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TOBACCO CULTURE

Mr. President and members of the Athenaeum, the subject of my paper is "Tobacco Culture".

"We hold these truths to be self-evident--that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such forms, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

These the most sublime words recorded in a political document, came out of a mentality of a people generated by ages of repression through arbitrary exercise of power and have become the bench mark of the high tide of human relationship.

To understand the culture which produced this mentality out of their political experiences through the numerous past centuries leading up to this apex, and to accurately essay the future direction of the present young industrial revolution; a study of the forces which produced the mental attitude of the tobacco culture of Tidewater Virginia, and gave birth to the Revolution of the American Colonies, becomes a sort of microcosm to determine how the mental attitudes of any people develops in a culture to produce political change. This shall be the purpose of this necessarily brief outline of a study.

A more recent case in point for this study, however, might be the development of the European revolutions of 1848, but the final results of these unhappy dissatisfactions are not yet in, and historians are too close to the events for scientific determination.

However, substantiation for my, and I am sure your, distrust of any constructive results, may be found in some ideas of Alexander Hergen, one of Lenin's greatest predecessors in the pantheon of the Russian Revolution in the matter of equality of all men, and the right of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Hergen preached against the tyranny of all moral absolutes and ideological abstractions, arguing that respect for human freedom demanded that one resist the temptation to set up one's own ideal

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We are today in a changing world -
according to Einstein, when the atom
bomb was dropped upon Hiroshima
in that one day everything on earth
was changed, except men's minds.

as the final goal of history, predicting socialism will develop until it reaches its own extremes and absurdities, when once again a cry of denial will break from the titanic chest of the revolutionary minority and again a moral struggle will begin in which socialism will play the role of contemporary conservatism and will be overwhelmed in the revolution as yet unknown to us. "

Now, this side light to our study of the mental attitudes which produced our own American Revolution might give insight into the contending governmental sciences in today's world.

So, to explore the tobacco culture gives us access to the mental world of the great Tidewater planters of the mid-eighteenth century Virginia, and by understanding these mental processes, we learn how these men perceived agricultural and economic changes over which they exercised no control, and why on the eve of the great American Revolution many great Tidewater planters championed a radical political ideology.--

For it was in Virginia where it all began in the beginning or at least where the men were to conceive it--the great Revolution--fought, won it, and saw it on its way. They began the Second Revolution and we lost it. We pray any Third Revolution may more peacefully evolve, for we are not yet perfect. *inset over*

One early spring day several years ago, Dorothy and I visited "Westover", a magnificent Georgian mansion built by William Byrd II during the 18th century, together with a number of great plantation homes along the James, the York and the Rappahannock Rivers.

Caught up in a sense of history and the agrarian way of life, we could not help but reflect upon the culture which produced those estates and the mental attitudes which produced that culture. For the mental path from tobacco to politics, from agrarian experience to political protest, was tortuous.

During the 1760's many great Tidewater planters discovered that accumulating debt to British merchants threatened to undermine the Virginian's personal autonomy, the core value of the tobacco mentality.

The route of this mental path is easily traced in the family notebooks of the great families of the men who later framed a

government which was designed through built-in checks and balances of power, not to work, in order that by restricting the power of Government; Government could not then curb the rights and the will of the people.

But as we said above, we are not examining here the political results of the culture nor discussing the truth or error of the economic laws which gave concern. Rather we are pointing out what happens to mental attitudes when such a situation and experience develops, and this study concentrates upon perception or how the gentry made sense out of the events that seemed to them to be transforming their culture.

The tobacco mentality imposed social and moral imperatives on the great Planters, and by relating these imperatives to a pattern of debt and credit in Virginia, we begin to appreciate why these men valued an ideology that stressed autonomy and abhorred corruption.

Though debt and tobacco did not bring the Virginians to revolution, they hastened many planters down the road to independence, and gave country ideas a moral force that they otherwise might not have possessed.

The great Tidewater planters dominated society. They sold their tobacco on consignment. Each year they shipped their harvest to an English merchant, who not only sold the staple at the best price he could attain, but also purchased for them manufactured goods that the Virginian had ordered, carrying on their books whatever debt might accrue until the balance of trade should favor the debtor Planter.

The Planters, therefore, perceived commercial relations with the tobacco merchants in personal terms. Exchange they believed involved the planters' honor, virtue and independence. It was a form of friendship. Theirs was not necessarily an accurate picture of how commerce operates. Indeed, by standards of economic theory these planters may seem today as perversely irrational. They confused the reality by generalizing the values of a local culture, and for most of the century these mental categories served them well enough. By receiving credit from these British merchant houses which the merchants were glad to advance in view of the great demand for the staple, these Virginia

gentlemen did, of course, compromise their personal autonomy. Personal autonomy allows no compromise, and possession of personal independence demonstrated among other things that a gentleman was morally sound. Independent people, stood above the scramble after power and wealth and thus seemed ideally suited to provide leadership for the small planters.

This bundle of assumptions was a staple of country thought and the Centrality of Independence in the writings of Boolingbrook, Trenchard and Gordon, who along with John Locke ^{and} ~~or~~ James Harrington apparently corresponded to eighteenth century planters' experience.

