

# Keep the Change

The zeal for improvement threatens old liberties.

By James A. Reed

THE PRESENT-DAY reformer supplants the ancient and foolish doctrine, “Everything that is, is right,” with the still more foolish doctrine, “Everything that is, is wrong.” In a world which an intelligent and patriotic ancestry lovingly handed over to us in a reasonably well-ordered condition, he runs amok. Our inherited liberties, guaranteed by a Constitution and code of laws, together forming a homogeneous system, are recklessly attacked until the whole structure is seriously imperiled.

The modern reformer insists upon substituting statutory commands for ethical precepts and official surveillance for the restraints of morality. He undertakes to force the acceptance of his peculiar doctrines by penalty of fine and imprisonment. The old and true concept of freedom embraced the right of the citizen to choose his own religion, think his own thoughts, indulge his own habits, and live his life without interference by the state, save that he should not trespass upon the rights of others. For this condition of personal freedom and responsibility, the reformer proposes to substitute legal regulations, which, like a web of steel, shall encompass the citizen from birth to death. Man will live and die the slave of the majority which enacts the laws.

Natural rights may be as effectively destroyed by the laws of a republic as by the decrees of a despot. The doctrine that the world can be made virtuous and happy by substituting for the natural right of choice, with responsibility, the prohibitions and regulations of law is as old as human tyranny. It has been resorted to in every age and has uniformly failed. It

established the Inquisition and equipped it with instruments of torture. It forbade freedom of thought, of speech, and of the press. It compelled men to embrace certain creeds upon pain of death, ordered people to attend particular churches or suffer barbaric penalties. It regulated the habits of the people in the minutest detail. And occasionally, as every school-boy knows, it burned a witch.

The modern intolerant differs from his ancient prototype only in degree. Alike they have resorted to the logic of brute force. In the past, the penalty was pillory and scaffold; today it is fine and imprisonment. Legal restrictions are to take the place of ethical instruction, parental precepts, and enlightened reasoning. The statutory reformer nominates himself as doctor-general of public morals and insists that all mankind shall swallow his physic.

Let it be admitted that this statutory moralist is generally honest and in earnest. Unfortunately, honesty of opinion and earnestness of purpose are only too frequently accompanied by gross ignorance. Zeal, honesty, and ignorance in combination always produce intolerance, and intolerance increases to fanaticism, eager to destroy all the natural liberties of men if thereby the zealot's ends may be gained. Regardless of the university degrees he has attained, the fanatic is invariably ignorant. Tolerance is the offspring of intelligence. The intelligent man knows he may be mistaken. The ignorant man is certain he is right. Give me the radius of a man's intelligence, and I will describe the circumference of his tolerance.

Regardless of divergent creeds and cults, modern reformers all agree:

1. That our plan of government has not worked with perfection and that therefore the plan ought to be destroyed;
2. That all who oppose them are “in league with hell and have made a covenant with death”;
3. That they possess an infallible specific which every human being should be by law compelled to swallow, and that, thereupon, evil will disappear, sorrow will cease, men and women will be transformed into statutory angels, and “everything will be lovely and the goose hang high”—particularly if the reformer succeeds somehow or other in grabbing a lucrative job.

Accordingly, the agitation begins, proselyting proceeds, the morons are mustered. All the while numerous hired males and females, masquerading as disinterested representatives of morals, pull the strings and gather in the shekels. The political candidate, observing the gathering storm, promptly trims his little sail to catch the wind and scuds before it for the port of office. Commonly, he pledges himself in advance. Wherefore, he arrives in Washington hog-tied beyond squealing.

Of course, no plan of government ever has been or ever will be absolutely perfect; even if perfect, its administration would necessarily be faulty. Defective administration is inseparable from the frailty, dishonesty, and ignorance of human agents. What is needed is better execution of the law, not the destruction of the governmental plan. Clearly, the

new-hatched schemes must be enforced by men as inefficient or as corrupt as those embarrassing the present system. Accordingly, thoughtful and patriotic men agree that no principle of our government should be abandoned or changed, except for grave reasons, and then only when there is approximate certainty that the proposed substitute will not only remedy the evils that now exist, but will not bring worse and greater ones in its wake.

