

MUDDY THINKING¹

WE meet this evening to honor those who have, by virtue of scholarly attainments, won title to special academic recognition. It is my privilege to talk not to geologists and geographers, but to those who have gained distinction in many fields of knowledge. What shall an investigator of the earth's surface features say, on such an occasion, to especially distinguished students of the arts as well as of the sciences, of letters as well as of laws? Perhaps we can find common ground if we direct our attention to some one of the major purposes of that scholarly equipment which it is the function of our educational institutions to provide. I take it that one such purpose, and I suppose the chief one, is to train the mind to operate skillfully and effectively; to make of it an instrument of precision, with which work of high quality can be accomplished in one or more fields of endeavor.

A French authority, asked to name the essentials of good literary composition, replied that they were three in number: first, *clarté*; second, *clarté*; and third, *clarté*. So might one designate as the three prime essentials of good thinking: clarity, clarity, and clarity.

You have, no doubt, frequently heard extolled the value of clear thinking, especially when applied to the solution of difficult and intricate problems. This evening I want to direct your attention to the dangers of muddy thinking, especially when practical problems of every day life are involved.

The geologist has to deal not only with lakes, where the

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surface is limpid and calm, but also with rivers, whose waters are troubled and muddy. In these contrasted features of Nature we may find analogies pertinent to our theme. Look for a moment at this lovely alpine lake. In its calm depths are reflected the majesty of snow-clad peaks, the blue of a summer sky, the fleece of a floating cloud. Yet among those peaks lie glaciers, relentlessly grinding away the rocks on which they rest. From those glaciers spring torrents, heavily charged with rock debris. Down a thousand ravines rush turbid waters; from a thousand valley walls echo the thunder of cataract and the roar of rapids. In the valley the waters gather, rushing onward in troubled haste till they enter the alpine lake.

Now comes the transformation. Far out on the quiet blue surface spreads the turbulent mountain stream. Swift waters gradually slacken, and partake of the calm of the lake. The troubled currents are stilled, and lay down their burden of silt. Murky waters grow clear, and the mountain stream is at rest. Storms may swell *incoming* streams, till they burst their banks in their fury; but calmly there flows *from* the lake a current of crystal clear water.

Into the human brain flow numberless currents of thought. Today they thunder upon it from every quarter of a troubled age. The storms of passion and prejudice sometimes swell these currents till their power for evil becomes appalling. Will they burst the bounds of reason, and deluge the world in their fury?

The answer to that question, I venture to suggest, depends largely upon the type of thinking done by the men and women of your generation, soon to inherit a badly disordered world. If intellectual training leaves the mind like a river, through which ideas speed onward in shallow channels, the future outlook is truly dark. That type of thinking may be forceful,

but the forces will not be controlled by calm reason. That type of thinking may be broad, but it will never be deep. That type of thinking may be swift, but it will not be sure. It is almost certain to be muddy. It cannot be wholly clear.

But if training makes of the mind a reservoir, receptive of currents from all points of the compass; a lake into which streams of information may pour their burden of disordered facts without disturbing its quiet, or muddying its contents; where turbulent haste gives place to calm reason, and turbid ideas are reduced to clarity; then will the mind reflect a steady image of lofty peaks and serene sky, and from it will flow a constant stream of clear thought to gladden the deserts of the lands below.

Clear thinking or muddy thinking—which shall it be? I suggest that you take time to look about you, to scrutinize the mental processes which lie behind and beneath those events which crowd upon us day by day. Are those events, and the actions of men which precipitate them, the products of well ordered reason and calm reflection? Or do they result from thinking, which, however honest and patriotic, is superficial, hasty, and turbid?

I am not here dealing with the results of dishonest thought, nor with the mental processes of individuals possessing inferior capacity. I am only considering a certain type of defective thinking which you and I are apt to fall into, unless we deliberately cultivate correct habits of thought. What, then, are the characteristics of muddy thinking, as distinguished from that which is not only honest but clear? Let me suggest a few of the criteria of muddy thinking, by which we may recognize it, and thus seek to avoid it.

If a man publishes to the world conclusions which are clearly contradictory to well established natural law, or which are negated by indubitable facts in your own experi-

ence, you will usually be safe in charging him with muddy thinking. I say *usually*, because I do not lose sight of the fact that discovery of some new natural law may render plausible conclusions which before seemed absurd. Nevertheless, if some one tries to convince you by an involved process of reasoning that the world must be flat, you do not hesitate to consider his reasoning faulty. Should he tell you that were you to sail out across the ocean you would surely come to the edge and drop off, you doubt his assertion. If you have already made a round-the-world trip in safety, the facts of your experience will justify you in believing that he has been guilty of muddy thinking. So in the case of persons of higher intellectual competence, you may properly apply the test of conformity to well established principles and lack of conflict with your own personal experience.