It was only when the merchants announced that they were playing by a different set of rules that the great planters realized how much of their culture was at risk in the marketplace.

Even when a creditor said nothing about the state of an individual's accounts, an indebted man knew in his heart he had become a dependant being, that he had lost an amount of personal liberty. The presence of so many slaves made the prospect of losing liberty more poignant.

Financial dependance conflicted with the imperatives of the tobacco mentality. Since all tobacco planters, large and small, produced the same export crop, they were competitors; yet, at the same time, the staple economy fostered a spirit of cooperation among the tobacco producers. The small planters also depended to a more or lesser degree upon foreign merchants for their livelihood. Out of these commercial experiences they developed that spirit of mutuality that sometimes wells up among men who share a work culture. Thus, a small planter's chances of receiving financial assistance from one of the great planters was fairly good, and a gentleman rarely demanded interest and often as not, no payment of debt over a period of years out of expectation of upturn in the borrower's finances.

In fact, the spirit of friendship all be it between unequal parties appears to have developed. Virginia, even after the right to print currency, never seemed to have adequate money supply. To suggest that a great planter would attempt to profit from a friend's adversity or incompetence was an insult.

In relations between great Tidewater Planters where there was

no public credit structure, it was the creditor not the borrower who made the excuses if repayment went years beyond expectations. The planters trusted the English merchants to trade by the same standards they themselves acted upon.

The Tidewater planters simply recreated the British merchants in their own image and in the process they transformed them into men who understood the meaning of honor and independence; who appreciated that trade was a kind of friendship and would do a favor even if that meant sacrificing profit. The planters of the eighteenth century Virginia attempted to tame the unknown by labeling it in terms drawn from their own tobacco culture.

Historians who describe these Virginians solely as agricultural capitalists and emphasize income as the central aspect of tobacco mentality, miss the point. These Virginians competed not only for pounds and pence but also for honor and reputation. He savored even the highest praise from his neighbors. He showed almost no interest in how his harvests were actually marketed in England. He craved direct and immediate confirmation of high standing within the local agrarian community. He simply trusted the same attitude in the men with whom he did business.

One planter writes, "I really do not understand your manner of keeping my interest account." These Virginians were not unlearned about factors involved in supply and demand but about commercial practices which ate into their profits they remained ignorant.

Among the large planters as well as the small farmers, it was the proficiency as to his skill to produce the best product as to cleanness, neatness, color, scent and substance which became his primary concern. So it was that ^{during} when the Stamp Act crisis and the Tobacco Acts in the House of Burgesses which seemed to deprecate the staple, together with the falling prices on English markets, combined to injure their pride and a social station equal to any British subject, that a mental attitude of rebellion was produced. A mental attitude as expressed by Landon Carter, "Truth and justice, like liberty and property are so twinborn that whenever one of them is made sick by legal authority, the other must pine and languish under the same heavy stroke."

So pride of production and sensitivity to criticism were

twinsides of the Tobacco Mentality. Tobacco also acquired a psychological demotion in a public reputation, a sense of self-worth as an agricultural producer.

It probably comforted the Tidewater Planter to think that if they themselves behaved so honorably, their commercial friends must be doing the same for them in the Mother Country. But a look today at the faces in the portraits of owners of hundreds of country treasure houses throughout England built during this period of colonial expansion, reveals, that their conception of an economic system was contrary to the concept coming out of the Tobacco Culture.

It is true that British consignment merchants who loomed so largely in the Virginia economy were middling sorts by the standards of the 18th century business community. None possessed fabulous wealth. Successful merchants had to master personal credit arrangements in the form of investments and sophisticated banking procedures. Tobacco merchants, in fact, found themselves in a far reaching social change. For the first time bills of exchange were bought and sold, discounted and processed and traded in. The system worked well as long as merchants did not have to cover large unexpected demands for cash. The profit for the tobacco trade was considerable. Nevertheless, the liquidity problems these merchants faced were more serious than those who dealt only in domestic trade. But European demand for the crop kept retail prices high and merchants even pushed credit upon compliant Virginians, and the increased production of the staple fostered competition among the producers to force sale prices down allowing wider profits. Had the merchants been willing to share these profits maintaining the purchase price of the staple to remain constant, no debt would have been produced. Somewhere excess profits were accrueing.

The fault was in the English system of government which could deregulate the rights of the people for the purpose that the privileged could deny liberty to the underprivileged, but in so doing dividing the social estate and conditioning the way for ultimate loss to the privileged, as has always resulted from such purposes according to historical and anthropological evidence.

Such ultimate loss to the privileged is due to their myopic or avaricious self-centeredness.

For not only in the American colonies but also in Britain itself, there was unhappiness. The failure of the British economic system was resulting in the problem of emigration to America. Beginning in 1771 thousands began leaving Scotland, Ireland and Britain taking with them tons of property, filling the coastal cities of America but more particularly expanding westwardly as in Virginia; swarming up her rivers to the newly opened lands of the Piedmont and on their small holdings without benefit of slave labor, they harvested thousands of pounds of tobacco.

