

IN DEFENSE OF THE PRACTICAL POLITICIAN

It is with some reassurance that I come here to Centre feeling as I do that if there is any place in this country where I can be understood, as a practicing politician seeking to discuss compromise in politics, it is here in Kentucky. For I do not come espousing compromise on the cynical, smoke-filled room, money-under-the-table concept that so frequently attaches to this most maligned and misunderstood but vital facet of governmental decision in this country. I would talk rather of that process that has reason as its chief constituent and that permits order and progress to be substituted for impasse and frustration. It is my purpose to seek to make a case for that procedure which, properly practiced, is the very life blood of representative democracy.

I therefore take much comfort in the knowledge that this is the state that, by virtue simply of its geographical location as much perhaps as anything else, has provided so many of the tempering and conciliating voices to a divided nation. Perhaps, it would not be overstating the case to say that this is the heartland of that political philosophy that has honest and honorable compromise as its cornerstone. Since the first unhappy rumblings over the related issues of slavery and disunion, it has been Kentuckians who were found among the leaders

in seeking the resolution of the questions that have divided and in fact still divide the nation. Indeed, the name of Henry Clay has become synonymous with the fine art of compromise, and one of the tragedies of history is that his efforts could not have been finally successful in averting the Civil War. Of course, Crittenden was still around in 1861, but his ill-starred attempts were too little and too late to stop what by then I suppose really was an "irrepressible conflict." It is a melancholy footnote to history that this man of reason and patience would see his two sons become generals in a war that he could not prevent, one on the Confederate side and one on the Union. That this fratricide was not the fault of these compromisers from Kentucky is a fact that should be a matter of satisfaction to you who claim this state as your own.

There was one issue on which Kentuckians then were unwilling to compromise, and that was the dissolution of the Union. So in 1860, with two native sons, Lincoln and Breckenridge, in the race for President, Kentucky cast its electoral vote for John Bell of Tennessee on the Union ticket.

In our own time this state has produced other men who have made great contributions to the national interest by their ability to bring issues to workable solutions. One who was cast in this historic mold was that distinguished alumnus of this institution, the late Chief Justice Fred Vinson, who in a lifetime of service in positions of great responsibility in all of the three branches of the government left a heritage of significant accomplishments

based on the tempering of idealism with reality.

And then, of course, there was the incomparable Alben Barkley, whose moderating voice and warm human instincts made him probably the recipient of more genuine affection from the American people than any other politician of his generation.

These were not grim, narrow-minded fanatics insistent on every letter of their position as if it were providentially inspired. These rather were reasonable men, conscious that they did not have all the answers and willing to concede to others the possibility that they, too, might be at least partially right. For it can be only on this basis that compromise can be entertained.

So in this somewhat less than perfect world in which we find ourselves living let us get a few things straight about what we are talking about. Whether we like it or not, as Chief Justice Vinson once said, there are indeed few absolutes. So much of what we hold to in politics or economics or even in religion is conditioned to a large extent by the circumstances and experiences of our individual lives. Mr. Justice Holmes noted once this basis for much of his own philosophy: "I do not see any rational ground for demanding the superlative--for being dissatisfied unless we are assured that our truth is cosmic truth, if there is such a thing--that the ultimates of a little creature on this little earth are the last word of the unimaginable whole."

In a society as diverse as the American society of today, it is manifestly out of the question for our government to

operate except on the basis of a recognition of different and even diametrically opposing viewpoints and of a willingness to accommodate those differences. There is nothing new about this either, for there exists no more historic example of compromise intelligently arrived at and honorably carried out than that afforded in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. This is the spirit of compromise as it was demonstrated in its most exalted hour. But at the time it was blasted as a sell-out by those who wanted the confederation to continue. Today it is sacrilege to be critical of anyone who had a part in the drafting of this great instrument, but opponents of the document then were less charitable. Carl Van Doren relates how a picture showing the signers was spat-tered with filth from the street in Philadelphia, particularly the pictures of the Pennsylvania delegates: FitzSimons, Wilson, Mifflin, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris, and Gouverneur Morris. This disparaging verse accompanied the other indignities:

"As for 'Simons and the Caledonian, their eyes
 were turned green,
 And General Tommy, Benny and Bobby, were also
 unclean.
 Bob seemed to hold guineas and Jamie to beg,
 But Old Harry had hold of the man with one leg."

