

Values for Survival

Essays, Addresses, and Letters
on Politics and Education

L E W I S M U M F O R D

I could smile when I hear the hopeful exultation of many, at the new reach of worldly science and vigor of worldly effort; as if we were again at the beginning of new days. There is thunder on the horizon, as well as dawn.

JOHN RUSKIN

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first edition

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To my dear son

GEDDES

*Long before his work was done
He was the father, I the son.*

Geddes Mumford was born in Brooklyn, New York, on 5 July 1925. He served in the United States Army as Private First Class, and became First Scout, Second Platoon, Company L, 363 Infantry, 91 Division. In the opening drive on the Gothic line in Italy he was killed while making contact with the enemy on night patrol. He died alone, on Mount Altuzzo, probably on 13 September 1944.

This book consists of variations on a single theme: What must modern man do to be saved? While these papers were written separately without any thought of ultimate publication, the germ of the book itself was planted in a letter that came from my son before he went into combat. From Africa he wrote:

“While I think of it, I might mention the subject of the overseas soldier’s reaction to the war. . . . Our existence depends upon our being hard and tough in every phase of our life and therefore we are. However, we were not raised to that type of life and we are inclined to seek relief in thoughts of home. As far as I can see, it’s a reaction to a life which, by its definition, is too narrow to permit reasoning on the forces which so vitally affect it. I seriously doubt that anything can be done about this situation while the war is still in progress. Battle leaves little time for thought and if the subject were broached now the soldier would only make an incomplete survey of the case. He would probably think only ‘Why should I fight?’ and go no further. To my knowledge it will have to wait until after the war. Then, with further education, the returned soldier will be able to look back and see ‘why he fought.’ It will be up to the people who did not go, to give this education and they will have to approach the subject in a completely objective manner to succeed. . . . The completion of this task, not the peace treaties and the pacts concerning government, will really end the war.”

I promised my son to compose a book that would, if possible, aid in this task; and I hope that the present volume will serve that purpose, not merely making the past more

intelligible, but casting a wide cone of light over the future. This future is doubtless a different one from that which the smug and the unawakened comfortably look forward to; but I trust my words will make sense to the returned fighting man, and to all those civilians in every land who have in any way shared his privations, his miseries, his dangers, or his sacrifices. If mankind survives the present catastrophe, it will be because the war itself has summoned up the deepest reserves of our nature and has put them to work. Unconditional surrender will be a mocking symbol of victory unless it leads to the unconditional redemption of man: the victor no less than the vanquished.—L. M.

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BOOK ONE:

ESSAYS ON POLITICS

I prefer liberty with danger
to peace with slavery.

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

. . . Where danger lies
Salvation also grows.

FRIEDRICH HÖLDERLIN

CALL TO ARMS

[This appeal was first published in *The New Republic* for 18 May 1938: it was written four months before the appeasement at Munich. Since the only importance of this essay now is as historic record, I have made no attempt to expunge its errors and misjudgments. Perhaps the most serious error was that of accepting the current judgment of the effect of the Treaty of Versailles upon Germany; but needless to say it was not for this reason that my plea for action remained unanswered. Because of editorial restrictions, my original article appeared in a shorter and less adequate version. In reprinting it, I have taken the liberty to restore the omitted pages, which are indicated by brackets.]

1. THE DANGER OF OPTIMISM

An atmosphere of foggy unreality hangs over current discussions of peace. Most of the proposals to keep war from coming to America are noble and high-minded and humane; but they have one serious defect: the world on which they are based no longer exists. The proposals are dated 1938; but the premises remain those of 1928.

This failure to keep up with events may prove almost as fatal as the events themselves. For we are now confronted with a worldwide political phenomenon, fascism, whose deeply malignant character and cancerous spread have changed every problem of civilized political existence. Peace-loving people are still trying to make themselves believe that fascism is not what it seems and that fascists do not mean to

do the things they actually do. Such people even hope, by some show of affability, by some economic bribe, to transform the very nature of the evil that threatens to engulf us all. Surely, these people say to themselves, turning away from the latest fascist barbarity in the morning paper, the world cannot be so bad as that; or if it is for the moment, it cannot long remain so.

But the world *is* as bad as that: what is more, the skies threaten to become much blacker before the clouds lift again. Those who persist in closing their eyes to the vicious forces that are now deliberately attacking our civilization are the victims of unprofitable hopes and palsied wishes. Hating war, they are preparing themselves and their countrymen to endure something far more hideous than war: the "peace" perpetrated by fascism. I accuse my colleagues and friends on *The New Republic* of maintaining this state of wishful apathy. In the very last paragraph of its supplement on National Defense, *The New Republic* dared dismiss the threat of fascism and assure the reader that it cannot long "seriously menace the world."