By 1774 portions of Ireland and Scotland had been drained of one-fourth of its trading cash and a like proportion of its manufacturing people, industrial workers, farmers, and people of some property. These facts are recorded in 4 large volumes of the Register of Emigration 1773-76 which are to be published later this year. Legislation to stop people leaving England was proposed.

There was no mystery about the causes of the emigration. Among these causes was high rack-renting, landlord absenteeism, the climax of 50 years increasing rents, fees for leases that were three or four times annual rents, until it was said, "the very marrow is screwed out of our bones, and our lives are even becoming so burdensome to us, that we do not care whether we live or die".

These emigrants did not all find farming or an industry in America to support their professions, but their situation stimulated a fierce egalitarian concept of life, and resulted in straightened circumstances for many, which resulted in surprisingly good soldiers of the later Revolutionary Army and a work ethic: in an expanding industry which in a short period of some 250 years has transformed a continent of wilderness into the wealthiest nation in the world but which if deserting the safeguards expressed in the Declaration of Independence, which came out of the tobacco culture, such nation could find itself following the path which leads to the position today of the nations of Europe and Asia.

Several measures of resistance developed. It is not the purpose of this paper to touch upon the political steps which led to revolution, but the economic development which united the large and small planter as is evidenced by the fact that among

the signers of the Virginia Non-importation Resolution of May 17, 1769, were Peyton Randolph, Robert Carter Nicholas, George Washington, Carter Braxton, Thomas Jefferson, Richard Henry Lee, and Patrick Henry.

In short, the tobacco merchants were not acting like true commercial friends and the planters presented their irrate protest to the King in these words:

"Dependence upon Great Britain we acknowledge and glory in our greatest happiness and only security. It is as a dependence of a part upon one great whole."

However, these proud gentlemen refused to bow to the interests of a few well connected merchants.

Indeed, such ~~powerful~~ over-mighty subjects threatened to usurp the prerogative of the monarch. They were attempting to rule Virginia, to bring it under their control, and the Planters declared if the King appreciated the planters' recent sacrifices during the French and Indian Wars, he would now protect them from "the merchants' unreasonable clamor against our paper Bills of Credit."

These were not the musings of a crank. Tobacco produced huge returns for the Royal government and British merchants, but not alas for the Tidewater Planters. British merchants would not even allow the impoverished Virginians liberties to experiment with new crops like grain, in order to keep the planters employed in the commodity tobacco or to purchase the hemp which many of the people were deterred from cultivating for want of a certain market.

Even Thomas Jefferson, a man usually accounted as a man of enlightened reason subscribed to the merchants' conspiracy by saying:

"The merchants had urged Virginia to produce as much tobacco as they possible could, good prices were promised and credit flowed easily. The planters trusted their commercial friends in Great Britain not realizing the abundant credit was the honey to bait the trap of dependence." A powerful engine for this purpose Jefferson recounted was, "the giving of good prices and credit to the Planters until they got him more immersed in debt than he could pay without selling his lands or slaves. Then they reduced the price given for his tobacco

so that his shipments be ever so great, and his demand for necessities be ever so economical they never permitted him to clear off his debt."

These Virginians began to see they were supporting a governmental system which made possible a financial system which permitted some of its citizenry to become tremendously wealthy at the degradation of other citizens. These Virginia Planters were not really indebted, nor were they attempting to repudiate their debt, they simply were not being paid for the staple the amount of money proportionately to the amount borrowed at the time the obligation was made, while the cost of the processed product when sold to the consumer remained the same, perhaps higher. Moreover, the British citizens receiving this increasing pecuniary advantage over citizens of equal rank, were also assessing the burden of taxation, to protect their property from their European neighbors, upon items the colonists must purchase or use. This united the urban northern colonies with the Virginia planters in the struggle for independence because the profits from British manufactured goods purchased from sale of tobacco products also gravitated to English markets.

As we approach the 200th anniversary of the adoption of our Constitution whose guarantee of certain rights is assailed in many quarters today, a study of the culture which produced it, becomes more pertinent. That culture, as we have seen, was the Tobacco Culture, and the mentality which came out of it perceived that a government which permitted one group of its citizens to prosper unequally at the expense of another group destroyed life, liberty and happiness.

Men of this vision were forced to separate themselves from such a government and to form another government whose objectives were more egalitarian and autonomous, one in which the objectives set forth in the Declaration of Independence were guaranteed by certain rights.

Of course, the new nation began immediately to drift away from these objectives. But we are still a young nation which may reverse the course. If not ^{long} us, others will.

They will do it by instilling in all a faith that each achieves his personal and individual best by submerging himself in common

aspirations, a common fate, a common self. There would be no denial of liberty in that; no one would feel himself under alien domination; each would realize himself in all, and all in each.

You will say, "it sounds good but you know it cannot be done". On the contrary, I am not so sure as I used to be that it cannot be done. For behind it lies a faith and a necessity. It is the faith that our collective fate in the end depends upon the irrepressible fertility of the individual, and the finality of what he chooses to call good.