

The College Graduate and Public Life*

By The Honorable Theodore Roosevelt, Harvard 1880

There are always, in our national life, certain tendencies that give us ground for alarm, and certain others that give us ground for hope. Among the latter we must put the fact that there has undoubtedly seen a growing feeling among educated men that they are in honor bound to do their full share of the work of American public life.

We have in this country an equality of rights. It is the plain duty of every man to see that his rights are respected. That weak good nature which acquiesces in wrong-doing, whether from laziness, timidity, or indifference, is a very unwholesome quality. It should be second nature with every man to insist that he be given full justice. But if there is an equality of rights, there is an equality of duties. It is proper to demand more from the man with exceptional advantages than from the man without them. A heavy moral obligation rests upon the man of means and upon the man of education to do their full duty by their country. On no class does this obligation rest more heavily than upon the men with a collegiate education, the men who are graduates of our universities. Their education gives them no right to feel the least superiority over any of their fellow citizens; but it certainly ought to make them feel that they should stand foremost in the honorable effort to serve the whole public by doing their duty as Americans in the body politic. This obligation very possibly rests even more heavily upon the men of means; but of this it is not necessary now to speak. The men of mere wealth never can have and never should have the capacity for doing good work that is possessed by the men of exceptional mental training; but that they may become both a laughing stock and a menace to the community is made unpleasantly apparent by that portion of the New York business and social world which is most in evidence in the newspapers.

To the great body of men who have had exceptional advantages in the way of educational facilities we have a right, then, to look for good service to the state. The service may be rendered in many different ways. In a reasonable number of cases, the man may himself rise to high political position. That men actually do so rise is shown by the number of graduates of Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and our other universities who are now taking a prominent part in public life. These cases must necessarily, however, form but a small part of the whole. The enormous majority of our educated men have to make their own living, and are obliged to take up careers in which they must work heart and soul to succeed. Nevertheless, the man of business and the man of science, the doctor of divinity and the doctor of law, the architect, the engineer, and the writer, all alike owe a positive duty to the community, the neglect of which they cannot excuse on any plea of their private affairs. They are bound to follow understandingly the course of public events; they are bound to try to estimate and form judgment upon public men; and they are bound to act intelligently and effectively in support of the principles which they deem to be right and for the best interests of the country.

The most important thing for this class of educated men to realize is that they do not really form a class at all. I have used the word in default of another, but I have merely used it roughly to group together people who have unusual opportunities of a certain kind. A large number of the people to whom these opportunities are offered fail to take advantage of them, and a very much larger number of those to whom they have not seen offered succeed none the less in making them for themselves. An educated man must not go into politics as such; he must go in simply as an American; and when he is once in, he will speedily realize that he must work very hard indeed, or he will be upset by some other American, with no education at all, but with much natural capacity. His education ought to make him feel particularly ashamed of himself if he acts meanly or dishonorable, or in any way falls short of the ideal of good citizenship, and it ought to make him feel that he must show that he has profited by it; but it should certainly give him no feeling of superiority until by actual work he has shown that superiority. In other words, the educated man must realize that he is living in a democracy and under democratic conditions,

and that he is entitled to no more respect and consideration than he can win by actual performance.

This must be steadily kept in mind not only by educated men themselves, but particularly by the men who give the tone of our great educational institutions. These educational institutions, if they are to do their best work, must strain every effort to keep their life in touch with the life of the nation at the present day. This is necessary for the country, but it is very much more necessary for the educated men themselves. It is a misfortune for any land if its people of cultivation take little part in shaping its destiny; but the misfortune is far greater for the people of cultivation. The country has a right to demand the honest and efficient service of every man in it, but especially of every man who has had the advantage of rigid mental and moral training; the country is so much the poorer when any class of honest men fail to do their duty by it; but the loss to the class itself is immeasurable. If our educated men as a whole become incapable of playing their full part in our life, if they cease doing their share of the rough hard work which must be done, and grow to take a position of mere dilettantism in our public affairs, they will speedily sink in relation to their fellows who really do the work of governing, until they stand toward them as a cultivated, ineffective man with a taste for sacrifice stands toward a great artist. When once a body of citizens becomes thoroughly out of touch and out of temper with the national life, its usefulness is gone, and its power of leaving its mark on the time is gone also.