Those words might indeed have been pardonable ten years ago: today they indicate self-deception or misjudgment of the gravest kind. Such optimism, such reckless optimism, is far more appalling when it comes from the mouths of the editors of an important liberal weekly than is the most strident war-mongering by professional militarists. And to my mind, *The New Republic's* attitude carries with it greater danger, for the ultimate treason of the intellectual is to place his credulous wishes above fact and truth, merely because the facts are repugnant, or because the situation they point to cannot be changed without heroic exertion. To be prepared to deal with fascism, it is better to overestimate the extent of

our military needs than to underestimate the political necessity of having to fight.

2. THE POTENCY OF THE PATHOLOGICAL

The most serious mistake a civilized man can make today is to assume that the fundamental values of life have not been altered in the fascist countries. Yet large groups of people still refuse to believe that nations which use the electric motor and the radio can, by a purely ideological transformation, become inimical to the larger scheme of our society. Too thinly rational to understand the nature of irrationality, our advocates of "co-operation" hope to bring the fascist states back into the normal channels of human intercourse. As Reinhold Niebuhr has well put it, such minds are incredulous of the existence of radical evil: they imagine that they are dealing with differences of degree. But they are wrong: they are dealing with a difference in kind. Fascism is a codified and co-ordinated barbarism. To the extent that fascism has become self-conscious, in both Italy and Germany, it has systematized its delusions, erected its perversities into a standard of values and set up a series of barbarian alternatives to the ideals of our civilization: ideals first expressed in Judea and Greece, widened for mankind by Christianity and reinforced through large drafts upon other civilizations by the spirit of humanistic science.

The mission of fascism, of which its leaders openly boast, is not to fulfill the promise of the modern world but to destroy it. Those who hope to find some common ground with fascism through a policy of "appeasement" or who would ward off the terrors of war by a policy of meek passivity and fearful isolation do not reckon with the strength of the irrational forces they have to face. Fascism's victories have not been

based upon the superiority of fascist arms or military leadership—both are extremely doubtful: the fascist principle is to bully and blackmail the indecisive, to fight only the weak, and to conquer with exemplary savagery the helpless. Its strength lies in its capacity for demoralization.

To seek to get along with fascism on the democratic principle of live and let live is to open the way for a more complete fascist conquest. Whatever strength fascism has lies precisely in its pathological condition: its predisposition to suspicion and hatred, its violent paranoia, its readiness to exalt the maimed ego through collective sadism and murder. Every form of dishonesty, torture, and violence is justified by the fascist if it promotes the advantage of the state; every form has already been used by the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists and the Japanese militarists. The bestial torture of political victims in concentration camps, the piratical sinking of defenseless cargo boats, the pitiless bombing and strafing of innocent civilians are merely the objective symbols of this philosophy of government. It is not a new philosophy: what is new to the modern world is that it is now unchallenged and unchecked.

These collective pathologies of course have their long history in the nations they afflict: that in Germany goes back centuries before the Treaty of Versailles—at least as far as the Thirty Years' War—and Borgese has shown in "Goliath" that the roots of Italian fascism are even older. But when an unbalanced person threatens immediate physical violence, it is more pressing to put him under control than to understand his symptoms. If we are to do justice to the Japanese, the Italians and the Germans, we must first rob the fascist governments of their immediate capacity to work incurable mischief. Unlike democratic polities, fascist states have no place for moral correctives within their system: their barbarism is

unchallengeable, their pathology is now incurable from within. What a large proportion of Italians and Germans may still think or feel in their private capacities no longer counts; they have no means of expression; within a generation most of the values they embody will have been extirpated by the school and the military camp.

3. THE THREAT TO FASCISM

[Fascism indeed faces a serious threat from within. It is continually threatened by the humanness of humanity. It is threatened by the tendency of normal men and women to temper their newly acquired barbarism by ancient sentiments of pity and generosity; by their tendency to modify irrationality by common sense, by respect for truth, by the acceptance of objective testimony and rational thought. Fascism is threatened further by the tendency to modify absolute claims to despotic authority by the simple co-operation of men working intimately in groups, in the factory, the office, the household, the neighborhood, the city; finally, it is insidiously undermined by the underlying irreverent sense of humor with which lowly humanity revenges itself upon the pretensions of the great and powerful. Ignazio Silone, in his superb Fontamara stories, has pictured these latent human tendencies. But left to themselves, these reactions are all innocuous. Fascism knows how to combat them. When propaganda is insufficient, the concentration camp finishes the job.

Being on the defensive against the normal manifestations of humanity and the normal give-and-take processes of civilization, fascism meets the forces that threaten it in two ways. Internally, it erects a wall around its own country: seeking economic self-sufficiency in times of war, it imposes restrictions upon the peacetime inter-regional exchanges of

surpluses, which would weaken this autarchic economy. It limits the movements of its subjects; it seals their mouths; it stops up their ears; it halts those processes of communication and intercourse that are the very life-blood of civilization. Externally, to guard against the insidious example of freedom and democracy, fascism wages a pitiless campaign against non-fascist states: it seizes every opportunity to disorganize the political life of democratic countries, to menace their external security, to encourage those groups in the country that seek to imitate fascism: it takes advantage of the very opportunities for discussion and free initiative that democracy offers to undermine democracy.

