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# The American Liberty League, 1934-1940

FREDERICK RUDOLPH

IN March, 1934, the New Deal was a year old. The economic collapse which had provoked it and the confused but determined activities of the New Deal had become, by then, profoundly disturbing to men whose gods were Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer. For them both the depression and Franklin Roosevelt's solutions contained unwholesome quantities of uncertainty and change. Correspondence, reflecting despair and anger, flowed from one citadel of economic power to another, most of it destined to remain in the private files for which it was intended. Some of it, however, found its way into the chambers of Congress and eventually into the public press. There the anguish of what has come to be called the American Way was from time to time documented and recorded. Of such a character was the exchange of letters between the Du Pont Building in Wilmington and the Empire State Building in New York in March, 1934, between R. R. M. Carpenter, a retired Du Pont vice-president, and John J. Raskob, a retired chairman of the Democratic party but a still active vice-president of the Du Pont organization.

"Five negroes on my place in South Carolina refused work this spring . . . saying they had easy jobs with the government," Carpenter wrote. "A cook on my houseboat at Fort Myers quit because the government was paying him a dollar an hour as a painter." What Mr. Carpenter asked of Mr. Raskob was that he, who might have the ear of the President for the asking, inquire of Mr. Roosevelt whether he knew where the country was going; his own experiences, at his place in South Carolina and on his houseboat in Florida, had convinced him that the directions were altogether contrary to American promise. Mr. Raskob was inclined to agree, but, he said, he was now out of politics and, besides, he had a better idea. "You haven't much to do," he wrote Carpenter, "and I know of no one that could better take the lead in trying to induce the Du Pont and General Motors groups, followed by other big industries, to definitely organize to protect society from the sufferings which it is bound to endure if we allow communistic elements to lead the people to believe that all businessmen are crooks." Raskob went on to suggest that there was a need for "some very definite organization that would come out openly with some plan for educating the people to the value of encouraging people to work; encouraging people to get rich." He felt that

R. R. M. Carpenter, and his friends Pierre and Irénée du Pont, were especially equipped to take on that task, for they were "in a position to talk directly with a group that controls a larger share of industry . . . than any other group in the United States."<sup>1</sup>

Of such beginnings was the American Liberty League. On August 15, 1934, an organization such as Raskob had contemplated was chartered in Washington, D.C., dedicated to "teach the necessity of respect for the rights of persons and property . . . and . . . the duty of government to encourage and protect individual and group initiative and enterprise, to foster the right to work, earn, save and acquire property, and to preserve the ownership and lawful use of property when acquired."<sup>2</sup> And from its birth until its death, its most faithful financial backers were the Du Pont and General Motors groups upon whom Raskob had counted.<sup>3</sup>

The Liberty League was as indigenously American as the New Deal which it was determined to destroy. Its unsuccessful efforts to unseat Franklin Roosevelt, its philosophy and program, the techniques which it used in order to survive as long as it did—these are not the materials of an un-American movement. They are the compound of a set of emphases which, although they found little support in the New Deal, are as much a part of the structure of American values as are those which have been carried along in succeeding Democratic administrations since 1932. The Liberty League represented a vigorous and well-stated defense of nineteenth century individualism and liberalism, a more explicit and determined elaboration of that position than will be found elsewhere in American history. It was organized at a time when by and large the philosophy of rugged individualism had stopped performing in American society, but that is not to say that it had lost all function—it still retained, for example, a strong hold upon the imaginations of men whose experiences supported its promises. Although the New Deal and the history of American political preferences since 1932 hardly argues for the survival of the position which the Liberty League maintained, there was too much of a thoroughly American character in the movement to permit the

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, Dec. 21, 1934. The correspondence was disclosed during the Nye munitions hearings in the Senate. When Jouett Shouse, president of the League, informed the press of the formation of the organization, he disclosed that Raskob was one of its prime movers. *Ibid.*, Aug. 23, 1934.

<sup>2</sup> American Liberty League, *American Liberty League: A Statement of Its Principles and Purposes* (Washington, 1934).