"In short, the shape of most of the figures were
 altered
 And instead of masqued patriots, rose up rogues
 ready haltered.
 All that was wanted to complete the black scene
 Was a gallows that would hold at least ten or fifteen."

It is one thing to look at this process from the standpoint of issues, though, and quite another to look at it from the

standpoint of individuals. This is where more real anguish is involved for sincere and honest men than in any other area of political experience. What legislator worth his salt has not lain awake at night and wrestled with his conscience as he pondered the eternal problem of expedience versus judgment. Compromise is very definitely represented here, and again it should not automatically be made a matter of reproach. It is not merely cynical to say that a defeated politician can't help anybody. It is an ever-present fact of life that an incumbent ignores at his peril.

But whether we approach the subject from the point of view of issues or individuals, it seems that we come quickly and inevitably to this conclusion: That compromise per se is not only not bad but on the other hand is as necessary as breathing. The problem is not if but when and possibly how. The legitimate use of this complex art must therefore be our concern, rather than whether we should practice it. Subject to admitted variations as to times, places, circumstances, and methods, there stands out this general rule that seems to afford a minimum standard to follow in making this judgment of what is proper: Will the public interest ultimately be served by a process that will be consistent with the self-respect, morality, and integrity of the individuals responsible for the decision?

Here, obviously, we get involved in a question of definitions and individual judgments for which no manual can be written. The efficacy of the application of such a rule will of course depend

on the sincerity, intelligence, and honesty of the individuals, but then must not all legitimate compromise rest on the same basis? This points up why it has been impossible to compromise with the Soviets. Honest compromise should never be confused with Russian roulette. Any kind of compromise that has to be enforced with a loaded pistol is of course not really compromise at all.

There is one other quality that I have not mentioned that is largely overlooked in thinking of compromise, and that is the element of courage. The general tendency is to assume that any politician who ever concedes anything is lacking in courage. Frequently, the very opposite is true. In many cases, perhaps in most, the willingness to compromise involves great courage, and the more sharply defined the issues and the more deeply divided the partisans, the greater the courage that is required. Some of the most courageous public officials I know have been the quietly dedicated men of reason who have worked under the most unrelenting pressures to gain acceptance of unpopular but necessary agreements, while bombastic orators denounced them as traitors or worse.

President Kennedy in his magnificent book, Profiles in Courage, cites as a special example of this kind of courage in conciliation the Seventh of March speech of Webster in behalf of the Compromise of 1850. For this he was pilloried by his friends and enemies alike and moved to lament that, "In highly excited times it is far easier to fan and feed the flames of discord, than to subdue them; and he who counsels moderation is in danger

of being regarded as failing in his duty to his party."

It is in its application rather than its definition, therefore, that we can understand what compromise means. It is here that we must go if we shall be able fully to appreciate it as a working process in a free society operating under a democratic political system such as we know in this country. A totalitarian system need not be concerned with compromise as a tool of government. We must be.

It seems to be a fact of history that under the American system of government, the process of compromise has been relatively successful in dealing with procedural differences and lesser substantive issues. But when it has come to the really great questions of civil war and the division of the Union, of slavery in the nineteenth century and its progeny, the racial problems of today, there frequently just has not existed the concensus, the willingness to approach a workable solution, short of sharp and open conflict, that these issues demand. That this is true is usually no accident either, for the partisans work overtime to see to it that nothing less than total acceptance of their view is tolerated.

This was certainly the case in 1860-61, when as Arnold Whitridge points out in his book, No Compromise, "Both the abolitionists and the fire eaters saw to it that the democratic machinery broke down at the right time." It has never been established that the rank and file of the American people, North or South, were at each other's throats. Quite the contrary seems to have

been true. Certainly it would have been the case if any considerable number of them could have pondered what the next four years would bring, and this would apply to the people of the South most of all. For them the stark tragedy of their plight recalled the accuracy of the axiom that can be advanced to good advantage in this latter day that problems that defy solution by the application of a proper process of orderly compromise tend to invite uncompromising solution by authoritarian methods. I do not say this is good, and I do not say that it stands alone as sufficient justification for entertaining bad compromises, but it nevertheless is a fact that poses strong reasons for keeping issues from getting beyond the bounds of compromise.

