Understanding and Eternal Vigilance

By Ethan A. H. Shepley

EDUCATION," a British novelist once observed, "should be as gradual as the moonrise—perceptible not in progress but in result."

Many of you here may disagree. Surely, you young men and women may argue, your progress is distinctly perceptible. You have recently ground out those interminable theses—so long, and so long postponed. You have completed exacting laboratory experiments, and you have stood up under a barrage of raking examinations, written and oral. The significant milestone you pass today is marked by this impressive ceremony and its long-awaited conferring of degrees.

In today's increasingly complex age, with its growing mountain of knowledge, with its population pressures due to medical advances that prolong lives, and with its intensified international problems, many of you will advisedly return to this great university or will study elsewhere for further education and further professional training. Others of you have your minds set right now on getting out and making a success of whatever you plan to do in life. Having earned your A.B.'s, you are about to learn the rest of life's alphabet in the proverbial college of hard knocks.

At least for the coming season, probably, most of you feel well enough supplied with formal education. This sensation, which I hope is only temporary, is not peculiar to diploma-bearing youth. Fred Conway, the noted St. Louis artist, is telling his Washington University colleagues these days that he is off to Paris this summer just to have fun.

"I'll not set foot in any museum," he says. "You know, this education stuff can be carried just too far. I'm going to sketch and paint in the streets of Paris again just like when I was a kid."

But whatever our diversified im-
meditate pursuits may be, each of us here shares with all the others a continuing job whose urgency and importance we may all underestimate.

This is the job of maintaining and preserving what we refer to as a free society, which we take entirely too much for granted. Those who have thought the problem through, notably Walter Lippmann, have convinced themselves that the liberal way of life itself is in danger.

It is this way of life that makes possible our many other joys—the material, intellectual and spiritual freedom that we and other Western democracies prize and rejoice in as our birthright.

And yet I wonder whether a single young man or woman at these exercises has ever entertained the slightest doubt with respect to the continued existence of the kind of society we have enjoyed and maintained here in the United States of America for the last 181 years. I wonder, too, whether any of you are aware of the fact that, if we succeed in significantly extending the life-span of our democratic form of government, we will be the first major power to do so in the six or seven thousand years of history of which we have record.

Although I am not a professional political scientist, it is my impression that, except for a matter of a few brief generations, no such nation has thus far been able to maintain a democratic system, as we know it, without having it fall apart at the very moment it seemed most secure.

I bring this to your attention in dead earnest because, as Aristotle declared, "All who have meditated on the art of governing mankind have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth." And what is wrong with the state of our democratic government today? Mr. Lippmann contends that it languished and is dangerously sick, and I agree with him. His recent book, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, describes with clinical precision the malady that began to afflict our government as soon as its leaders saw their wisest decisions, in such major matters as making war or drawing up treaties, would not be popular.

To stay in office and achieve what good they could, political leaders in the liberal democracies during the last 40 years have been forced by the pressures of an uninformed public to withhold action when prompt action was called for and, on the other hand, to do things that should not have been done.

Our entry into World War I had to be postponed until a feeling of intense hatred of the German people had been developed. And that very same hatred forced our leaders at the close of the war to impose upon the conquered nation a vindictive treaty whose terms virtually assured us of another world conflict. Our leaders recognized Hitler for what he was when he appeared on the scene. But the unwillingness of the people to endure the sacrifices and hardships that would be required prevented those leaders from disposing of Hitler at a time when it could have been done at comparatively little cost in lives or property.

With these chilling thoughts as his themes Mr. Lippmann has written a fascinating but a frightening book.

On the domestic scene, his thought is paralleled in its power of conviction by the books of a very wise, down-to-earth political writer, Frank Kent. In the 1920's, Frank Kent of Baltimore wrote several books, including *The Great Game of Politics* and *Political Behavior*, that are as sound today as when they were written. They make brutally clear just how hard the average citizen must work to be a really good citizen, to vote intelligently and regularly and thus combat the day in and day out efforts of the professional politician, who is in politics for exactly what he can get out of it. The educated American voter must see that the decisions rightfully his do not go by default to the professional political worker.

Unless America in general develops healthy curiosity about vital matters like these, I do not see how we can even say we have a high standard of living. Bathtubs and automobiles are all very well in their places, but they cannot take the place of things that make us become intellectually and politically alive.

A study made two years ago shows that in the United States only 17 per cent of the population reads books, compared with 31 per cent in Canada, 34 in Australia and 55 in England. The score in reading is more than three to one in favor of the British.

