

The World We Want

by

Lyman Bryson

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Thirty years is a generation of men and it was a little more than thirty years ago that I graduated from this University just on the eve of the first great war. We did not then expect that the Victorian world could do anything but last forever. It is one of the most vivid recollections of most of us who were young at that time that we all hated the fixity of social forms, the rigid patterns and the narrow lines along which we thought our lives would have to go.

We were inspired to rebellion by the literature of that time not only in English but in the French and German that we tried to read. The poets and the playwrights were angry against a world that was too stable and too secure. This ought to make clear how much has changed in a generation but if you need other evidence I can tell you that an important officer of this University announced during my undergraduate days that the works of George Bernard Shaw were so disgraceful that they ought to be burned by the public hangman on the campus. Fortunately we did not have any public hangman in Ann Arbor and I doubt if that official's spleen would have carried him to such

Hitlerian destruction. Nevertheless, George Bernard Shaw who now seems so mild, was then a great revolutionary.

We loved rebels because we thought only rebellion and the break up of everything could give us room to breathe. The students that I have met in the last five or six years have been seeking something quite opposite. Many of them have declared that they would be happy only if they could find something stable to tie to. The chief cry of our time has been for a support and a protection not very clearly defined in the minds of most men but stirring very strongly in their hearts which we have generally called security.

The world that was too stable is gone, and we are still not content. We asked for adventure and we got adventure aplenty, and we cry now for that same stability that we did not like when we had it. I am well aware, of course, that there were great evils in America in 1910 and that they had to be remedied. But I am also aware now that most of those evils have not been cured and that new evils have been born. In the last decade we have tried to remedy economic injustice and we have had some success but, at the same time, and seemingly without any power on our part to stop it, another world war has begun. A war can scarcely be called a form of stability.

We are not merely perverse, however. Each generation wants something different from what the last thought necessary and that must be so because the world goes ahead by change. Young people have to lead in the succession of new desires that make for progress.

This is true in a democracy more than in any other form of government or social order because the chief aim of democracy is to rear men and women who love freedom and are willing to live in liberty and to use all their strength of mind and spirit that a free life demands. It was perhaps a mistake for the leaders of the American people in the war of 1917 to say that we wanted to make the world "safe for democracy" because democracy is not a doctrine of safety and no one can really be safe in a world in which he is free. Freedom requires a man to rely on his own ^{judgment} and take the consequences. Men who live by other systems are only required to obey. It is important to observe that in most other countries where men have not been free but have had instead to obey commands the consequences have not been happy. Free men make mistakes and suffer for them but slaves suffer hurts and humiliations that are harder to bear.

We did fight a war to make the world safe for democracy and that was not the kind of world we got. Now we are fighting another war and we hear on every side the assertion that the American people do not know what the war is about nor why they got into it. In fact, some of the men who have come back, early casualties of the fighting, say with some bitterness that most Americans do not even know that there is a war. Most of us know that we are in this war because of a long series of mistakes which began before most of you were born and for which the whole American people and all political parties and most of our vocal leaders of opinion carry some share of the blame.

It is quite possible that we could not have built a peaceful world out of what was left in 1918 but, whether we could have done so or not, there is little evidence that we tried very hard. I spent five years of my own life helping to patch up the ruins of Europe after 1918. I can remember coming back to America during the political campaign of 1920 and feeling shocked and humiliated by the fact that my own countrymen had already lost the crusading spirit with which they had entered the war. By that time they were ashamed of their ideal. We have no crusading spirit now and I think on the whole that is a great advantage because if we can fight and win a war in a mood of grim realism we may be more ready to take the grimly realistic measures that will be necessary afterward.

We do talk constantly about the failure of Wilson, and the League of Nations and the Versailles peace. Some of you probably do not realize that there was a deep and widespread determination then, just as there is now to end war forever. But it was quickly spent. We have a new war and for new reasons. Most of those reasons are inadequate. They help to explain but they do not justify. There is a reason, however, that lies at the base of our attitude toward all values. It is giving energy to the efforts of most of the men who are going into this thing with courage instead of mere blind hate. They ~~might~~ say, "We have been compelled to see that we live in a world in which the good will not always triumph unless it is backed by force. We know that men who believe in justice and freedom must be willing

to support their ideals by getting and exercising power."

It is surely not necessary to point out that this is not irresponsible power and that the men I am talking about do not share the somewhat sentimental dreams of a new American imperialism. Against any such ventures the oppressed peoples would surely find a way to resist. This mood of many men now is rather the result of an admission which comes very hard. We can scarcely bring ourselves to admit that you can not dodge responsibility and shrink from action and still expect the world to be a fit place for you and your children to live in. We have been hoping for a long time that peace and freedom came to men who felt nothing stronger than a wish for happiness. But now the far-seeing men of my own generation and the leaders of yours are actuated by a conviction that sterner desires are needed to cope with the truth.

This is deeply important in the history of American thought and American ideals . It is contrary to what has been implied in the teaching of many years. It is a fair criticism of our education, I think, to say that young men and women have not been told that they would have to make the world decent if they expected it to be that way.

