

# A SCHOLAR DISCUSSES PUBLIC OPINION

By William Starr Myers

JUST ten years ago there appeared, from the pen of President Lowell of Harvard University, a book entitled "Public Opinion and Popular Government" which since that time has been considered the standard authority upon the subject. No better testimony to this fact could be desired than the estimates by such men as the late Albert Venn Dicey and James Bryce, both of whom spoke of the work as the greatest yet written in this field. For these reasons, the mere announcement that President Lowell has prepared another book of the same general character is bound to arouse interest among scholars and the reading public. Their keenest anticipations will not be disappointed when they experience the satisfaction of scanning this new volume.

It is a real pleasure, as well as satisfaction, to find a book so sound, adequate, and sane in its content. Also

it is written, not with the brazen assurance of the tyro, but with the calm restraint of the thorough scholar. President Lowell's earlier work analyzed both public opinion and the mechanism through which it may be made effective. This later book stresses the former part of the subject and has as the object of its inquiry not a criticism of actual politics but a study of the process by which public opinion is formed and expressed. The discussion is predicated upon the definition of opinion as "the acceptance of one among two or more inconsistent views which are capable of being accepted by a rational mind as true". This acceptance of course is based upon conviction, resulting from either first-hand thought or reliance upon some trusted authority. Even in the latter case there remains the need for ability to choose the authority, as well as to make a sound judgment. As President Lowell says, "Many a man sits on the back platform of the train, insisting that he is on the engine, and that the train is going backwards." This, it may be remarked, is the common case with the radical, who often is entirely ignorant of history and is so desirous of going somewhere that he loses all mental orientation. He does not know past successes, much less past failures.

But President Lowell is a thorough American, and insists upon the need for personal responsibility in the formation of an opinion. It is upon this basis that our country and its institutions, Anglo-Saxon in character, were founded. As he well says, "A sense of personal responsibility for his opinions is perhaps the greatest duty that a citizen owes the public. . . . This is secured in large part by

directing attention forcibly to the consequence of a course of conduct and the evil that may result from an error in judgment." In contrast to it, "The group directs the attention of its members to the general conviction that they are right and discourages the consideration of opinions opposed to those which they hold." Here we see the essential fallacy and unmoral tendency in much of the present agitation for "social" as distinguished from individual responsibility. President Lowell rightly thinks that in the immediate future the public probably has less to fear from personal than from cooperative selfishness. Blocs in Congress and organized "propagandas" outside would seem to be adequate proof of the point.

The whole spirit of the book makes a call upon the best that is in our people, for it is the departure from the fundamental principles of individual responsibility that explains much of the crass materialism and the vagaries of the mob that go by the name of "progressive thought". The reading of this volume should prove both a purgative and a tonic to the mental processes of our best citizenship. It should be worthy of careful study especially by politicians, journalists, and others whose work causes them to deal with mankind in the aggregate. For mob psychology is not public opinion, since it lacks the element of settled conviction. And the men and women with convictions, formed only after long and well thought out study, are the people upon whose shoulders rests the future of this country in particular, and even of democracy in general.

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Public Opinion in War and Peace. By A. Lawrence Lowell. Harvard University Press.