middle class.

These basic functions are: the police, the law courts, the military. (These represent the only moral justification for the existence of a government: the protection of individual rights, i.e., the protection of individual citizens from the initiators of physical force.) What is the state of these governmental functions today?

Observe the conditions of an average American's existence. He has lost the most rudimentary form of protection: the safety of city streets. He is in danger on his way to work in the morning, and on his way home; he is in danger if he steps out of the house after dark; his family are in danger if they go

shopping, visiting, or walking in a public park. They dare not ride the subway, yet they are threatened with the loss of their safest transportation: their car. Criminal attacks are a daily occurrence, any time, any place: purse-snatching, mugging, burglary, rape, murder. The police are helpless: they have been brought close to impotence by impossible rules, which protect the "rights" of the criminals. The policemen struggle on as best they can, but they admit bitterly that there is little they can do: they risk their lives to arrest a thug, but the courts set him free.

The average man cannot seek redress in court, whether in criminal or civil matters: he cannot afford it. The cost, the length of time required, and the unpredictable outcome of non-objective laws, have made him give up the hope of appealing to justice, whether he suffers from a neighbor's petty chiseling or from some major violation of his rights. He has grown stoically - or cynically - indifferent: he knows (or senses) that the main violator is the government, that no muggers can deprive him of the sums which the government seizes at income-tax time.

The moral inflation leaves him unprotected against the financial inflation: he works harder and harder (often in the form of "moonlighting"), but his real income is shrinking, he is not rising in the world, he is not getting anywhere, he is running on a hopeless treadmill. Try to tell his wife - in the midst of her desperate struggle to provide the family with decent meals, which they can't afford - that she must bear "humiliation" for the sin of "waste"!

Just as these people sense that today's leadership does not regard them as worth protecting, so they sense that their country, too, is regarded as not worth defending. The military services have survived, so far - in the midst of an unrelenting campaign of attacks, vilifications, and demands that the defense budget be cut (even though welfare projects, not defense, consume the largest share of the national budget).

To add insult to the American people's injury, The New York Times published an editorial (May 25, 1972), entitled "Retreat on Rights," which said: "The Supreme Court decisions permitting criminal convictions by less than unanimous juries and narrowing witnesses' immunity against self-incrimination are disquieting in their practical effects but, even more, as portents of things to come.

"In the United States and other free countries, the drift of history in this century has been toward strengthening the power of government and diminishing the liberties of the individual. One of the few countervailing pressures has been the libertarian tendency of the Supreme Court to construe the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment broadly in behalf of accused individuals, racial and religious minorities, the impoverished and ignorant, and political radicals and dissenters. The Court's new majority bloc made up mostly of Nixon appointees may be bringing that tendency to an end." After discussing the possible consequences of the Supreme Court decision - such as: "Prosecutors will find it easier to get convictions in cases which now end in hung juries" - the editorial urges the country to hope that the effects will not prove "destructive of individual rights."

This means that we must fight the world's drift toward statism by protecting the individual rights of criminals.

(Don't remind me that an accused person is not necessarily a criminal and

that he must be protected against unjust accusations. The rights of the accused are not a primary - they are a consequence derived from a man's inalienable, individual rights. A consequence cannot survive the destruction of its cause. What good will it do you to be protected in the rare emergency of a false arrest, if you are treated as the rightless subject of an unlimited government in your daily life?)

A mawkish sentimentality toward criminals, coupled with a brutal cruelty toward innocent citizens, is not a new phenomenon. In my review of The Language of Dissent by Lowell B. Mason (The Objectivist Newsletter, August 1963), I wrote: "Mr. Mason makes a profoundly important observation: whenever a country's criminal laws are more lenient than its civil laws, it means that the country is accepting the basic principle of statism and is moving toward a totalitarian state. (Such a trend means that crimes against individuals are regarded as negligible, while the collectivist concept of 'Crimes against the State' becomes paramount and supersedes all rights.) In Soviet Russia, he points out, criminals were treated 'with tolerance and circumspection. On the other hand, those accused of violating the state's political and economic commands were sentenced to death or exiled to Siberia without any semblance of trial as we know the word here in America.'"

Now observe the odd assortment of individuals whose rights and liberties are singled out by the Times editorial for special protection. "Racial and religious minorities," as well as "political radicals and dissenters," should find it offensive to be lumped with "the impoverished and ignorant" and the (probably) criminal. The obvious question is: What about the rights and liberties of the honest, the educated, the self-supporting, the majority? The answer is that the assortment is dictated by and represents a confession of altruism's essence: it is only suffering, weakness, failure, default - real or imaginary, spiritual or material or numerical or moral - that entitle men to rights, liberties and public concern; happiness, strength, success, virtue do not.

In a cultural atmosphere of this sort, who can find any inspiration or desire to preserve his moral integrity? The signs of moral deterioration are all around us. But, to the great credit of this country, most people, so far, have not given up.

(To be continued.)

Ayn Rand

OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

Starting on September 15, the taped lectures of Dr. Leonard Peikoff's course, Introduction to Logic, will be given in Boston. For further information, contact Frank Peseckis, (617) 261-2491 (after September 3).

B.W.