<sup>3</sup> The League made periodic reports to Congress on the state of its finances and the source of its income. These may be found reported in the *New York Times* for Jan. 11, 1935; Jan. 26, 1936; Mar. 17, 1936; Apr. 9, 1936; June 12, 1936; Sept. 12, 1936; Oct. 22, 1936; Jan. 8, 1937; Mar. 12, 1937; June 12, 1937; Sept. 11, 1937; Mar. 11, 1938. A study of the reports indicates that the League spent over a million dollars; that Shouse, in 1936, was the highest paid political organizer in the United States, at a salary of \$36,000 and \$18,000 for expenses; and that of the \$483,000 collected in 1935, over one third was contributed by members of the Du Pont family.

conclusion that it was an unimportant, flash-in-the-pan combination of undercover political party and overt pressure group. The American Liberty League was much more than that. Indeed, it symbolized essentially old and established traditions and values coming face to face with new social, political, and economic facts. In such a case, new facts, however unalterable, do not immediately succeed in overcoming old values. At least until now, it has been the nature of civilized societies that men have complicated their lives by seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable; such, in a way, was the aim of the American Liberty League. It emphasized the values which, by its lights, deserved encouragement and protection from new facts at which it balked, and from certain other values in the society which it chose to ignore or de-emphasize.

At a time when the Republican party was bankrupt of leadership and purpose, the American Liberty League became the spokesman for a business civilization, and a defender of that civilization from the attacks of the administration in Washington and of lesser groups from the right and the left, the followers of Father Coughlin, the Townsendites, the Socialists, the Share-the-Wealth movement of Huey Long. "Business which bears the responsibility for the paychecks of private employment has little voice in government," it complained in its *Statement of Principles and Purposes*, proceeding then to become in the mid-thirties the mouthpiece of organized American conservatism.<sup>4</sup> At a time when economic distress encouraged an increasing emphasis upon the forgotten man and the common man, it came to the defense of the uncommon man who stood at the pinnacle—the uncommon man, whose freedom to follow the bent of his natural talents, unfettered by government regulation and control, had long been an ingrained tenet of the American faith. The roster of its officers and of its chief financial contributors is a roster of the uncommon men of the time, the men whose ambitions and abilities had been rewarded with the success, the power, and the prestige to which Americans of every background have been traditionally conditioned to aspire: Irénée, Pierre, and Lammot du Pont, controllers of a vast industrial empire; Ernest T. Wier, steel man; Will L. Clayton, Texas cotton broker; Alfred P. Sloan, president of General Motors; Edward F. Hutton, chairman of General Foods; J. Howard Pew, president of Sun Oil; William S. Knudsen, also of General Motors; Joseph E. Widener, Philadelphia transportation magnate; Sewell L. Avery of Montgomery Ward; George H. Houston, presi-

<sup>4</sup> *American Liberty League: A Statement of Its Principles and Purposes*. From August, 1934, until November, 1936, the League made the first page of the *New York Times* thirty-five times; in the absence of organized Republicanism, the press looked to it for opposition sentiment on New Deal legislative proposals.

dent of Baldwin Locomotive. And with them were corporation lawyers, professional politicians, some academicians, and others who represented a mixture of business with politics or business with academics. They were men who subscribed, out of conviction or experience, to that combination of social Darwinism and American experience which evoked a constant stream of leaflets, pamphlets, radio addresses, and press releases from the offices of the Liberty League.<sup>5</sup> Its spokesmen included Alfred E. Smith, 1928 presidential candidate of the Democratic party, whose biography was a story out of Horatio Alger; John W. Davis, 1924 presidential candidate of the Democratic party and chief counsel for J. P. Morgan; Bainbridge Colby, Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson and attorney for William Randolph Hearst; Neil Carothers, director of the College of Business Administration at Lehigh; Edward W. Kemmerer, professor of international finance at Princeton; Albert G. Keller, professor at Yale and student of William Graham Sumner, who constructed a *Science of Society* which was shot through with the transfer of Darwinian analysis to social institutions; and Samuel Harden Church, head of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. The membership of its national advisory council was drawn largely from the successful business interests of the industrial states of the North and East, whose contributions permitted the League to spend over a million dollars to defend its construction of the American Way—a business civilization in which a concern for individual liberty, romantic individualism, the worship of success, the high value of personal power and prestige were embedded in a tradition of economic independence which survived in America, less as a reality than as a dream to be fulfilled.