Plainly, fascism cannot afford to risk the challenge of democracy. For its own security, it must now widen the base of fascism and attack, piecemeal if possible, the more rational and humane system of life that still prevails in countries that have not submitted to the totalitarian yoke. This barbarism is not passive: it is militant: its first purpose is the systematic extermination of democracy. The present success of fascism in carrying through this policy, not merely within Germany and Italy, but in neighboring countries, radically changes the nature of the problem that confronts the American people. There is now no conceivable limit to fascist aggression until the world is made over into the fascist image. For the only security of fascism against the ever-rising forces of civilization is to reduce mankind as a whole to its own state of barbarism. In the face of this situation, a policy of passive defense, of watchful waiting, is a policy of submission.

4. THE CHALLENGE OF THE AMERICAN HERITAGE

We Americans live under the oldest written constitution in the world. We have a tradition of freedom, braced by the long

experience of the frontier, with its free land and its sturdy opportunities for the self-reliant man. This tradition is sanctified by daily habits of life that include every rank of American, no matter what his economic station, no matter what his religious or political opinions.

Despite occasional waves of irrationality, which existed even before the days of the Know-Nothings or the Ku Klux Klan, the dislike of servility and authoritarianism is deeply engrained: free speech, free government, free choice may on occasion be threatened by local reactionary minorities, but they are still precious to the common American who runs the farms and the factories of this country. This tradition is embedded in the protestantism and rationalism that formed the foundation of the original American ideology.

Every writer, every political leader who has left his impression on the American mind, has upheld this tradition: it is in Hawthorne as much as in Whitman; it is in plantation Jefferson as much as in frontier Jackson; it is in Melville as much as in John Dewey.

This American tradition carries with it the promise of a high civilization. It has fostered great human figures, the sweet austere humanity of an Emerson, the shrewd tender wisdom of a Lincoln: it is a tradition that is opposed to any fixed and final status, in knowledge, in belief, in doctrine, other than the belief that men themselves have individually and collectively the responsibility of guiding their own destiny, and working out their own salvation. Such a tradition is favorable to co-operative endeavors in art and science and government: for its disciplines must, in the nature of things, be self-imposed, and its synthesis must remain an open one, always subject to the correction of new truths, to the challenge of a higher morality. Our government has succeeded by the

pragmatic test: it has brought into a working communion vast millions of people, coming from diverse countries, bearing the most disparate national traditions: it has taught them to live in amity, and beneath all their national and regional and economic differences, to remember their common humanity.

Whatever the defects of American political life, whatever the blots on our system of law or our grossly imperfect economic organization, we still preserve in grand outlines the traditions of a free people. Such a system of government may temporarily lend itself to misrule or class exploitation; it may blunder and explore blind alleys: but it holds within itself the perpetual possibility of correcting its errors, of improving its methods, of recovering its human goals. Even now, though we are far from having distributed economic abundance, our fundamental traditions still keep alive the elementary sense of human self-respect. Every true American honors these traditions and knows they give shape to his character and are a source of his personal strength.

What we Americans need to be reminded of now is something different, though it springs out of this pride in our heritage; and that is, our way of life is if need be likewise worth dying for, so that our children and our children's children may continue to enjoy this heritage. In a world now being over-run by barbarians who are deeply and systematically inimical to our democracy, the choice offered us as a people is not a choice between peace and war: it is a choice between defending our institutions or of submitting to a servile and barbarous tradition that is repugnant to all that we hold dear. The risks of death are already upon us: the risk of physical death, the far worse risk of moral death. Fascism has declared war on our institutions. We have a few months, at most a few years, to decide what the answer of free men must be.]

5. THE HARD CHOICE BEFORE US

What is needed to prevent the flames of fascist ideology from searing the world is to start a backfire. We must be ready to meet the irrational demands and claims of the fascists with the only means their philosophy recognizes as valid: superior military strength, backed by a more concentrated moral purpose on behalf of the values of civilization. To think that civilization can be saved on cheaper terms is an error.

In the long run, fascism cannot compete with democracy or afford to risk its counter-challenge. Hence there is no conceivable limit to fascist aggression against democracy until the whole world is made over into fascism's own maniacal image. Reason may still emerge from this irrational world; civilization may still be rescued from those who wantonly practice decivilization. But these things will come to pass, not by vaguely wishing for them or by "trusting to time"; they will come only if we meet fascism with decisive force and fresh initiative—with a plan and a program that embody the long hopes of humanity.*

Do not imagine that fascism will sweep over the world without touching America. Every country contains morbid elements that will gladly harbor this disease, just as every individual has weaknesses which may, if uncorrected by

* In fighting the second World War the United States concentrated on technical facility and military strength, to the neglect of moral and political purposes. Since the generation that fought it had been stripped of its heritage of universal values by its leaders in literature and education, our ideological equipment was so much straw armor. The contrast here between Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt was markedly in the latter's disfavor. Lacking any well-formed purposes and goals, our people mistakenly thought that the war was over when the fighting had ceased: hence the demoralization that accompanied demobilization need hardly be wondered at.