The first great lesson which the college graduate should learn is the lesson of work rather than of criticism. Criticism is necessary and useful -- it is often indispensable -- but it can never take the place of action, or be even a poor substitute for it. The function of the mere critic is of very subordinate usefulness. It is the doer of deeds who actually counts in the battle for life, and not the man who looks on and says how the fight ought to be fought, without himself sharing the stress and the danger.

There is, however, a need for proper critical work. Wrongs should be strenuously and fearlessly denounced; evil principles and evil men should be condemned. The politician who cheats or swindles, or the newspaper man who lies in any form, should be made to feel that he is an object of scorn for all honest men. We need fearless criticism; but we need that it should also be intelligent. At present, the man who is most apt to regard himself as an intelligent critic of our political affairs is often the man who knows nothing whatever about them. Criticism which is ignorant or prejudiced is a source of great harm to the nation; and where ignorant or prejudiced critics are themselves educated men, their attitude does real harm also to the class to which they belong.

The tone of a portion of the press of the country toward public men, and especially toward political opponents, is degrading, all forms of coarse and noisy slander being apparently considered legitimate weapons to employ against men of the opposite party or faction. Unfortunately, not a few of the journals that pride themselves upon being independent in politics, and the organs of cultivated men, betray the same characteristics in a less coarse but quite as noxious form. All these journals do great harm by accustoming good citizens to see their public men, good and bad, assailed indiscriminately as scoundrels. The effect is twofold: the citizen learning, on the one hand, to disbelieve any statement he sees in any newspaper, so that the attacks on evil lose their edge; and on the other gradually acquiring a deep rooted belief that all public men are more or less bad. In consequence, his political instinct becomes hopelessly slurred, and he grows unable to tell the good representative from the bad. The worst offence that can be committed against the Republic is the offence of the public man who betrays his trust; but second only to it comes the offence of the man who tries to persuade others that an honest and efficient public man is dishonest or unworthy. This is a wrong that can be committed in a great many different ways. Downright foul abuse may be, after all, less dangerous than incessant misstatements, sneers, and those half-truths that are the meanest lies.

For educated men of weak fibre there lies a real danger in that species of literary work which appeals to

their cultivated senses because of its scholarly and pleasant tone, but which enjoins as the proper attitude to assume in public life one of mere criticism and negation; which teaches the adoption toward public men and public affairs of that sneering tone which so surely denotes a mean and small mind. If a man does not have belief and enthusiasm, the chances are small indeed that he will ever do a man's work in the world; and the paper or the college which, by its general course, tends to eradicate this power of belief and enthusiasm, this desire for work, has rendered to the young men under its influence the worst service it could possibly render. Good can often be done by criticizing sharply and severely the wrong; but excessive indulgence in criticism is never anything but sad, and no amount of criticism can in any way take the place of active and zealous warfare for the right.

Again, there is a certain tendency in college life, a tendency encouraged by some of the very papers referred to, to make educated men shrink from contact with the rough people who do the world's work, and associate only with one another and with those who think as they do. This is a most dangerous tendency. It is very agreeable to deceive one's self into the belief that one is performing the whole duty of man by sitting at home in ease, doing nothing wrong, and confining one's participation in politics to conversations and meetings with men who have had the same training and look at things in the same way. It is always a temptation to do this, because those who do nothing else often speak as if in some way they deserved credit for their attitude, and as if they stood above their brethren who plough the rough fields. Moreover, many people whose political work is done more or less after this fashion are very noble and very sincere in their aims and aspirations, and are striving for what is best and most decent in public life.

Nevertheless, this is a snare round which it behooves every young man to walk carefully. Let him beware of associating only with the people of his own caste and of his own little ways of political thought. Let him learn that he must deal with the mass of men; that he must go out and stand shoulder to shoulder with his friends of every rank, and face to face with his foes of every rank, and must bear himself well in the hurly-burly. He must not be frightened by the many unpleasant features of the contest, and he must not expect to have it all his own way, or to accomplish too much. He will meet with checks and will make many mistakes; but if he perseveres, he will achieve a measure of success and will do a measure of good such as is never possible to the refined, cultivated, intellectual men who shrink aside from the actual fray.