The cloak in which the Liberty League dressed itself in order to promote its position and its program was made of respectable generalities, partial self-delusion, intense sincerity, and frequently embarrassing hypocrisy. It supported with worshipful intensity the Constitution of the United States; it placed itself on the side of the individual and of liberty in opposition to an encroaching government bureaucracy; it respected the judgment of the founding fathers who had so wisely incorporated the separation of federal powers and the rights of the states into the great national document; it defended the American right to enjoy the sweat of one's own labor and the rewards of one's ability.<sup>6</sup> With its announced purposes few could find fault,

<sup>5</sup> Reporting on the activities of the first seventeen months of the League, Shouse maintained that 1,363 weekly newspapers were accepting a special League news service. *New York Times*, Jan. 26, 1936. In addition, each month saw the publication of pamphlets, consisting of speeches and radio addresses of League spokesmen, as well as specially prepared studies of New Deal legislation by League researchers in Washington.

<sup>6</sup> For the main directions of Liberty League thought, use was made of its series of Bulletins

but as Franklin Roosevelt told his press conference on the day following the announcement of the formation of the organization, the League reminded him of a group organized to uphold two of the Ten Commandments.<sup>7</sup> William E. Borah, said a headline in the *New York Times*, "Backs Plan of Liberty League," yet deep in the column of the story itself one could find Borah, facing up to the question of industrial monopoly, declaring, "The power which closes the door of opportunity . . . in the business world leaves me cold to all their panegyrics about liberty. . . . There is no liberty worthy of the name without economic freedom and social justice."<sup>8</sup> It was this absence of any concern for the social and economic dislocations of the 1930's which documented the League's great skill at self-delusion. It sincerely thought that it had something vital to sell, but it miserably misjudged the consumers whom it hoped to win. Frantically, it tried to save a people who would not be saved.

However well it represented certain American values, the Liberty League ran counter to other values in American society which found more fertile soil in the economic distress which followed the stock market crash of 1929. American benevolence and humanitarianism, when called upon to face the greatest unemployment problem in the nation's history, could find no solution in the well-rounded phrases of the founding fathers or in the fears of the American Liberty League. R. R. M. Carpenter's anxiety over the behavior of his farm hands in Carolina and of the chef on his Florida houseboat was not the kind of anxiety which American society in general was experiencing. For most Americans, as successive Roosevelt victories demonstrated, it seemed altogether more important to look after the ill-fed, the ill-clothed, and the ill-housed than to pay heed to Mr. Carpenter's despair; and, in the process, it seemed a lesser evil that the government take on a great and all-encompassing humanitarian function than that the very American value of humanitarianism be thwarted by a too rigid devotion to a past way of doing things. If there had been a streak of benevolence in the announcements, publications, and radio addresses of the Liberty League, one wonders whether anyone would have taken them seriously, but, even so, it is an inescapable conclusion that the absence of any humanitarian concern was a serious drawback to its growth. When one of its academic spokesmen described the depression as something of a health tonic intended to rid the economic system of harmful poisons, it displayed its lack of a warm appreciation of the social

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and Documents (1934-36), in which the basic position of the League is carefully and frequently expounded by its spokesmen and staff writers.

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 1934.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 25, 1934.

and economic illnesses which had attended the eradication of those economic poisons.<sup>9</sup> Its attack upon the NLRA provision for union representation according to majority vote as an “illegal interference with the individual freedom of the worker . . . to sell his own labor on his own terms” could only be taken as a refusal to admit the social and economic factors underlying the growing union movement.<sup>10</sup> When the chairman of its Illinois division remarked, “You can’t recover prosperity by seizing the accumulation of the thrifty and distributing it to the thriftless and the unlucky,” the League was explicitly charging the American people with careless living habits or asking them to accept all the bad luck reflected in unemployment statistics with patience and good humor.<sup>11</sup> When the League found a farmer, one Elmer Willis Serl, Route One, Delavan, Wisconsin, who would say for publication that “the farmer without anything North or South of his neck . . . needs a prod in the pants and not a pat on the back,” American humanitarianism was unimpressed. Partly because the League either did not care to or found no way to enlist on its side this well-developed and characteristic American sentiment, it invited failure.<sup>12</sup>