We are not overlooking the danger that if we take power and use it in behalf of justice, we are in great danger of using it for a less noble purpose. That power corrupts has been observed by historians since the beginning of the record and there are examples to be seen all around us now. It is always true that power does not

make right and may endanger judgment. But it is also true -- and this is the hard lesson we are just beginning to learn -- that power is something which we must accept with all its dangers until we have created a world in which violence and injustice are impossible. ⁴ No such world as that is in the view of any prophet now. On the contrary, the world we can see ahead, not only for the length of your lives but perhaps even beyond, is full of suffering and despair. Men are going to be dangerous to each other for a long time to come. The countries of Europe are going to be cut up by civil wars, by bloody quarrels among their leaders and be hot with the fevers of revenge. ⁴ If we Americans are to be in that international world at all, if we do not withdraw again into a shell of isolation, we ~~will~~ ^{shall} have to help combat anarchy as we have fought against aggression. We shall suffer for it even if we do nothing about it. We cannot give our time and strength to solving our own heavy problems as long as Europe and Asia are in long drawn out guerrilla warfare. Unless peace and order can be established everywhere we will have to choose between anarchy at home or a degree of military preparation and control that will be almost as intolerable. What this amounts to is to say that your generation carries an enormous weight of responsibility put upon it by the long series of failures to which my generation contributed so much. You have not only a war to fight and win. You have also a world to straighten out. What disturbs some of us as we look forward is not

any fear that you lack the courage or the intelligence to do what needs to be done. But we do think that you have still only a very faint idea of the work ahead of you and we are not at all sure that you have been fairly trained for it.

We can best discuss it as your opportunity. Many of you seem to expect a fairly short and easy war and after that a reckless boom and then another shuddering collapse. Many elements in American life, not only young people but organized business and organized labor, now are afraid of what will come with the cease-firing command. War causes a feverish speeding up of production and a kind of prosperity. After that -- what ^{can} ~~will~~ we depend on? For these fears there seems to be no good reason unless we are too timid and too lacking in imagination to use the remedies that every economist can tell you about. But even so, even if the business and economic affairs of this country do undergo violent oscillations, there will still be jobs for many young Americans. Your time is ~~nevertheless~~ ^{still} going to be a time of opportunity. Actually the war may be long and hard. But the post-war period will open a field for all your talents and your heroic devotion. Nations which have been our friends, and our enemies too, will have seen their institutions and utilities, school systems, hospitals, railroads and homes all destroyed and those nations will want help. As I said a moment ago, I know what they look like. I know what people look like when they are only the remnants of families and their homes are only piles of brick and they have been sick and starved for months.

No country but ours can give the human and material help that will be needed. It will be for our own sake as well as theirs. The time is past when any part of civilization can be prosperous alone.

If I have said this much about power I must say even more about responsibility. This will not be imperialism and if it becomes that, in spirit or in the actual exploitation of helpless peoples, we might better not have it on our conscience. When I say that nations will have to be rebuilt socially as well as materially I want to make it quite clear that I do not mean that they are to be rebuilt in an American fashion. The imperialism of the spirit may be even worse than exploitation. This power that I am talking about, something which is not your heritage but something you can take for yourselves, is not only more beneficent than imperialism but far more understanding, far more sensitive to the real needs of other people, far more sympathetic to the wide diversity of human lives.

I am quite aware of the fact that there are practically no historical instances in which a nation, finding itself at the threshold of world wide influence as we find ourselves now, has said deliberately that it would assume the burden of helping the destroyed and vanquished peoples, that it would use its wealth and its technical knowledge for the benefit of the citizens of every nation, but that it would in thus spreading civilization not be guilty itself of any destruction or any impairment of the rights of men to be different -- to be themselves. In this we shall be pioneers.

There are, in fact, a number of centers in the United States today where groups of scholars and students, some of them members of the armed forces, are studying problems of post-war reconstruction. They are trying to get a quick training that will take the place of the

long professional preparation they should have had. Some of you may have been part of these classes. The work they are getting ready for must be done. It would be a great mistake, however, for us to think of this great post-war rebuilding period as only repair work. There are at least three other phases of it that might well fascinate and inspire ambitious youth. In the laboratories and industrial centers of our country there is now an accumulation of inventions and devices which must be applied. As soon as the war is over there will be an opportunity to use all of the engineering ability that this nation can produce to take full advantage of what we will already have in hand.

Secondly, as always happens, the discovery of new scientific laws and the invention of new scientific tools have opened up tremendous possibilities of future scientific pioneering. The time immediately after the war ought to be a period of greater scientific advance than any in the past.

And third, we have reached a time at which we should be scientific about human beings also. It is not too much to hope that the sciences that have to do with human relations will at last begin to catch up with the sciences by which we predict and control material things. All this is evidence that the people of America will have the means with which to build a new world civilization. No other generation of men has had an opportunity like this.

And now to answer the question with which I began, What kind of a world do we want? I can be very brief. We want a world in which these powers of reconstruction can be free to build for men not only in this

country but for human beings everywhere. We believe that peace and freedom are necessary for such a world and we believe that we can, with good conscience, use our power to bring decency and order, freedom and peace into the world and to give the forces of the future a chance.

I have said almost nothing about the great immediate test that you face. You know without my telling you that there is a rough time ahead, with deprivation for all of us and anxiety and, for some of you, wounds and death. There is nothing that anyone can say to you about that except to express deep faith in your courage and your determination to see it through. But it is necessary to insist that what you have to go through will be worth any necessary sacrifice because the world that comes after the war will be one in which those who believe in freedom will be allowed to live by it, and those who believe in violence will be restrained, and the spirit of greatness that is in you can bear fruit.