

The American Cause

CHAPTER 1

IGNORANCE—A DANGEROUS LUXURY

This little book is a statement of the moral and social principles that the American nation upholds in our time of troubles. It is not a collection of slogans, nor yet a history of American politics. Intended to be an honest description of the beliefs we Americans live by, *The American Cause* is a brief effort to refresh Americans' minds.

Many Americans are badly prepared for their task of defending their own convictions and interests and institutions against the grim threat of armed ideology. The propaganda of radical ideologues sometimes confuses and weakens the will of well-intentioned Americans who lack any clear understanding of their own nation's first principles. And in our age, good-natured ignorance is a luxury none of us can afford.

THE MEANING OF IDEOLOGY

Our book is intended for the general reader. We try not to take sides concerning religious and political questions which are in dispute in America, but endeavor to state as simply as we can those great convictions upon which nearly all Americans seem to be agreed: to which most Americans agree, by their daily acceptance of these principles as rules of life and politics, even if they themselves cannot easily put their convictions into words. This book does not provide an American "ideology." The word ideology means political fanaticism, a body of beliefs alleged to point the way to a perfect society. Most Americans, this author included, are not political fanatics. But this book does provide, we trust, a concise statement of the beliefs that secure our order, our justice, and our freedom.

When, in the Second World War, our troops landed in North Africa, the French were astonished at how politically naïve American soldiers seemed. For most Frenchmen are passionately interested in political notions; while most Americans—like most English people—are not. This lack of interest in abstract politics is not always a harmful thing. One reason that the Americans, like the English, do not spend much time arguing over theories of politics is that for a very great while nearly all of us have been contented with our society and our form of government. We have not been revolutionaries since 1776 because we have felt that we have enjoyed as good a society as any people reasonably can hope for.

But nowadays, if we mean to defend against our enemies all the good things in our society, we need to study and to think. We are terribly threatened by relentless opponents. We do not need to invent some new theory of human nature and politics; but we do need, urgently, to recall to our minds the sound convictions that have sustained our civilization and our nation. The revolutionaries, no matter what resources they may have, cannot defeat us if we are strong in our own principles. But if we seem to the rest of the world to stand for nothing; and if we ourselves are ignorant of those ideas and institutions which nurture our culture and our political liberty—why, then we will fall, no matter how great our industrial productivity is, and no matter how many divisions we equip, and no matter what ingenious new weapons we devise.

Fanatic ideologues in our time have drawn their strength from faith in their ideas, evil though most of their ideas have been. When revolutionaries willing to lay down their life for their movement have more faith in their ideology than we have in our ancient principles, and when anti-American ideologues on college campuses can bewilder even American university students by their arguments, then our American cause is in peril.

IDEOLOGY AND IGNORANCE

It is doubtful whether the great majority of American citizens are possessed of any clear understanding of those differences of principle which distinguish their society from that of their adversaries. And this is a perilous condition. There is small danger that the majority of Americans ever will embrace a radical anti-American ideology actively. But there is considerable danger that the majority of Americans may fail to oppose such movements intelligently. It is not required that radical doctrines be accepted with enthusiasm; rather, such nostrums flourish upon the indifference and ignorance of the majority.

We need badly some millions more of Americans who are hard to beat. Our immediate task, it seems, is to re-affirm the faith that has been our nation's. Nowadays we Americans—as Edmund Burke said of Englishmen in the time of the French Revolution—“are combating an armed doctrine.” Not so long ago, the armed and fierce doctrine against which we fought was Soviet Communism; before that, it was Nazism; in the future, it may be some fresh fanatic challenge to the things we love. Our American principles, we think, will stand the test of such a ferocious assault—if only we know those principles. A fanatic armed doctrine can be resisted only by a strong body of sound principles.

Demosthenes, the great Athenian patriot, cried out to his countrymen when they seemed too confused and divided to stand against the tyranny of Macedonia: “In God's name, I beg of you to think.” For a long while, most Athenians ridiculed Demosthenes' entreaty: Macedonia was a great way distant, and there was plenty of time. Only at the eleventh hour did the Athenians perceive the truth of his exhortations. And that eleventh hour was too late. So it may be with Americans today. If we are too indolent to think, we might as well surrender to our enemies tomorrow. This small book, despite all its limitations, possibly may encourage some thought.