And if it did not care to make use of the strength which might be derived from an ingrained humanitarian impulse, neither could it depend upon humor as a weapon with which to attack the New Deal and its works. Laughter as an instrument of political warfare in America perhaps reached its refinement in the homely political speeches of Abraham Lincoln, but the value of humor in the art of persuasion may be recognized as a constant in American life, from the witticisms of Ben Franklin through Franklin Roosevelt’s remarks about his dog Falla before the Teamsters Union in 1944. Yet, humor could not be put to work for the American Liberty League. It sought laughs in an enumeration of the activities of the Works Progress Administration: rat extermination campaigns, music lessons, art projects, library cataloging, and dances by Sally Rand, the fan dancer. The laughter, however, was hollow, for whatever one might say about the New Deal, the underlying problems with which it was confronted could not be laughed at.<sup>13</sup> Quite the reverse was true of the Liberty League. Senator Borah, a year after the *Times* had mistakenly announced that he was a backer of the League, declared of the Du Ponts: “They were deeply moved about the Constitution

<sup>9</sup> American Liberty League, Document 28, *Government by Experiment*, NBC speech of Apr. 17, 1935, by Dr. Neil Carothers, director of the College of Business Administration, Lehigh University, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Bulletin 2 (September, 1935), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Document 29, Ralph M. Shaw, chairman of the Illinois Division of the American Liberty League, speech before the Georgia Bar Association, Sea Island, May 31, 1935, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Leaflet 5, *A Farmer Speaks* (1936?).

<sup>13</sup> Document 78, *Work Relief* (November, 1935), p. 15.

of the United States. They had just discovered it.”<sup>14</sup> In Richmond an assemblyman addressed the Virginia legislature, defining a Liberty Leaguer as “a man who is a Republican but ashamed of it, [or] a man raised as a Democrat who’s become able to buy flour by the barrel and sugar by the sack, made one trip to New York and bought a forked-tail coat and stove-pipe hat.”<sup>15</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, selecting Wilmington as the scene of his last address outside New York in the 1936 campaign, took the opportunity to speak on “Liberty,” recounting an old tale of Lincoln’s about the wolf who, having been torn from the neck of an innocent lamb by a shepherd, complained to the shepherd that he was being deprived of his liberty.<sup>16</sup> For better or worse, the complaints of the wealthy in times of economic distress are a better source of humor than are the discontent and the misery of the many. The effectiveness of Liberty League humor was limited to the already convinced—the economically wealthy and powerful and their apologists and defenders in the bar associations, universities, and the major political parties.

In the 1930’s an organization with “sound” American principles might have been expected to attain a membership of more than 150,000 at its peak, without the assistance of a humanitarian impulse or the sanction of humor. But it could not go much beyond 150,000 if it turned its back upon the common man or insincerely used the cult which had enthroned him. Jouett Shouse, president of the League—onetime chairman of the Democratic party’s executive committee and former head of the Association against the Eighteenth Amendment, when interviewed in August, 1934, on the ambitions and intentions of his organization, told reporters that he expected to enlist two to three million people in the crusade.<sup>17</sup> The next day the *Times* reported that his estimates had been revised upward to four million.<sup>18</sup> Representative James W. Wadsworth, one of the first officers of the League and a former Republican senator from New York, announced that “the first step will be organization into several divisions, organizing farmers, laborers, the investing public and other groups that are all in the same boat.”<sup>19</sup> The chairman of the Missouri division of the League, in November, 1934, told a radio audience that the organization was created to give the citizens of the country “the means for collective expression of public opinion”; a similar sentiment had been expressed in the platform of the League, which declared that it

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 1936.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Feb. 27, 1936.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, V (New York, 1938), 557-58. Wilmington, Delaware, Oct. 29, 1936.

<sup>17</sup> *New York Times*, Aug. 23, 1934.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 24, 1934.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



would "provide for the rank and file of the American people . . . an opportunity . . . to offset the influence of any and all groups working for selfish purposes."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Liberty League presented itself to the American people as a popular movement, designed to give them a voice in the affairs of their government; to this degree the American Liberty League bowed to the cult of the common man. In Moscow, *Izvestia* reported, "The League does not intend to limit itself to the upper strata of society; it aims to conquer the masses."<sup>21</sup>