Nor will the case be different if the individual lays claim to high authority in the field he discusses. We must take truth for our authority, not authority for truth. A psychologist should know how to think. But when one who claims to be an authority in this field tells a large radio audience that it is only an overpowering fear of death which causes one to eat his dinner, I do not think you will be unduly rash if you conclude that he has been indulging in some very muddy thinking.

Another indication of muddy thinking is the utterance of various statements or conclusions, simultaneously or in rapid succession, which are mutually inconsistent. Consistency over long time intervals is not always a virtue. A man may honestly think one thing this year, and the opposite a year later. One must make allowance for changed conditions as well as for mental growth. But if conflicting opinions are poured forth in such rapid succession that confusion of ideas rather than growth of ideas is indicated, you may safely conclude

that the brain is muddled. When the chief executive of a great state of our Union tells the public in the course of a few hectic days that the brutal lynching of two men is the best lesson that his state has ever given the country; that, as a matter of policy he does not either personally or officially condone lynching; that if anyone is arrested for the good job he will pardon them all; that he would like to turn over other imprisoned kidnappers to those fine, patriotic citizens who know how to handle such a situation; and that the wounded sheriff and his officers deserve praise because they did all they could to preserve and uphold due respect for the law; when, I say, such an extraordinary succession of flagrantly inconsistent statements pours from the lips of a high public official, you may be quite certain that his outgivings are the result of hopelessly muddy thinking.

As a third indication of muddy thinking, let me name the failure to follow a line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, the failure to "think a thing through." This type of thinking is frequently observed in the case of well-meaning enthusiasts who propose courses of public action for state or nation. When I listen to the argument that criminals should not be punished, that crime is only a form of sickness, that society makes the criminal and therefore should not punish the innocent victim of its own sins, I cannot help suspecting that muddy thinking is back of these pronouncements. If the well-meaning individuals who want to call all crime "illness," would only be consistent, and call all punishment "medicine," and would then recognize the fact that different types of illness require different kinds and quantities of medicine, sometimes for prevention and sometimes for cure, one could more readily keep step with them. Unfortunately, they see but half the problem, and that half through a glass darkly. We must hesitate to follow them until they give

convincing proof that they have thought the problem through to its logical consequences, and can predict with reasonable certainty what will be the ultimate effects upon society of the course of action they propose.

Caution is eminently justified, for muddy thinking, translated into public policy, can bring upon a people disasters of the first magnitude. Let us take a chain of facts and trace them to their source. In this great civilized country, men properly charged with crime, and held by the supposedly strong arm of the law, are dragged from prison by infuriated mobs and brutally murdered with the most degrading exhibitions of savagery. If you ask why, the answer is that the people neither trust nor fear the law.

They do not trust the law to protect them, because they see on every hand overwhelming proof that crime is efficiently organized as a big business and effectively protected by alliance with powerful politicians; that gangsters long and intimately known to the police live openly in luxury, and impudently flaunt in the public press their criminal careers; that the arm of the law, paralyzed by a thousand technicalities, bound helpless in a maze of red tape, and weighted down by cumbrous procedure, reaches slowly, falteringly, uncertainly for the criminal, often failing to find him, and when finding, often failing to hold. Disgusted and hopeless, the people substitute, or condone the substitution of, the fury of mob violence for a legal system fallen into a state of inefficiency which can only be called disgraceful.

Nor do the people fear the law which they distrust. Relying on the muddy thinking of governors and sheriffs, who visualize the use of armed force, when necessary to uphold the law, as merely "shooting down good people," the mobs proceed with impunity to requite murders of greed or passion with murders of vengeance, and thus to turn loose upon

society a score of blood-stained hands for every pair they lawlessly remove.

What has brought our legal system to such a low estate, that it is both distrusted and flaunted? There are doubtless a number of factors involved in the breakdown of American law. I venture to emphasize one which has not, I think, received the attention it deserves. This is the low standard of legal ethics expressed in the dictum that "a lawyer's first duty is to his client." This view has been defended in the public press by able legal talent, men of high standards of personal conduct and jealous of the reputation of their profession. Yet I cannot escape the conviction that back of that view lies a failure to think the proposition through to its inevitable consequences.