These considerations, however, do not appeal to the modern reformer. Like the patent-medicine quack he proclaims himself the master of human ills and drives straight on. All too often the public is convinced. More frequently, an active and organized minority is converted, and timorous congressmen, although unconvinced, hunt cover. Thus, half-baked schemes, commonly promoted by intolerants, mountebanks, and dreamers, are put upon the nation. And before the great, good-natured public is aware, it has been placed in leading strings, its rights circumscribed and its natural privileges abolished. More appalling is the fact that little by little, the great edifice erected by the toil and wisdom of the past is being defaced and its very foundations undermined.

The statutory reformer has a single and invariable method of procedure. He magnifies the wickedness and sufferings of mankind and attributes them all to the object of his special malediction. Witness the Prohibition propaganda. Its literature blazed with assertions that all vice, crime, poverty, and human agony were directly chargeable to the Rum Fiend. He was the devil incarnate who produced virginal incontinence, marital infelicity, theft, arson, rape, robbery and murder. He it was who filled the penitentiaries with pitiable creatures who otherwise would have stood resplendent as pillars of the state and ornaments of society.

The reformer cried aloud, "Amend the

Constitution, pass the Volstead statute and in the twinkling of an eye evil will vanish! Close the saloons and the jails will empty themselves; cries of poverty will be turned to songs of joy; childish wailings to melodious laughter; drunken blows to fond caresses; and hatred be transmuted into tenderest love. Highwaymen will give up their bludgeons and become ministers of justice and so on, ad infinitum, ad nauseam.

The legal revolution occurred, but the moral miracle did not come off according to schedule. Men still go philandering, and sometimes maidens listen to their amorous wooings. The fires were put out in the furnaces of the distilleries but were lighted under ten thousand illicit stills. Moonshining became a profitable trade, bootlegging a dignified profession, rum-running a romantic calling.

A vast multitude of men who formerly revered the law avidly conspire for its breach. The leprosy of hypocrisy has become epidemic. Half-drunken legislators enact dry laws and celebrate the achievement in moonshine. Police officers, sheriffs, constables, and bailiffs, their breaths reeking with rot-gut, drag to jail an occasional victim selected as a sacrifice to public clamor.

Meanwhile the Prohibition force revels in blackmail, subornation, venal immunities, treachery, fraud and crime promotion, revolting practices inseparable from the spy system. Tyrannous acts are of hourly occurrence. In violation of the Constitution, the homes, the business houses, baggage, vehicles, and persons of citizens are indiscriminately seized and searched.

Washington has become the universal Mecca of human freaks. Protagonists of vagaries gravitate by all known routes, some by election, some by appointment, and some by "divine command." The great majority, however, merely follow noses that itch for the business of others. There they bed and breed. They haunt

the corridors of the public buildings, crowd into the offices of congressmen, and insist upon displaying their fantastic and sometimes loathsome wares. Consumed by passion for experimentation, they regard the public corpus as a legitimate subject for ceaseless exploratory operations and clinical vivisection.

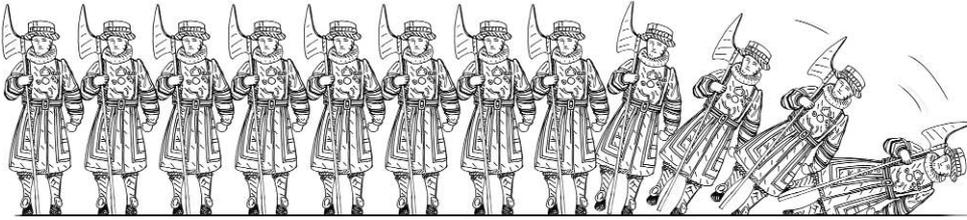
To this array of freaks, the Constitution is not a bulwark of liberty but a shackle upon progress which they hold in contemptuous disregard. Congress itself is full of men who do not think of the Constitution save as an obstacle to their desires. They study it only to devise some plan for its circumvention. There is no subterfuge they will not employ, no deceit to which they will not resort, if peradventure the limitations imposed by the Constitution may be cheated. The Capitol is choked with the advocates of change.

What shall the end be? Will that race of men who for a thousand years have asserted the "right of castle," rejected governmental interference in domestic affairs, proclaimed the right of free man to regulate his personal habits and to rear and govern his children in accordance with the law of conscience and of love, now become subject to a self-imposed statutory tyranny which from birth to death interferes in the smallest concerns of life?