I second the motion that Joseph Wood Krutch made late last month in the *Saturday Review*. He urged that some statistical sociologist draw up a method of evaluating living standards to include so important an item of human happiness as books.

To return specifically to Frank Kent—he shows why, by and large, a candidate cannot very well be candid, though of course there are brilliant exceptions. But the bulk of candidates cannot be candid for fear they offend the pressure groups that make political war on any frank opponent of their own selfish interests or own points of view and that thus put an end to the outspoken candidate's usefulness to his party.

These diseases of the body political

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tic at home and abroad become most virulent in the very forms of social structure and population distribution that we are now rapidly developing. Technical advances, specialization and industrialization are bringing us with frightening speed to a pattern of almost completely urbanized living.

You know, it is comparatively easy to operate in a democratic way so long as you have a relatively small group or a rural community. Here each individual knows the other individuals, and thus they have the opportunity to pass judgment on another. But when we have human beings drawn together in vast numbers, we find ourselves confronted with a very different problem.

Until the last 40 years or so, our experience has justified the political scientists' expert and reiterated opinion concerning our American Constitution. The authorities here and abroad hold that our Constitution is the most perfect document of its kind ever developed by the brain of man.

Does recent history cast doubt on the validity of this opinion? Personally, I do not think so, and I should like to review some familiar ground to show why I believe our difficulties do not stem from any defect in the Constitution but rather from our own fail- ures as citizens. The Constitution provides for a division of powers and responsibilities, as well as for a system of checks and balances. Taken together, these provisions create an ideal pattern for the administration of government.

Under our present form of government the people have the right to select their Chief Executive. But unlike more autocratic rulers he governs with the consent of the people and only to the extent that they give their consent through their duly elected representatives in the legislative branch of the government.

Then back of all this we have the United States Supreme Court and the inferior federal courts to make sure that neither the executive nor the legislative branch of the government exceeds the power or authority conferred upon them respectively by the Constitution. In this way, a constitutional democracy tempers the majority rule with justice. It protects the minority from the arbitrary action of a majority, which if uncontrolled can be the cruelest of all kinds of dictatorship.

So far as the judicial branch is concerned, it seems to have been performing its function in accordance with the basic plan and without interference by the people. But let us take a good look at the actual day-to-day functioning of the executive and legislative branches of our government since World War I. Has the President, during this period, actually been advocating and undertaking to do the things that he honestly believed to be in the best interests of this country as a whole on a long-range basis? And has Congress been performing its function on the same basis?

If, in the words of that colorful American, Alfred E. Smith, we look at the record, we will find that neither the President nor the Congress has actually been free to conduct his or their actions on any such basis.

Insofar as their actions were in areas that had an immediate and unwelcome effect upon the freedom of action of the people or upon their pleasures and comforts, the President and the Congress have not been free to use their own judgment.

This is shown by Mr. Lippmann in his careful analysis of significant events within the last generation. So long as the government was not obliged to make decisions affecting the freedom and the convenience of the people, the government's right to use its best judgment was not challenged. When, however, it became necessary for the good of the nation to take the young men out of the homes, out of the factories and off the farms and put them into uniform and send them off to do battle in distant parts of the world, with many never to return; when our right to buy food, gasoline and tires for our cars had to be drastically limited for the protection of the nation, when deep inroads had to be made through taxation upon the incomes of our people and we found ourselves restricted and con- fined by regulations affecting our daily lives—when these things have happened, then, as Mr. Lippmann points out, the people, perhaps unconscious, have usurped the powers of government by applying pressures so great as to make it virtually impossible for their duly elected representatives to perform the functions of government for which they are held responsible under the Constitution.

The propensity of democratic governments is to please the largest possible number of voters, Mr. Lippmann remarks. Because of this, in times of stress, we have witnessed what he deems no less than a derangement of powers.

To quote him directly: "The people have acquired power which they are incapable of exercising, and the governments they elect have lost powers which they must recover if they are to govern." From this kernel of thought—from this acorn, if you will—there quite naturally grows Mr. Lippmann's whole great tree of thought concerning the public philosophy, with all of its luxuriant and powerful branches.

He shows that what we need in our time is a great measure of collective unselfishness. We must be prepared to make some sacrifices today for the benefit of future generations. And this goes against the grain. Can anyone imagine a corporate management that would starve present stockholders for the good of those who will come along, say, in 1980?

Perhaps the essence of the selfishness that I am opposing here today is expressed in the last will and testament drawn up by a man of means who posthumously addressed his heirs and the public charities thus: "Being of sound mind, I took care to spend all I had before I passed away."

