

leadership is derelict and popular understanding darkened, but its basic concept is sounder than the concept of dictatorship.

—GLENN FRANK.

PUBLIC CO-OPERATION AND THE MERIT SYSTEM

WHY for more than fifty years has a merit system of examinations for public employees been struggling for recognition? And why have only three out of forty-eight states made it the cornerstone of government by putting it into their constitutions where fickle legislatures cannot tamper with it?

The politicians, of course, have always found fault with examinations, for as far as the law has any teeth in it, it obstructs their spoils system. Under this system, no person need think of applying for any position unless he has good political backing, and (though no appointing officer will admit it) the place often goes to the man who has the strongest pull.

Until the depression came and the taxpayer's pocket nerve was hard hit, politicians continued in power because they gave jobs and favors with a lavish hand. They used the public money to pay these pet job holders, and defied the law which says all positions (except a very few that are policy forming) must be filled by competitive examinations. Thus the merit system is strangled between an apathetic or skeptical public and a group of greedy politicians.

Repeal Group Organized

Growing bolder during this public indifference and ignorance, the politicians have now started a national Civil Service Repeal Association. Here is what they say:

"This association affords the avenue for a return to the old order of individual merit, in the making of appointments. . . Civil Ser-

vice Commissions are costly and increase the cost of government. Such commissions should be abolished because they do not offer to the logical (sic!) candidate the means of appointment to the position he desires and which, it is known, he can fill efficiently.

"Civil Service prevents executives in public offices from appointing persons to deputyships who have helped (sic!) the political party in power.

"Civil Service examinations are costly and do not bring harmony (sic!) to any form of government, in addition to the high cost. Instead, it brings discord and unrest by failing to give to those persons qualified a position in some department of governmental activity.

"The Civil Service Repeal Association has been formed and will conduct a vigorous campaign for legal repeal (under initiative and referendum laws) of Civil Service laws throughout the country, starting in the state in which the association has its headquarters—Ohio."

What has brought this repeal association about? The leaders of the Democratic, Republican, and Socialist parties are each at the head of a lot of office seekers, no better than a pack of wolves. Many of these wolves are in sheep's clothing, having even fooled themselves into believing they were sheep, and some of them would not be such bad sheep if and only if they had something to eat. How can they help being hungry after starving in this depression?

Blames Early Training

But who let them grow up believing that the "public office" trough was their trough and to the victor belong the spoils? The answer is plain—a public school system which gives a one-year anemic course in civics and has failed to develop an alert public sentiment against attacks on the merit system. These civics courses give the student but a limited grasp of the mechanism and framework of government, perhaps a casual mention of the Civil Service

law, but no real enthusiasm for this law as the backbone of honest government. Why are these potential voters not told how the laws are twisted and turned to suit the tricks of scheming politicians? Why are they not told that the flouting of the merit system has made the spoils of office the main goal of elections at the expense of party principles?

Governor Lehman held the fort against bills to exempt employees from examinations. Judge Samuel Seabury has explicitly said "Laws cannot cure this evil and there is no panacea but public education." This is a terrible indictment of our public schools. Was there any uproar in the public schools and colleges or in the great public that was trained in these schools when Senators Nunan and Kleinfeld in the New York Legislature stabbed the merit system, and brought in bills exempting from examination the liquor control officers? Not a ripple. Yet Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson and many others expressly planned a new kind of public school education that should have raised such an uproar. They foresaw that this new democracy must have this perfectly new kind of public school.

Although the Fathers explicitly put citizenship first, the teachers forthwith started off on the wrong foot and have been unable to change step since. They fell into the old rut of European standards, syntax, cube root, and other frills, and the political bosses have had their own way. The founders planned that we should be wise to the tricks of politicians and be posted on current events, as Jefferson said: "To know what is going on, and to make, each, his part go on right."

Is there any mystery about the technique to be used by the schools in fitting future voters to do their part when they come to vote? Since Catherine Beecher and Bronson Alcott more than 100 years ago had some form of student government and merit

examinations, throwing responsibility on young folk as fast as their shoulders proved equal to it, substituting for teacher's favorites or teacher's pets tried and true student officers, these great principles of character development needed in a democracy though undisputed, have been more honored in the breach than in the observance. As former Superintendent William McAndrew says:

"Now, more than a century and a half after the promulgation of the principles of democracy, they have not got into the schoolmaster's blood. He is still fussing with pretty things, good enough in their way, such as the gentlemen and scholars of the days of Queen Anne used to put their tune to."

Student co-operation and practice in the merit system have no place under an old-fashioned martinet whose old-fashioned discipline crushes the individual. When European countries are taken as the model for both courses of study and discipline, we continue at cross purposes with the plans of the founders, and the inevitable follows, an indifferent and ignorant electorate.

Under some form of pupil co-operation the student should learn to elect their leaders and give merit-system examinations to their administrative officers. As Walter Millard and the National Municipal League lay it down, administrative officers should not be elected but should be chosen on a merit examination basis, and of course this should begin in the schools.

Forty years or more ago Dr. William McAndrew required a large high school class in civics to report daily on current events appearing in the press. This precisely fulfilled Jefferson's requirement to know what is going on, especially in local politics. A program of pupil co-operation is only half-hearted when this newspaper reading is omitted. Under the direction of an alert teacher, after several years' study of current events, the pupils get a definite

idea of what is going on in city, state and nation, with a fine ambition to clean up the political mess.