I doubt not these statutory bonds will be eventually broken. The right of the free man to live his own life, limited only by the inhibition of non-infringement on the rights of others, will again be asserted. But before that day arrives, will the splendid symmetry of our governmental structure have been destroyed? ■

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*James Reed (1861-1944) served three terms as a Democratic senator from Missouri. This essay is adapted from a piece that originally appeared in H.L. Mencken's American Mercury in May 1925.*



# Outclassed

You may have been too occupied with the ongoing Tiger Woods scandal to notice, but here in Britain, class war was declared at the beginning of December. The

Sarajevo moment came when Gordon Brown accused David Cameron of dreaming up his inheritance policy “on the playing fields of Eton.” Cameron (Eton and Oxford) mobilized his forces for the coming struggle. If Brown wanted to fight a class war, he said, his chin wobbling slightly, bring it on. “It’s a petty, spiteful, stupid thing to do, but if that’s what they want to do, you know, go ahead.” Fer sure, fer sure. You know, like totally.

This is a phony war if ever there was one. Even if Labour was sending out dog whistles to the socially disadvantaged, the Tory policy of raising the inheritance tax threshold was not about class but about money. England is no longer a class act. There are probably not enough people of class left in this country to form a croquet league, let alone wage a class war. Some of the old class labels are still used, to be sure, and class resentment is not uncommon, but the hierarchical structures that class once proclaimed, and the deference it once inspired, have largely disappeared. It seems a bit of a pity, really.

When I was a boy, there were at least eight classes: the lower working class (or “undeserving poor”), the working class, the upper working class, the lower middle class, the middle middle class, the upper middle class, the upper class, and the aristocracy. There may even have been a lower upper class. By and large, the country was run by the upper middle classes, most of whom had been educated at public (i.e., private) school,

very often at Eton. Money was not then the measure of all things. Those of good birth were sometimes poor, and their needs were attended to by such charities as the Distressed Gentlemen’s Aid Association.

Even children were class-conscious in those days, sometimes keenly so. The first question I was asked at my public school was “Reid, are you U or non-U?” I later discovered that U stood for “upper class” and non-U for dead common and that the terms had recently (1954) been made popular by Nancy Mitford, who was about as U as it was possible to get.

In the Fifties, social standing depended not just on accent but on vocabulary. Here are some non-U words with their U equivalents in brackets: toilet (loo or lavatory), pardon? (what?), perfume (scent), dessert (pudding), glasses (spectacles). “Pleased to meet you” was non-U; “How do you do?” was U. “How do you do?” is not a question that should be answered. You don’t say, “I’m good, thanks. How ’bout you?” The proper response is, “How do you do?” You might think that such an exchange would inevitably end in the equivalent of a Japanese bowing competition, but it does not, at least if you are well-bred.

My mother, being a bit class conscious, would beat me senseless if ever I said “toilet.” And it wasn’t just my own dear mother or my generation. Thirty years later others had the same obsessions. In her 1981 book *Class*, celebrity writer Jilly Cooper confessed, “I once

heard my son regaling his friends: ‘Mummy says that ‘pardon’ is a much worse word than ‘f--.’”

Class barriers were weakened during World War II and began to tumble during the socialist Sixties, but it took a Conservative—Margaret Thatcher—to knock Britain into something closely resembling a meritocracy. Daughter of a provincial shopkeeper (lower middle class by Mitford standards), she was almost as wary of Tory toffs as she was of the undeserving poor. Under her, the Conservative Party became the party of aspiration and social mobility.

Such is the egalitarian mood now, such the inverse snobbery, that men seeking high office sometimes conceal their privileged backgrounds. In their potted biographies on the Conservative Party website, neither Cameron nor his policy review chief, Oliver Letwin—“Oliver is a passionate champion of progressive social reform”—admits to having been at Eton, though check out Liam Fox, shadow defense secretary, and in the first paragraph you will see that he went to his local comprehensive school (and doesn’t care who knows it).

What a dismal thought it is that Conservatives should have helped lay the yoke of egalitarianism on the British neck. I would suggest that the special relationship has not served us well here. “Elite” was a dirty word among the American conservatives with whom Mrs. Thatcher liked to do business, and it is now a dirty word here, too. What’s that about? If conservatives won’t defend the elites, who will? Once you get rid of your elites, you get Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin, and we get (maybe) a Prime Minister called Dave. A victory for conservatism? Get out of here. ■