Those consequences we see about us every day, and they are deplorable. The basest criminal, with his ill-gotten wealth, hires the best legal talent for the express purpose of defeating the law and securing freedom to continue his war upon society. Able lawyers, faithful to the tradition that their first duty is to their client, set skillfully to work to manipulate the cumbersome machinery of the law to the criminal's advantage. Delay follows delay, witnesses die or disappear, the memories of others grow dim. Technicalities are invoked to suppress pertinent evidence here, to introduce irrelevant and confusing testimony there. Eloquent appeals to the prejudices and sympathies of jurors are made for the express purpose of swaying them from a just verdict, and toward one favorable to the guilty client. The wealth of the criminal, and the knowledge, skill, and eloquence of his able attorneys, are enlisted in an unequal battle against society. Unequal, because representing the people there is usually a less distinguished array of legal talent, often overworked and usually moderately paid. Unequal, also, be-

cause the law's delay and the technical barriers erected for the defense of the accused, give enormous advantage to the criminal, and heavily handicap society in its efforts to protect itself. The result is a foregone conclusion. The more able lawyer repeatedly wins his case, and turns loose upon society a man he knows to be its deadly enemy.

In the medical profession a different standard prevails. The physician's first duty is to society, not to his client. If his client has leprosy, no honorable physician will try to prove him free from disease. The pleas of the client, and all his worldly wealth, will not prevent that client from being cited to the proper authorities for such disposition as society demands. What we need is a standard of legal ethics which will make it impossible for the lawyer knowingly to turn a moral leper loose upon the community.

The lawyer's first duty is *not* to his client, but to the society which permits him to practice his profession in its courts of justice. When that standard of professional conduct prevails, the lawyer will say to his client: "My sole obligation is to see that justice is done. If you are innocent, my skill will be exercised to secure your acquittal. If you are guilty, I shall do all I can to see that you are not improperly convicted or wrongly punished. But under no circumstances will I do anything to delay or thwart a just disposition of your case, nor will I prostitute the weaknesses of the law to prevent a prompt and proper verdict."

Another criterion of muddy thinking is found in evidence that passion controlled it. If the orderly processes of thinking are destroyed by overpowering emotion, the product can hardly be clear. I would not imply that strong emotion has no proper place in the lives of thoughtful men and women. God help the nation if its citizens ever lose the capacity for righteous indignation. But indignation, to be effective, must

be preceded by, if not coincident with, calm reflection and reasoned judgment. That this is not impossible on a large scale was demonstrated by a recent municipal election in my home city, in which an indignant but intelligent public not only drove from power those who had plundered and disgraced their city, but showed remarkable discrimination in voting on a list of debatable propositions submitted for their approval or condemnation.

But indignation unaccompanied by clear thinking is dangerous. You are familiar with the type of individual who contributes more heat than light to a discussion. His mind is so swept by swift currents of emotion that it is rendered turbid by the sediments of passion and prejudice. Men may reasonably differ on questions of public policy; but a tirade of abuse against the opposition is always an evidence of muddy rather than clear thinking.

Yet another criterion of muddy thinking is to be found in vague and indefinite expressions of one's thought, whether in spoken or written language. Clear thinking gives birth to clear expression of thought. Muddy thinking is betrayed by muddy language. In the momentous discussion of vital national policies now going on in our country, it is in the highest degree important that each of us scrutinize the outgivings of proponents of differing views, and decide, each for himself, what policies are the lucid expression of clear and competent thinking; and what policies are the vague formulation of well-meant proposals born of honest but muddy thinking. We are so fortunate as to have as our President, in a time of unusual stress, an able and energetic man, remarkable alike for his ability to think clearly, reason soundly, and expound in simple, comprehensible language large problems of state. Yet the nation is manifestly uneasy concerning more than one of the administration's major

policies. This is because no President, however broad his experience and brilliant his intellect, can be an expert in all the fields he must administer. He perforce relies on the advice of others. As citizens who must prosper or suffer, according as the administration's policies are good or bad, you have a vital interest in the nature of the advice upon which the President is acting. If you find that the administration's policies have been clearly and definitely set forth, that the pronouncements upon them have been consistent, and that they involve no proposals contrary to long-established economic laws and the collective experience of mankind, you may safely conclude that there has been clear and competent thinking on the part of the President's advisers. If, on the other hand, you find that the administration's pronouncements on any vital question of public welfare have been vague and indefinite, and that even a great master of the art of expounding public matters to a whole nation has left the people in doubt as to what a particular policy is, or is to be; or if you observe that any proposed course of action runs counter to economic law and past economic experience, then I think you will be justified in asking whether the nation's advisers are clear in their own minds as to just what policy should be followed. And let us not forget that muddled thinking, translated into public action may be fatal to the public weal, no matter how high the motives and sincere the purposes of those responsible for the fatal policy.