The record, however, is sufficient evidence of the degree to which the common man failed to respond. No labor or farm divisions of the League were ever formed; indeed, the League's only interest-group subsidiary was its National Lawyers Committee, composed largely of corporation lawyers. Furthermore, its suggestion that the American people needed the American Liberty League to represent them ran counter to a trust in the effectiveness of popular government.<sup>22</sup> For an organization which had no membership fees or dues, 75,000 members in its first seventeen months was not a very convincing showing despite Shouse's feeling that the receipt of one and two dollar donations meant that the League was reaching "far down into the mass of American people."<sup>23</sup> At a luncheon meeting of the American Liberty League of New York, held in the Empire State Building, Shouse told his listeners that he was "delighted to have the opportunity to address this club which . . . represents in its membership and its affiliations an excellent cross section of the great metropolis of America."<sup>24</sup> Eighteen months later in an official publication the League declared that it would "continue to emphasize the protection of the rights of the masses."<sup>25</sup> Whether these statements were born of hypocrisy or of ignorance is not so important as the fact that they all were a tribute to the common man whom the League somehow hoped to win by defending, its protestations to the contrary, the privileges of wealth and position. The League, like the values which it upheld, was in a sense trapped in a complex of annoying facts and prevailing values which could not

<sup>20</sup> Document 74, *The National Lawyers Committee of the American Liberty League*, radio address of Ethan A. H. Shepley, chairman of the Missouri Division, broadcast over Station KMOX, St. Louis, Nov. 6, 1935, p. 2. Also, *American Liberty League: Its Platform* (Washington, 1934).

<sup>21</sup> P. Lapinski in *Izvestia*, quoted in "A Russian on the A.L.L.," *Living Age*, vol. 347 (November, 1934), 277-78.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick J. Hurley, Herbert Hoover's Secretary of War, refused to join the group. "I am opposed," he said, "to minorities trying to rule the nation. It is ridiculous for any class to come forward with the statement that it is not represented. Every district elects a Congressman and every state two Senators." *New York Times*, Aug. 30, 1934.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 8, 1934.

<sup>24</sup> Document 25, *Congress at the Crossroads*, Jouett Shouse to the American Liberty League Club of New York, Mar. 30, 1935, broadcast by CBS, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Bulletin, Aug. 15, 1936, p. 1.

be shoved aside; its trials were made more apparent by the necessity of masquerading a defense of property and wealth as a popular movement. A recurring theme in its publications and its sponsored radio addresses was a fear of the redistribution of American wealth, an embarrassing fear for a popular movement. In its active years it agreed with Franklin Roosevelt exactly twice: in his opposition to the soldier's bonus and to the thirty-hour week.

Caring no more for the common man than the minimum requirements of public relations demanded, the Liberty League, nonetheless, could have built a larger popular following had it adopted the techniques of the demagogues who were amassing a more impressive membership in such groups as the Townsend clubs, Share-the-Wealth clubs, and in the Union for Social Justice. Its appeal, however, was pitched on a level which placed its emphasis upon the defense of something which most Americans had very little of—property. The truly popular movements of the decade, the New Deal included, promised something specific for the common man, for the aged, for the economically underprivileged, while the Liberty League offered rather to protect property holders from the people and from their government in Washington. That the League's ambitions grew out of a misreading of the American temper becomes rather apparent when one considers that the untold efforts of an elaborate Washington headquarters and staff offices throughout the country and the expenditure of over a million dollars went into a movement whose results were so pitifully disappointing; the League, after all, turned its guns on the New Deal in 1934 only to see it overwhelmingly returned to office in 1936. The emotive symbols which it used—the Constitution, the Supreme Court, the Declaration of Independence—and the American heroes to whom it appealed for sanction—Jefferson, Washington, and Lincoln—have generally been extremely useful in manufacturing mass opinion in the United States, but the symbols and the sanctions must also have been put to use for something the people wanted. In the 1930's the cult of the common man had become sufficiently embedded in American society to make clear that any pressure group or political organization must disregard it at its own peril; the American Liberty League learned the very hardest way that the common man, who started on his way up under the auspices of Andrew Jackson, had replaced the industrial leader in giving the directions in American life.

With similar peril, it ignored the emphasis which Americans had placed upon equality. Freedom and liberty were part and parcel of the American Way, but as the defenders of a freedom which, when fostered by giant cor-

porations, at least looked like license, the League was even more suspect because of its silence on the compelling American value of equality.

