

The Commoner.

Commercial Value of Ideas in Politics.

Hearst's Chicago American prints the following extract from an oration delivered by ex-Attorney General Wayne MacVeagh before the Harvard chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa society. If Mr. MacVeagh were not known to be a republican, one would suspect him of being not only a democrat, but what the republicans call a demagogue and a disturber of the peace. He says:

While we must, of course, always insist upon the one vital distinction between true and false American patriotism, recognizing only as true that which possesses the ethical spirit, and rejecting as false that which does not possess it, we must also recognize that such a subject can be properly discussed only with that liberal and catholic feeling which makes the amplest allowances for difference of opinion.

There is no reason why we should not cheerfully admit that the controlling consideration in the immediate present is that of money.

Assuming, therefore, that we must deal with conditions as they exist, I have thought it might be useful to call the attention of our men of business to the commercial value of ethical ideals in American politics.

If it is possible to satisfy them that the cherishing of such ideals may be of pecuniary advantage—may be, in truth, treated as a commercial asset—they may appreciate the wisdom of ceasing their efforts to destroy them, and may be persuaded to help in the good work of maintaining them and of extending their beneficent influence.

It is difficult to understand why the free government under which we are privileged to live especially needs the influence of ethical ideals in the conduct of life, or why we may possibly incur danger if we are without the protecting and conservative influence of such ideals.

Under whatever disguises, called by whatever names, inheriting or seizing whatever partisan organizations, the alignment of the two great political divisions of American voters, who will sooner or later struggle against each other for the possession of the government, will inevitably be upon the basis of the contented and the discontented.

The party of the contented will be ranged under one banner, and the party of the discontented will be ranged under the other, and that alignment will steadily develop increasing sharpness of division until the party of the discontented, being the majority, has obtained the control of the government, to which, under our system, they are entitled; and then they will be sure to remodel the present system for the distribution of wealth, unless we have previously done so, upon bases wiser and more equitable than those now existing.

The one party will be, under whatever name, the party of capital; and the other party will be, under whatever name, the party of labor.

My purpose, therefore, is to point out, without the slightest bitterness, to the members of the contented class, the commercial value of ethical ideals as the safest source of the political aspirations of the majority of our people, and the most conservative influence in our national life, and also to point out to them the grave dangers from a business standpoint, in these days of possible conflict between capital and labor, of continuing to substitute money for morals as the permanent and controlling force in American politics.

The first ethical ideals which it seems to me it would be wise for us, even from the point of view of the stock exchanges, to guard most zealously just now, is the ideal condition of society with which the late President McKinley closed his congratulations upon the opening of the exposition at Buffalo—that of peace on earth and good will to men.

If fighting and killing are to be encouraged, if those who indulge in them are to be especially honored, and if oppression of the weak is to be cherished, it will be difficult to prevent the class of the discontented from familiarizing themselves too thoroughly with fighting and killing, and from learning to cherish in their hearts a desire to oppress their weaker but more wealthy fellow-citizens.

It is quite possible there may also be great commercial value for us at the present time in the ethical ideal that all men are born equal and equally entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

I am well aware that it is supposed exigencies now exist which require us to abandon the doctrine of equality we inherited.

We are told that the exigencies of modern business and modern trade require a wholly different ideal to be set before the new century; that

our personal duty is to conquer any weaker people whose territory we covet, and to subject them to such government as in our opinion will best promote our profit and their welfare.

There is still another ethical ideal which may soon prove to be of very great commercial value in American politics—the ideal of the citizen, whether in or out of office, exhibiting moral courage in dealing with important public questions.

It is perhaps inevitable, but it is none the less to be regretted, that a distinct lowering of moral standards should follow a state of war, inducing us to cherish the delusion that if we talk loudly enough and boast foolishly enough of our physical prowess by sea and land, and give our time and thought only to warlike actions and preparations, as we have been doing for the last three years, all serious moral and domestic questions will somehow settle themselves.

Such a delusion is equally childish and cowardly, and it is only necessary to glance at such questions to discover that instead of settling themselves they are daily growing in gravity.

As one example, take our attitude toward the corrupt use of money in our elections and in our representative bodies. Even the dullest intelligence must see that if we continue to destroy, as for some time past we have been destroying, the belief of the majority of our fellow-citizens that elections are honestly conducted and laws are honestly made, we are destroying the best possible basis for the security of private property; for there can be no reverence for law where laws and law-makers are bought with money, and I fear we are rapidly destroying the possibility of such reverence in the minds of the masses of our countrymen.

Upon the ground of expediency alone, regarding it only as an element in our commercial expansion, in our growth of trade, in our increase of wealth, in the prosperity of our stock exchanges—even from this standpoint, it is assuredly great practical folly to destroy the ethical ideal of law, as we are striving so earnestly to do.

There is another very grave problem which we are also refusing to consider, and by which re-

fusal the ethical ideal of law is also being destroyed.

It is the problem presented by our negro population, now approaching ten millions of souls.

All of us, whether in public office or in private station, now concur in trying to ignore the existence of any such problem at our doors, while we indulge in self-congratulations about the blessings we are carrying to another ten millions of dark-skinned races in far-distant lands.

At present the condition of the whole subject is lawlessness, and such a condition is disgraceful to us all and is fraught with the serious dangers which lawlessness always brings in its train—as the exact opposite of the ethical ideal of law.

Indeed, the ethical ideal of the legislator and the citizen, as men zealous to know their public duty and brave enough to do it, is also rapidly being destroyed by our failing to even attempt to deal seriously and adequately with many other problems now imperatively demanding our attention.

It certainly would tend to make private property far more secure in America if the less fortunate majority of our population saw us of the more fortunate minority giving courage and time and thought to efforts to solve these problems and others like them, and thereby to lessen some of the evils which in many cases bear so heavily and so unjustly upon the poor.

Indeed, the influence of ethical ideals upon American democracy ought to be considered of value if only because the cultivation of such ideals will inevitably tend to make more really patriotic all classes of our countrymen, for such ideals lift us all above the unsatisfied standards of public duty with which we are vainly trying to content ourselves.

Lieutenant Louis Hamilton, of the Fourteenth United States infantry, commanded the special guard of honor at the Buffalo city hall and on the train which carried the remains of President McKinley to Washington. He is the great-grandson of Alexander Hamilton.



The above cartoon, reproduced by courtesy of the St. Paul (Minn.) Globe, appeared in that paper recently as an illustration of the truth of a Commoner editorial to the effect that abuse does not injure the man or party made the subject of the attack.