Yet again, college men must learn to be as practical in politics as they would be in business or in law. It is surely unnecessary to say that by "practical" I do not mean anything that savors in the least of dishonesty. On the contrary, a college man is peculiarly bound to keep a high ideal and be true to it; but he must work in practical ways to try to realize this ideal, and must not refuse to do anything because he cannot get everything. One especially necessary thing is to know the facts by actual experience, and not to take refuge in mere theorizing. There are always a number of excellent and well meaning men whom we grow to regard with amused impatience because they waste all their energies on some visionary scheme which, even if it were not visionary, would be useless. When they come to deal with political questions, these men are apt to err from sheer lack of familiarity with the workings of our government. No man ever really learned from books how to manage a governmental system. Books are admirable adjuncts, and the statesman who has carefully studied them is far more apt to do good work than if he had not; but if he has never done anything but study books he will not be a statesman at all. Thus, every young politician should of course read the Federalist. It is the greatest book of the kind that has ever been written. Hamilton, Madison, and Jay would have been poorly equipped for writing it if they had not possessed an extensive acquaintance with literature, and in particular if they had not been careful students of political literature; but the great cause of the value of their writings lay in the fact that they knew by actual work and association what practical politics meant. They had helped to shape the political thought of the country, and to do its legislative and executive work, and so they were in a position to speak understandingly about it. For similar reasons, Mr. Bryce's American Commonwealth has a value possessed by no other book of the kind, largely because Mr. Bryce is himself an active member of

Parliament, a man of good standing and some leadership in his own party, and a practical politician. In the same way, a life of Washington by Cabot Lodge, a sketch of Lincoln by Carl Schurz, a biography of Pitt by Lord Rosensery, have an added value because of the writers' own work in politics.

It is always a pity to see men fritter away their energies on any pointless scheme; and unfortunately, a good many of our educated people when they come to deal with politics, do just such frittering. Take, for instance, the queer freak of arguing in favor of establishing what its advocates are pleased to call "responsible government" in our institutions, or in other words of grafting certain features of the English parliamentary system upon our own Presidential and Congressional system. This agitation was too largely deficient in body to enable it to last, and it has now, I think, died away; but at one time quite a number of our men who spoke of themselves as students of political history were engaged in treating this scheme as something serious. Few men who had ever taken an active part in politics or who had studied politics in the way that a doctor is expected to study surgery and medicine, so much as gave it a thought; but very intelligent men did, just because they were misdirecting their energies, and were wholly ignorant that they ought to know practically about a problem before they attempted its solution. The English, or so-called "responsible," theory of parliamentary government is one entirely incompatible with our own governmental institutions. It could not be put into operation here save by absolutely sweeping away the United States Constitution. Incidentally, I may say it would be to the last degree undesirable, if it were practicable. But this is not the point upon which I wish to dwell; the point is that it was wholly impracticable to put it into operation, and that an agitation favoring this kind of government was from its nature unintelligent. The people who wrote about it wasted their time, whereas they could have spent it to great advantage had they seriously studied our institutions and sought to devise practicable and desirable methods of increasing and centering genuine responsibility - for all thinking men agree that there is an undoubted need for a change in this direction; but of course much of the best work that has been done in the field of political study has been done by men who were not active politicians, though they were careful and painstaking students of the phenomena of politics. The sack numbers of our leading magazines afford proof of this. Certain of the governmental essays by such writers as Mr. Lawrence Lowell and Professor A.B. Hart, and especially such books as that on the Speakers' Powers and Duties, by Miss Follet, have been genuine and valuable contributions to our political thought. These essays have been studied carefully not only by scholars but by men engaged in practical politics, because they were written with good judgment and keen insight after careful investigation of the facts, and so deserved respectful attention.