In their different ways, both Walter Lippmann and Frank Kent have shown that, with rare exceptions, our successful democratic politicians have actually become intimidated, insecure, frightened men.

Mr. Lippmann shows that men in government offices are deprived of their independence. "The climate of modern democracy," he says, "does not usually inspire them to speak out, ... The general
rule is that a democratic politician had better not be right too soon."

If we permit this malady to drag on, it can prove fatal. We could then see the end of democracy as we have known it. This catastrophe can be avoided only if we realize the gravity and rise to the challenge of our times.

The proposition that a great mass of people cannot possibly govern themselves has been recognized from earliest times. It is too clear to require argument. Sound and reasonably prompt conclusions can be reached only by those who have a complete understanding of all the relevant information and who, through experience and training, are capable of evaluating all the factors involved.

Last month President Eisenhower addressed the nation twice from Washington, first in defense of his budget as a whole and then to try to protect its allocations for mutual security. Here we see a splendid illustration of a Chief Executive pleading for relief from the clamor of the short-sighted people who, as he said, would sacrifice for immediate personal economic gain "the heritage of freedom from our fathers, the peace and well-being of the sons who will come after us."

Here is a President who, not having to run again, is trying to persuade the people to release the pressures that are making it difficult for Congressmen, many of whom will run for re-election, to be guided by their own best judgment, rather than by their fears, in giving or withholding their support of his program.

As Mr. Lippman points out, elected governments have not been really governing. He complains that, when faced with a hard decision, officials do not do what they think is right, but what they think is popular. They shun the hard answer which is right and take the easy answer, the one most likely to win the favor of the voters—but very likely to be wrong.

Numbers can never be a substitute for knowledge; in fact, the greater the number, the more impossible it becomes to give the people the necessary understanding of facts and to supply them with the experience and training they will need to form sound judgments.

"With each succeeding generation," James Truslow Adams points out in The Adams Family, "the growing demand of the people that its elected officials shall not lead but merely register the popular will has steadily undermined the independence of those who derive their power from popular election."

Thus men in office become in effect perpetual office-seekers. They are always on trial for their political lives; they are always required to court restless constituents, as Walter Lippmann observes.

It is bad enough that we have been exercising powers that are not ours. But to make bad matters worse we have failed in our responsibility to select those by whom these powers should be exercised. This duty, the single most important obligation imposed upon us by the Constitution, we have sadly neglected. As has been so well stated by Thomas Jefferson, "Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom." And the price of freedom is something that must be earned by all of us and not by just a few. It is not something that we can leave for someone else to do. We can't let George do it, because no one else can do it except ourselves. That is, to vote regularly, intelligently and unselfishly.

Unless we discharge our function properly, the professional politicians will continue, in most instances, to select the men and women who will run the country. Those elected in this way are not the kind of office holders in whom the people repose their trust and faith.

Lacking such confidence, the public tends to seek protection through tactics that are dangerous and divisive—through the formation of pressure groups designed to influence legislation.

But we must abandon this government by push-and-pull. We must disabuse our minds of the erroneous philosophy that might—the might of the selfish pressure group—makes right and that it can correctly be called democratic government. A constitutional democracy, as I have said, is majority rule tempered by principles of justice. It should not be governed by the principles of mechanical physics, which tell us that when one man pushes just so hard in one direction, and another just so hard in another, exactly how much force will be exerted in still a third

—and probably an unplanned and undesirable—direction.

If our system is to work aright, it presupposes the willingness of each man and each woman to devote a reasonable amount of time to performing the responsibilities of a citizen. This is a task you can't hire someone else to do for you, no matter how successful you may become in the careers on which you are about to embark.

My real message here today is this: that I want to plead with you to see your Constitution not as some kind of Aladdin's lamp which, if rubbed gently from time to time, can protect our liberty and preserve the things that we cherish in this country. The Constitution is no magic carpet. Like a road map, it can show us the way, but it cannot of itself take us to our destination. As members of the voting public, you alone can reach that goal.

If you will demonstrate the collective unselfishness in which the generations just ahead of you have been deficient, you will indeed fulfill that definition of education of which I spoke—that it should be gradual—perceptible not in progress but in result. The title that I have selected for my remarks—"Understanding and Eternal Vigilance"—suggests my sincere conviction that we are destined to lose our freedom and to forfeit the things that mean so much to a free people unless the individuals in our society understand what is required of them, unless they exercise that eternal vigilance to which Thomas Jefferson so eloquently exhorted them.