Governmental Philosophy

THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT. By Alpheus Henry Snow. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

UNTIL recently it could scarcely be said of any nation that it had a philosophy of government. Traditions of government, of course, all nations have had for a long time; but these were rarely so fixed and well grounded, or so fully accepted as a part of the national life, that they could be said to constitute a system of political philosophy. In the United States, to a greater extent than in any other country, perhaps, it is now appropriate to use such a term. Certain outstanding and fundamental convictions as to what a well-ordered government ought to be —most of them expressed in well-worn phrases—are now part and parcel of the American temper; they must be reckoned with in any attempt to analyze the public opinion of the United States, especially in its bearing upon our relations with other countries.

The opening chapter of Mr. Snow's volume deals in an illuminating way with this theme. The author shows how the various tenets of our political philosophy first got their grip upon the public imagination, what forms they have now assumed, and what influence they exert upon the trend of actual government. The Constitution of the United States may be the "supreme law of the land," as it declares itself to be; but the Declaration of Independence is the source from which most Americans draw their political inspiration. Although it has no force or sanction in the American law courts today, the Declaration is gospel to the mass of Americans whenever the rights of men or nations come into controversy. That is why the phrase "self-determination" proved a harmonic to the American ear. It is, of or was thought to be, a full-fledged synonym for "the consent of the governed." Mr. Snow's thirty-page chapter on the Declaration is clear and logical writing, by the way, and suffers nothing by omitting the platitudes usually uttered when men talk about this theme, or write about it.

The greater part of the book, however, deals with facts, not theories—with the practice and not with the principles of government. There is a suggestive essay on "The Mandatory System" and its probable influence upon the course of international relations. The Covenant of the League of Nations is dissected in order to show the various features which, apart altogether from such practical objections as may be urged against them, run counter to the traditional American method of doing things. Several other chapters deal with such matters as the American doctrine of judicial supremacy, the limits of international arbitration, the possibility of international compulsion, and the execution of judgments against States. An interesting discussion of a wholly new subject is presented in the final chapter on "The Participation of the Alien in the Political Life of the Community."

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