Finally, let me voice a caution against that type of thinking where the wish is only too clearly father to the thought—that "wishful thinking" in which overpowering desire to accomplish a good end renders one uncritical of the methods employed for its accomplishment. This variety of muddled thinking has been the bane of many a worthy movement

for reform; and because of such thinking many a reformation has brought in its train evils incomparably more lamentable than those the reformer sought to eradicate. Reasonable caution demands that the program of any reform movement be examined with calm deliberation and critical judgment. Partiality for a given end can never excuse indifference to the means employed for its attainment.

In international affairs I know of no problem more pressing than the problem of peace and war. Of all possible methods of settling international disputes I respectfully submit that competitive mechanical butchery of the youth of two nations is the most insane, the most diabolical that human ingenuity could possibly invent. To substitute for the brutal arbitrament of blood and iron the arbitrament of reason, is one of the noblest aspirations of mankind. In every civilized country multitudes are earnestly striving to attain this goal. I think you will agree with me that no problem ever more deserved the best thought of the ablest minds. Yet if you read carefully and think calmly, you will, I am sure, be compelled reluctantly to admit that discussions of this momentous problem are often beclouded by muddy thinking. Minds deeply stirred by emotion proclaim a futile policy of servile submission by the government to any and every outrage committed against it. Others would attain the same end by teaching our youth basely to abandon their solemn obligation to protect the homeland and support the government when these are threatened by a foreign foe. Men who fully realize that the gains of civilization must quickly be wiped out by the warring forces of evil in any country which fails to uphold wise law by determined force, tell us that no force must be employed against the lawless nation which runs amuck to the imminent peril of its peaceful neighbors. Hatred of the instruments of force employed

for evil purposes has misled these worthy people into condemning that force which alone can render secure human liberty and human progress. They vaguely appeal to the "force of public opinion," forgetting that the only public opinion which has any force is that which recompenses virtue with material or spiritual rewards, and opposes to potential wrongdoing the threat of potential punishment.

Does this mean that nations must always war? He is a pessimist indeed who would answer that question in the affirmative. Let me tell you how I believe the clear thinking of the future will answer it. I venture to predict that the answer will be based on a very ancient and fundamental law of nature respecting the necessity of self preservation for individuals and societies alike, and that it will be fully in accord with the common experience of mankind. The reasoning and the conclusion will, I believe, run something like this:

In no walk of life can the problem of peace be solved merely by preaching doctrines of righteousness, nor solely by educating public opinion to commend that which is right and condemn that which is wrong. It is true that justice must hold in one hand the balance wherein the deeds of men are fairly weighed. But in the other hand there must always be the sword, by which just decrees may be enforced. Whoever strikes the sword from the right hand, by that same blow dashes the scales from the left. Peace rests on justice, and justice rests on force.

In the progress of civilization it has been the common experience of all peoples that the peace of the many is best secured by making force potential rather than active, and by placing its use in the hands of a few selected and trained agents who are compelled by carefully framed laws to employ it for the promotion of good and the repression of

evil. The hands of the great mass of the population are freed to till the fields, direct industry, and cultivate the arts and sciences, only when the hands of a few bear weapons to protect the many in their peaceful pursuits. And the weapons can be few in number and rarely used only because the many stand pledged to drop their individual labors in case of public emergency, and to use their combined irresistible force to defeat any attack upon the law and its chosen representatives. Peace is effective because overwhelming force is potential.

The common experience of all nations must bear fruit in international affairs. Nations must gather about the council table, not to debate the calibre of guns to be employed in shooting each other, nor yet to sign vain promises never to use weapons they insist on possessing and perfecting; but to debate the practical details of making force in international affairs potential rather than active; of freeing the world from its burden of competitive armaments by reducing the field of arms to the comparatively insignificant equipment necessary to meet temporary emergencies; and of rendering the small emergency force and its limited equipment efficacious by placing back of it the overwhelming force of all civilized mankind, united in the determination never to permit a war-mad nation to overthrow the peace of the world.

That day has already come in the relations of individual with individual, village with village, city with city, and state with state. It is in the law of evolution that it shall come in the relations of nation with nation. Then, and not until then, will there be peace on earth and goodwill among men. All reasoning on this vital problem which obscures fundamental principles by appealing to emotional desires, belongs in the class of muddy thinking.

I have said enough to suggest the criteria by which we may distinguish between clear and muddy thinking. Our inquiry will not be altogether without profit if it incites us to give conscious attention to our own habits of thought. After the din of passion and prejudice, let us hear the still small voice of reason. After the tumult of the mountain torrent, let us enjoy the calm reflection of the lake.

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