The potential League member might listen to its spokesmen on the radio or read its profusion of pamphlets and bulletins without discerning any awareness of the equalitarian strain in American thinking. Few League officials were as outspokenly antiequalitarian as Frederick H. Stinchfield in an address at Salt Lake City, where he quoted generously from Alexis Carrel, whose observations were so completely contrary to American aspiration. "The democratic ideal has already determined the predominance of the weak," Stinchfield quoted from Carrel. "The only way to obviate the disastrous predominance of the weak is to develop the strong. . . . Today the weak should not be artificially maintained in wealth and power. . . . Each individual must rise or sink to the level for which he is fitted by the quality of his tissues and of his soul."<sup>26</sup> Yet, if few went so far as Stinchfield, none showed much more concern for equality than Raoul E. Desvernine, chairman of the League's lawyers division, who went no further than the expression of a common League platitude in Chicago when he insisted, "All have equality of rights under the Constitution and before the law."<sup>27</sup> Actually, the League's interest in equality was a somewhat obverse one: it was willing that Christian ministers direct themselves toward the business of building Christians of equal character, so long as they ceased "wasting time on the superficial" social and economic problems of the time;<sup>28</sup> it was eager that a greater equality of taxation be introduced since "interest in good government would be heightened if a larger number of persons were required to pay some tax."<sup>29</sup> But it had no serious interest in opening wider the avenues of social and economic opportunity by means of education or the various legislative measures of the New Deal. The League might have convinced some one that it was seriously concerned about equality of economic opportunity had it remembered at any time during the course of its history the position which its first statement of principles and purposes had taken on monopoly. At that time the League had announced that it was opposed to the spread of monopolies. By subsequently ignoring the question it gave eloquent testimony to the insincerity of that position. The League, indeed, had cut out an impossible job for itself, when one considers that it ambitiously hoped to

<sup>26</sup> Document 90, *The Constitution—Whose Heritage?* (Salt Lake City, January, 1936), p. 6. Stinchfield found further sanction in quotations from *The Federalist* and from John Marshall.

<sup>27</sup> Document 88, *Americanism at the Crossroads*, speech of Raoul E. Desvernine, before the Republican Round Table Luncheon, Hamilton Republican Club, Chicago, Jan. 15, 1936, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Document 43, *The Duty of the Church to the Social Order*, speech of S. Wells Udey, member National Advisory Council, American Liberty League, before Michigan Association of Congregational Churches, May 21, 1935.

<sup>29</sup> Document 83, *A Program for Congress* (December, 1935), p. 12.

accomplish its purposes by ignoring the common man and by refusing to call upon either the humanitarian or equalitarian values in American society. The Liberty Leaguers either did not know their country or they were unusually adept at planning failure.

Perhaps the most curious facet of the League's history was the fiction of nonpartisanship, maintained and nurtured from its origins until its dying day. Shouse, for instance, disclosed the plans and intentions of the League in a visit to the White House in early August, 1934, asking if the President objected.<sup>30</sup> When he told the press of the new organization on August 22, 1934, he remarked, "It is definitely not anti-Roosevelt."<sup>31</sup> In April, 1936, and later during the presidential campaign of that year, League officials reiterated that their group was a "nonpartisan organization founded to defend the Constitution." Only incidentally, they said, do we find ourselves opposed to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal.<sup>32</sup> The lengths to which nonpartisanship could be taken was demonstrated by James M. Beck, League official and former solicitor general of the United States, when he asked in a speech whether it could possibly be that "the American people will abandon the faith of Washington and Franklin, of Jefferson and Hamilton, of Marshall and Lincoln, of Cleveland and McKinley . . ." <sup>33</sup> When the electorate of every state but Maine and Vermont returned Franklin Roosevelt to the White House in November, 1936, the League began to prune its staff and gave up its custom of issuing periodic press releases; Washington observers then predicted that, in line with the League's history of pseudo nonpartisanship, "after a decent interval has demonstrated that the League's career was not coeval with the campaign against President Roosevelt, sustenance will be withdrawn and the League will disappear."<sup>34</sup> Whatever the reasons, the League acted accordingly.

Strategically, there were two serious handicaps in the position of virtuous nonpartisanship which the League pretended to maintain. It fooled no one; and it amounted to a self-imposed limitation on the kind of attack which could be made upon the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt. Americans prefer to attack men rather than issues, a preference which may be a function of their devotion to individualism or of their wariness of ideas; in any case, however, the League could not and did not involve itself in concerted per-

<sup>30</sup> *New York Times*, Aug. 25, 1934. Roosevelt responded that it was none of his business, but, even so, he had no objection.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 23, 1934.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 20, 1936. See also Document 6, *Progress vs. Change*, speech of Jouett Shouse before Bond Club of New York, Nov. 20, 1934.

