

THE ETHICAL BASIS OF CIVIL SERVICE REFORM.

[Written for THE CONSERVATIVE by H. C. Newcomb.]

The term "civil service reform" has emerged from the discussion of civil service methods that was forced upon the people by the evils resulting from the developments of the spoils system, particularly in connection with the Federal government, with a definite, historical meaning that is more restricted than the words might otherwise imply.

In its historical sense the term refers to a systematic attempt to secure the greatest possible beneficial return to the public for the expenditure involved in the maintenance of its civil establishment. The element of competition is necessarily implied as it is whenever personal services are purchased by private employers. To secure the utmost practicable return the public must employ the best qualified man whose services can be had for the salary offered and not the man who is merely qualified. Similarly the qualifications regarded in making selections for public employment must relate to the duties to be performed and all conflicting considerations must be rigidly excluded. The implication in favor of making tenure of office solely dependent upon the continuance of efficiency is equally unquestionable.

It will be observed that while the attempt to secure full return for the expenditure for civil service must be "systematic," no particular system is indicated. If the name "civil service reform" is assumed by anything that does not fill the requirements enumerated it is without justification and should not be permitted to mislead anyone. Therefore, while none will forget the present existence of a more or less completely elaborated system it will not be necessary or desirable to enter into any discussion of the law and regulations now in effect or to consider the wisdom or integrity of their administration. At the proper time there will be much to say in behalf of the present law and the manner of its execution while whatever defects can be discovered in either will be found to be considerably extenuated by the tentative character of the statute and the political obstacles to its execution. The duties imposed upon the Civil Service commission are not those most essential to the enforcement of the law and if we except that body and its employees the civil service law has mainly been administered by its enemies. To continue these observations would, however, lead us far from our consideration of the ethical principles which are the basis of genuine civil service reform.

Thou Shalt Not Steal.

These principles are epitomized in the command: "Thou shalt not steal."

"Thou shalt not steal" opportunity. The man who will undertake to educate

his faculties, to cultivate his mind, and train his physical powers, in order to follow a particular career, who in so doing joins energy with patience, persistence with integrity, and intelligence with the primary and fundamental requisites of mind and body should be welcomed to that career by society which he will best serve through its adoption.

It is clear that in following this policy society secures its own economic interests while permitting the largest freedom in the development of the individual and offering to the latter the maximum of mental satisfaction and of physical well-being. The attractions of the civil service are not numerous, its rewards are grudgingly given and infrequent, its disadvantages apparent and substantial, yet there are persons of ability and integrity to whom its drawbacks seem less than its compensations. Exclude the baneful effects of spoils-mongering and this class will be more numerous and will contain proportionally more persons of superior intelligence. The republican national convention of 1876 declared in favor of this principle and incorporated in its platform a resolution recognizing "the right of all citizens" regardless of their political opinions and affiliations "to share in the honor of rendering faithful service to the country." This right is denied by the spoils system which limits appointments to those who through personal or political services can obtain the favor of those who can influence the place-distributing power. Equality of opportunity is thus denied in favor of a small faction of partisans constituting but an insignificant fraction of the party temporarily in power. It is unnecessary to describe at length the rigor with which this limitation is enforced or the hopelessness of the candidacy of the most honest, capable, and fittest applicant, who, no matter how earnestly he has striven to advance the cause that has been successful at the polls, has been so unfortunate as to incur the personal dislike of the senators or representatives from his state, or who finds that the incompetent, or possibly the vicious relative of some one of political or perhaps of merely social prominence, is a rival candidate. There is no greater fallacy than that involved in the notion that the spoils system continuously or consistently imposes a partisan test for entrance to the civil service. To do so would be bad enough but what is done is inexpressibly less desirable. Places are treated as personal perquisites, the right to distribute them as a valuable addition to the emoluments of high official position or prominent political standing, and it is usually exercised with a view to the maintenance of the authority of the dominant individual, to reward his friends or placate his ene-

mies; rarely to advance the larger interests of the party.

Favors granted to members of the party not in power illustrate this phase. Every public office has its quota of useless individuals who, secure throughout all political changes in the incumbency of positions in which they are incapable of rendering valuable services, owe their continuance in office to the recognition of such claims by officials who probably believe that in the mutations of politics their complacency may be reciprocated. It was declared in an official report that under this system:

* * * "Persons of influence systematically foisted their incompetent and unfortunate relatives upon the public service. Pressure, menace, selfish influence, and sympathy were used to overcome the scruples of a reluctant officer and to gain a government salary for an unsuccessful cousin or an unemployed friend. * * * The spoils system was tending more and more to convert the departments into something like asylums for incompetents."

Garfield's Opinion.

President Garfield, who became a martyr to a disappointed officeseeker, said:

"The present system * * * degrades the civil service; it repels from the service those high and manly qualities which are so essential to a pure and efficient administration, and finally it debauches the public mind by holding up public office as the reward of mere party zeal."

On the other hand, the merit system, which it is the aim of the civil service reform to establish, opens wide the door of opportunity to every citizen who will prepare himself to excel as a civil servant and will consent to demonstrate that he has done so. What right has anyone who is unwilling to abide by such a test to receive a salary to which the poorest must contribute? What justification can be found for excluding anyone who can and will so demonstrate his superior qualifications? To do so is to rob the excluded individual of an opportunity and society of its right to the best attainable governmental administration. Those who despoil an individual of opportunities to which he is justly entitled steal rights that are much more fundamental than those of property.

"Thou shalt not steal" independence. Public office should not come as the grudging or as the generous gift of a patron; not, in the current phrase, as "patronage" but as the suitable recognition of pre-eminent fitness. Its emoluments should be the reasonable and just return for services faithfully and meritoriously performed and should neither exceed nor fall below the amount so determined. The public servant should, like the village black-