What is happening in Algeria is an illustration of the incredible terror that can haunt a land when the will to agree breaks down. The plastic bomb has been substituted for the caucus room, and the result is that a hundred people are dying each day in a senseless struggle that nobody can win.

This is the kind of corroding bitterness that Holmes was thinking about when he wrote:

"Deep-seated preferences cannot be argued about--you cannot argue a man into liking a glass of beer--and therefore, when differences are sufficiently far-reaching, we try to kill the other man rather than let him have his way."

There has probably been no greater deterrent to the successful accomplishment of worthwhile reforms than that occasioned by what Richard Hofstadter in his book, The Age of Reform, calls the "moral absolutism" of the reformers. He concludes that

the Progressives failed to endure as Progressives because they set impossible standards. History does not usually move in straight lines to realize predetermined programs of reform, and the absolutists, with no sense of the art of compromise, have all too often been rendered totally ineffectual in causes that frequently had great merit. What so many of these starry-eyed idealists could never bring themselves to understand was that in the world of politics, of all places, there is seldom room for total victory. As Kennedy notes in Profiles in Courage, "Politics is a field where action is one long second best, and where the choice constantly lies between two blunders." Clay knew this when he said, "Let him who elevates himself above humanity, above its weaknesses, its infirmities, its wants, its necessities, say, if he pleases, 'I never will compromise,' but let no one who is not above the frailties of our common nature disdain compromise."

It has remained therefore for the practical practitioners of the political arts to temper and to put into effect what in many cases have started out to be the programs of dreamers. Thus, acting admittedly under the impact of economic depression, it nevertheless took the political finesse of a Franklin Roosevelt to bring the Congress and the country to an acceptance of many of the Progressive proposals that had foundered a decade before. And in more cases than not it took horse-trading to do it. There is no cynicism in this. It is merely a recognition of how in our system, legitimate though admittedly less than perfect ends are arrived at.

So, in making a case for political compromise, it follows that I make a case for the practical politician. The most effective political executives and legislators have been by and large the men who have come out of politically oriented backgrounds. One of the greatest problems that that essentially reasonable man, Dwight D. Eisenhower, had to adjust to as President was the infinitely more difficult role of executing and administering policies in a civilian atmosphere than in the arbitrary military world to which he was accustomed. A dam in Wyoming or an air base in Texas is usually worth more to a President in the enactment of his program than the hooplah that attends the adoption of his party's platform. This, it is idle to add, is a concept that is bi-partisan in spirit and execution, although as one who supported him, I seem to note a particularly well-developed technique in this area on the part of the present occupant of the White House. Let me emphasize that I mention this without apology. It is simply one of the most effective working tools that a political leader has, and the manner in which it is used can go a long way toward determining how successful his administration is in terms of getting things done.

Although most of my observations and illustrations have dealt with the national level of government, they are equally as applicable to state and local government. My own personal experience has been confined largely to state government, both in the legislative and administrative fields. It is especially in legislative activity that the problem of accommodation by way of compromise comes up most frequently. Administrators have their problems, but

they do not so often involve differences of opinion within the framework of government itself.

But insofar as my legislative experience is concerned, I cannot recall a single instance in which any piece of legislation that might be termed controversial was ever passed without some modification in the nature of compromise. Many of these changes were agreed to in a sincere belief that they would in fact strengthen the legislation. In other cases they were acquiesced in merely because they seemed necessary to pass the bill. I can cite one example of what I am talking about in some of our state's tax laws, which contain a number of rather unlikely exemptions, all of which were included to attract sufficient support from legislators interested in those specific exemptions to win approval.

And, on the lighter side, there was the bill to provide a marker at the point where Hernando DeSoto is supposed to have discovered the Mississippi River. The only trouble was that it is a matter of some difference of opinion as to where the spot actually is, and representatives from two different counties claimed the honor. After a period of spirited debate with the issue of location unresolved, one member with more humor than serious interest but in a spirit of genuine compromise, proposed that the monument be equipped with wheels in order that it might be moved from place to place.