<sup>33</sup> Document 22, *What Is the Constitution between Friends?*, speech of James M. Beck, Mar. 27, 1935, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> *New York Times*, Dec. 20, 1936.

sonal attacks upon the President or upon the personalities of the administration. On the other hand, the New Dealers themselves had no qualms about their own partisanship, and the Liberty League, for them, became synonymous with Du Pont, economic royalists, and money bags; indeed, even after its expiration, the League was a symbol of selfish greed and special interests. The fact, moreover, that all six of the original officers were determined opponents of the New Deal destroyed the effect of nonpartisanship which its mixed Republican and Democratic membership was supposed to convey.<sup>35</sup> For a while the League did appear to be composed of more Democrats than Republicans, but by January, 1936, when the League sponsored a well-publicized dinner in Washington at which Al Smith attacked the New Deal, Arthur Krock was writing in the *Times* that the "members of the League might be classed as the most conservative group in the country today. . . . The League is dominated by Republicans." Considering what the Liberty League appeared to be—"a conservative group, inimical to the President and his policies, political in personnel, financed by the Du Ponts and created for the sole purpose of bringing back the Old Deal"—it is understandable why the backers of the League expected that a rational "non-partisan" position might be advantageous to its growth.<sup>36</sup> The League had tried to adopt the protective coloration of a popular movement without taking very seriously the problems of the common man and by ignoring the equalitarian emphasis in American values; when it sought further to disguise its backing and its purposes by calling them nonpartisan, it opened itself to the charge of gross hypocrisy.

The New Deal, on the other hand, found ready ideological and psychological material in its attack upon the depression and upon its critics in the manifest divergence between theory and practice in American life, as well as in a growing popular frustration which had grown out of unrealistic expectations nurtured by the national faith. The League's devotion to the American success story was probably of more assistance to its critics than to itself. For, although it might insist that "equality of opportunity has prevailed under the American form of government" and that "poor boys in almost countless numbers have amassed wealth with no capital except ambition, energy . . . thrift . . . and the incentive of the private property system," such declarations in the depth of the depression were strong reminders of a

<sup>35</sup> The first six officers of the League were Jouett Shouse, Democrat and politician; John W. Davis, Democrat and politician; Alfred E. Smith, Democrat and politician; Nathan I. Miller, Republican and politician; James W. Wadsworth, Republican and politician; and Irénée du Pont, Democrat and industrialist.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Krock, *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1934.

very real disparity between promise and performance in American life.<sup>37</sup> John J. Raskob, using the story of his rise from rags to riches as an argument for joining the League, was, in the 1930's, too far removed from the experience of most Americans to do much more than remind them that times had surely changed.<sup>38</sup> The League was not interested in the economic and social realities which confronted the American people; its concern was with the ideology and the constitutional framework which, with other factors, had enabled young men in the past to amass great fortunes and to arrive at stations in life which carried prestige and power. In better times, its thoroughly American philosophy might have had greater devotion; in bad times, however, other values which the League could not suppress were bound to flourish—humanitarianism, equalitarianism, and concern over the malfunctioning of the national ideology.

The performance of the League was little better designed to bring the desired results than was its approach. Its first and almost only practical alternative to the New Deal was to suggest that the Red Cross be commissioned to handle all direct relief.<sup>39</sup> The effect of its pronouncements on the unconstitutionality of the National Labor Relations Act was to encourage industrialists to disregard the collective bargaining provisions of the legislation, throwing struggling unions into courts all over the country and leading eventually to the sit-down strikes of 1936.<sup>40</sup> It discovered that Thomas Jefferson proved to be a more effective symbol for the left than for the right, even though he once had said that “were we directed from Washington when to sow, and when to reap, we should soon want bread.”<sup>41</sup> The presence of twelve Du Ponts at its 1936 dinner at which Al Smith spoke destroyed the desired effect of the presence of the boy from the streets of the East Side; indeed, when Smith spent the summer of 1936 in a more concerted attack on the New Deal, he carefully refrained from accepting Liberty League sponsorship. In 1936, too, the Republican party asked the Liberty League, by then a political liability, to “stay aloof from too close alliance with the Landon campaign”: the League co-operated by announcing that it would remain nonpartisan during the campaign, and it never did endorse Landon.<sup>42</sup> When

<sup>37</sup> *What Is the Constitution between Friends?* p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1936. This was a page-1 story.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1934. The suggestion was made by Shouse in a speech before the Beacon Society of Boston the night before.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 21, 1937.