It is a misfortune for any people when the paths of the practical and the theoretical politicians diverge so widely that they have no common standing ground. When the Greek thinkers began to devote their attention to purely visionary politics of the kind found in Plato's Republic, while the Greek practical politicians simply exploited the quarrelsome little commonwealths in their own interests, then the end of Greek liberty was at hand. No government that cannot command the respectful support of the best thinkers is in an entirely sound condition; but it is well to keep in mind the remark of Frederick the Great, that if he wished to punish a province, he would allow it to be governed by the philosophers. It is a great misfortune for the country when the practical politician and the doctrinaire have no point in common, but the misfortune is, if anything, greatest for the doctrinaire. The ideal to be set before the student of politics and the practical politician alike is the ideal of the Federalist. Each man should realize that he cannot do his best, either in the study of politics or in applied politics unless he has a working knowledge of both branches. A limited number of people can do good work by the careful study of governmental institutions, but they can do it only if they have themselves a practical knowledge of the workings of these institutions. A very large number of people, on the other hand, may do excellent work in politics without much theoretic knowledge of the subject; but without this knowledge they cannot rise to the highest rank, while in any rank their capacity to do good work will be immensely increased if they have such knowledge.

There are certain other qualities, about which it is hardly necessary to speak. If an educated man is not heartily American in instinct and feeling and taste and sympathy, he will amount to nothing in our public life. Patriotism, love of country, and pride in the flag which symbolizes country may be feelings which the race will at some period outgrow, but at present they are very real and strong, and the man who lacks them is a useless creature, a mere encumbrance to the land.

A man of sound political instincts can no more subscribe to the doctrine of absolute independence of party on the one hand than to that of unquestioning party allegiance on the other. No man can accomplish much unless he works in an organization with others, and this organization, no matter how temporary, is a party for the time being. But that man is a dangerous citizen who so far mistakes means for ends as to become servile in his devotion to his party, and afraid to leave it when the party goes wrong. To defy either independence or party allegiance merely as such is a little absurd. It depends entirely upon the motive, the purpose, the result. For the last two years, the Senator who, beyond all his colleagues in the United States Senate, has shown himself independent of party ties is the very man to whom the leading champions of independence in politics most strenuously object. The truth is, simply, that there are times when it may be the duty of a man to break with his party, and there are other times when it may be his duty to stand by his party, even though, on some points, he thinks that party wrong; he must be prepared to leave it when necessary, and he must not sacrifice his influence by leaving it unless it is necessary. If we had no party allegiance, our politics would become mere windy anarchy, and, under present conditions, our government could hardly continue at all. If we had no independence, we should always be running the risk of the most degraded kind of despotism - the despotism of the party boss and the party machine.

It is just the same way about compromises. Occasionally one hears some well-meaning person say to another, apparently in praise, that he is "never willing to compromise." It is a mere truism to say that, in politics, there has to be one continual compromise. Of course now and then questions arise upon which a compromise is inadmissible. There could be no compromise with secession, and there was none. There should be no avoidable compromise about any great moral question. But only a very few great reforms or great measures of any kind can be carried through without concession. No student of American history needs to be reminded that the constitution itself is a bundle of compromises, and was adopted only because of this fact, and that the same thing is true of the Emancipation Proclamation.

In conclusion, then, the man with a university education is in honor bound to take an active part in our political life, and to do his full duty as a citizen by helping his fellow-citizens to the extent his power in the exercise of the rights of self-government. He is bound to rank action far above criticism, and to understand that the man deserving of credit is the man who actually does the things, even though imperfectly, and not the man who confines himself to talking about how they ought to be done. He is bound to have a high ideal and to strive to realize it, and yet he must make up his mind that he will never be able to get the highest good, and that he must devote himself with all his energy to getting the best that he can. Finally, his work must be disinterested and honest, and it must be given without regard to his own success or failure, and without regard to the effect it has upon his own fortunes; and while he must follow the virtues of uprightness and tolerance and gentleness, he must also show the sterner virtues of courage, resolution, and hardihood, and the desire to war with merciless effectiveness against the existence of wrong.

**Reprinted from American Ideals and Other Essays, Social and Political. London and New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. (1897). Brother Roosevelt was the 26th president of the United States, serving two terms of office from 1901-1909.*