And what happens in Jackson also happens in Frankfort and in Nashville and in every other legislative chamber. Let me

point out here that it has been my good fortune during my career to have been rather closely associated with many legislators and other public officials not only from my state but from Kentucky and Tennessee and many other states. These were men and women of diverse social, economic, and political backgrounds--of varied levels of education and with differing concepts of government. But it has been a basis of much encouragement to me to note the sense of responsibility to the public interest that has been reflected in the expressions and actions of the vast majority of those officials whom I have known. And in those instances that we might cite where they may have been less than responsible, it all too often has been because a less than understanding public has by indifference or delusion encouraged them to act irresponsibly.

To one who has not experienced them, it is hard to picture accurately the pressures to which a legislator is subjected, but I can tell you from experience that it is frequently a lonely feeling that one has as he contemplates taking a position which conviction dictates when seemingly all of the advocates are on the other side. It is the ability of highly-organized special interest groups frequently to direct these pressures that poses a continuing threat to the democratic process. This is where the public official must be supported by an alert, intelligent, informed citizenry, conscious of its duty to be responsible, too. For after all responsibility mirrors responsibility.

I could not conclude this discourse without taking note of a recent development in our country's political activity that I think is related to this subject, and that is the apparently growing number of organizations which seem to have as their purpose the promotion of an intransigent philosophy on a wide range of subjects that should properly be the basis of open-minded consideration. In their valid and understandable concern for the security of our country, particularly with the ever-present threat of the Communists in mind, some of these people have advanced along a broad front to indict everything from mental health to the fluoridation of water, and in the process they have made a dogma of their views and subversives of those who disagree with them. This is not a new phenomenon by any means, and it too will pass away, but for the time being in this period when America's cause can best be served by a minimizing of internal differences of opinion, we find ourselves in a flap over some issues which are, in my opinion, totally unrelated to the basic task that is ours of defending freedom. And of doing this, mind you, in a world that has become so small that only a couple of weeks ago one of your neighbors from Ohio made three trips around the earth in considerably less time than it took me to get up here from Mississippi. This, of all times, is not the hour in the uncertain history of civilization to be conducting any experiments in irresponsibility. This is not the day for the ascendancy of the Know-Nothings, either academic or political.

So, although some may take no reassurance in the fact, I think it should properly be a source of considerable comfort to know that our country's government is today in the hands of practical, politically-minded men. They were practical men at Philadelphia in 1787, as indeed they had to be, who could understand that the realization of their noblest hopes and dreams lay only through the processes of earnest conciliation and agreement. And in every crisis and in the formulation of every great decision to meet that crisis, it has been the decent practical politician, with his sense of proportion, who more often than not has pulled us through. In one of the most knowledgable articles ever written on the practical processes of government, William S. White, writing in the New York Times in 1958, had this to say:

"It is this quality [of proportion] that serves the politician more durably, more importantly, and more consistently than it serves any other profession. It is this quality, perhaps, above any other, that enables him to resist the recurring challenges to his traditional primacy as a maker of public policy that accompany the recurring crises in American life. And it is this quality that first comes to mind in a defense of the politician against the various sins of which he is generally being accused.

"His experience has told him that there is far more than mordant humor in the epigram that war is too important to be left to the generals. It has told him, indeed, that the development of policy, with all its infinite complexities and crosscurrents and cross-purposes, is too important to be left to any kind or group of specialists. It has told him that the most brilliant technical competence is irrelevant to, if not actually incompatible with, the making of the necessarily general and essentially humanistic and endlessly compromised decisions for the governance of men that are in his field."

So, when all is said and done, we owe much to the practical politician and the adjustments that he brings to the inexact science of government. If he is less than certain, it is because he knows, with Holmes, that certitude is not always the test of certainty. If he is less than an intellectual, it is because he knows that all the answers are not found in books. If he is less than perfect, it is because he is dealing with less than perfect men. For in this sometimes lied-about, much talked-about and almost universally misunderstood character of the political stage lies the highest hope for the fulfillment of the American dream but more than that the faith and the determination that the cause of freedom will endure.