<sup>41</sup> Document 58, *The Imperilment of Democracy*, radio address of Fitzgerald Hall, president of the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway Co., under auspices of Kentucky Division of the American Liberty League, July 18, 1935.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Times*, July 1, 1936. The front-page headline of the *Times* declared: “‘Non-partisan’ Fight on Roosevelt Is Opened by the Liberty League.”

the League sponsored a six-day institute at the University of Virginia on "The Constitution and the New Deal," Virginius Dabney, the Richmond editor, reported that "the audiences were so openly hostile to the League and its spokesmen that the round table proved something of a boomerang."<sup>43</sup> Congressional investigations disclosed that the guiding figures of the League were large contributors to all and sundry anti-New Deal groups; the Du Pont brothers, Alfred Sloan, and John J. Raskob were the principal financial backers, for instance, of the Southern Democratic convention at Macon in 1936, when Eugene Talmadge made his bid for the presidency, with the assistance of Gerald L. K. Smith, inheritor of the toga of Huey Long; lesser right-wing groups like the Crusaders, Sentinels of the Republic, National Conference of Investors, and the Farmers' Independence Council—most of them masthead organizations, operated by professional publicists and lobbyists, many of whom, like the principal officers and backers of the League, were veterans of the prohibition repeal movement—owed substantial financial backing to the same small group of industrialists who sponsored the Liberty League. A *Times* editorial observed at the time that the League's founders were making some rather poor investments.<sup>44</sup>

In an imaginary conversation between a Future Historian and a Future Historian's Wife, Hamilton Basso in the *New Republic* in 1936 caused his historian's wife to ask: "There's one thing I'd like to know. Why was the Liberty League founded?" The Future Historian answered: "That's another mystery. It is as if a band of men joined together to assassinate their best friend. It comes under the head of abnormal psychology. My friend Jones has written an excellent monograph on the subject . . . called 'An Investigation into the Behavior of Millionaires When Affected by a Severe Case of the Jitters.' . . . In answer to your question, however, it is fairly safe to say that the Liberty League was formed to defeat Roosevelt II."<sup>45</sup> Basso, his Future Historian, and the historian's friend Jones were all quite right as far as they went, but a look at the Liberty League is more than a case study in opposition to the New Deal or in millionaire jitters. It is, as well, a study of the anguish of American values in a time of severe economic collapse. Both the League and the New Deal were constructed of American materials, but those which went into the New Deal, given the facts with which they were intended to cope, built a more durable structure.

On September 24, 1940, the *New York Times*, in a small item on page 20,

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, July 21, 1935.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Apr. 17, 1936.

<sup>45</sup> Hamilton Basso, "The Liberty League Writes," *New Republic*, XXCVII (July 22, 1936), 319-21.

announced that the American Liberty League, after four years of silence, had expired; it stated simply that "Recently . . . the offices in the National Press Club were closed." Four years earlier a Yale professor had prematurely concluded that "had it not been for the American Liberty League with its constant exposition, exposure, and panning, the New Deal would have set its roots and claws more deeply into our national flesh and it would have taken years to extricate it."<sup>46</sup> Professor Westerfield's misreading of the times and of the possibilities of the League had been symbolic of the League's approach and performance. It had misread American history and character; it had misjudged contemporary opinion, drawing on the development of a business civilization, romantic individualism, concern for liberty, and the worship of success and power and prestige as the sole ingredients of its construction of the American Way. It had maintained the obvious fiction of nonpartisanship long after it was apparent to everyone that its aims were political. It became a symbol of greed, reaction, and coldhearted constitution worship; while it defended liberty, it scorned equality—at a time when economic and social facts provided more fertile soil for an equalitarian emphasis. It failed to develop into the mass movement it had anticipated, permitting all that was American about humanitarianism, the cult of the common man, equalitarianism, and concern for ideological performance to be poured into the edifice which the New Deal was constructing on the ruins of nineteenth century individualism and liberalism.

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<sup>46</sup> Leaflet 4, *The American Liberty League*. Dr. Ray Bert Westerfield, professor of political economy, Yale University, reprinted from the *New Haven Register*, Jan. 27, 1936.