Before there was a merit system of examinations any decrepit old man, if he voted the straight ticket, might get a place as garbage collector, and if his heart or lungs gave way or he happened to lack an arm or a leg, he might still be a garbage collector, for he could be trusted to vote according to orders.

What has an officeholder's politics to do with his work? There is no Republican way of cleaning streets; no Democratic way of putting out a fire. There is only one best way, and that is to give the job to the man who has proved he can do it.

It is quite true that the public often distrusts examinations, and why not if, as the late Judge Ordway said, the commissioners are appointed and removed by the Governor or Mayor, and the commissioners' duty is to enforce the law against the very Governor or Mayor who appointed them? Judge Ordway believed that some day even the commissioners themselves must be subject to competitive examinations.

To meet this general distrust or apathy about examinations to determine merit I must as a former Civil Service Commissioner testify that the questions asked bear directly on the work to be done and really test the qualities needed for the place to be filled. The Public Works, Health, Police and all other departments are consulted to make sure of this. The applicant's character also is carefully checked up and all his former employers closely questioned. "Why did he leave? Do you want him back?" so that we know whether he is a man we can trust. Where necessary, practical tests are added to the written examinations. A highway engineer, after giving proof of technical knowledge, must build a section of a street under the supervision of expert engineers.

So also in promotion examinations for

those already in the service, a service rating or efficiency record is marked by an employee's immediate superior, and in his final rating this indicates his personal qualities which may not appear on the examination paper. Thus a nimble-witted "pen-and-ink" man who stands high on the mere answering of questions may find his rating much lowered because he lacks the essential personal qualities, co-operation, initiative, etc. If the public understood this, it would do much to inspire confidence.

When New York City took on the big job of building the Catskill Aqueduct (an engineering feat in the class of the Panama Canal), the cost ran into many millions, and hundreds of engineers and rod men had to be employed; too vital a job for political favorites. Examinations to determine merit were so carefully planned and well carried out that one of the ablest engineers in the country said his firm would not have known how to get as fine a set of men by the usual methods of selection.

Many times have I addressed clubs and groups on the merit system, and when I ask: "Are there any question?" up go several hands and one man says: "I came out top of the list, the commissioner called me up for a talk and that's the last I heard of it till I learned that the third on the list got the job. I was baffled. How could I believe the merit system was on the level?"

To restore confidence in the face of these hard facts I give you Mayor Gaynor's rule. It had become a custom for a department head to select any one of the three highest on the list, but the top man was so often passed over because, because, because!!! that Mayor Gaynor required every one of his twenty-three department heads to write him a letter telling why he passed over No. 1 on the list. During his entire four-year term of office he received not more than a dozen such letters.

All that part of the American government service which is outside of the merit

system may be counted upon to be comparatively inefficient. When the public is made to suffer because of arbitrary and excessive charges for gas or telephones or other public utilities, the suggestion is made that government ownership or government operation will afford the only possible relief. But one recoils from a remedy that inevitably calls to mind the inefficiency and expense of government work that is not under the merit system. We must have an organized public opinion demanding that the spoils system shall give way to the merit system before we extend government ownership or operation.

What can voters do to bring about more efficiency in public office? They can unite to put in office men and women who are pledged to the merit system and they can work to get the law imbedded in state constitutions where successive legislatures cannot tamper with it. There is nothing gloomy in the outlook. We simply have never fairly understood and squarely faced the situation.

RICHARD WELLING

BOOKS IN DIXIE

For anyone who has seen some of the fine libraries in the southern United States, both private collections in plantation mansions and public libraries in some of the thriving cities, it may come as a surprise to know that Dixie is short of books. Yet the American Library Association learned through a survey that two-thirds of the inhabitants of thirteen southern states have no local public library service of any kind. At the request of the Southeastern Library Association, an effort has been undertaken to provide such facilities.

The essential facts about the situation have been published under the title, "Books for the South," which survey the American Library Association is issuing; and a library conference of southern leaders was called recently at the University of North Carolina

at Chapel Hill. Representatives of religious, civic, educational, cultural and social service groups attended. The conference adopted a series of conclusions and recommendations. Their major conclusion was that in spite of current difficulties, Dixie could afford books—in fact, that it couldn't afford not to afford them! It recommended state-wide systems of public library service and urged concerted action to revise the states' fiscal policies so that funds may be made available for the purpose.

The conference reached this conclusion:

Free public library service is an indispensable part of a well-rounded program of community life. It strengthens and extends appreciation of the cultural and spiritual values of life; it diffuses information and ideas necessary to the present welfare and future advancement of the community; it offers to every citizen the means of self-education throughout life. Inasmuch as so many governmental units in every southern state are apparently unable at present to support public library service, it is reasonable to look to each state to organize, administer, and support a state-wide system of public library service.

The South's courageous insistence on maintaining and strengthening cultural and spiritual values in the midst of the economic crisis and at a time when numerous motion pictures and many of the radio programs are doing so much to lower standards is an example to the rest of the country. Nothing has yet been invented which quite takes the place of a good book.—*Christian Science Monitor*.

The rank and file of Americans believe in *rugged* individualism, as profoundly as did the pioneers, but they have had their fill of *ruthless* individualism. They will drive from power and destroy any political leadership that seeks to impose unnecessary and unworkable limitations upon the free exercise of rugged individualism, but they will submit to drastic limitations upon their freedom of enterprise before they will hand themselves back into the power of a ruthless individualism of business, industry, and finance.

GLENN FRANK