

A DANGEROUS TIDE OF INDIFFERENCE

(By the authors of The Politics of Unreason (University of Chicago Press), an analysis of political extremism in America since 1790.)

We may seem to be in a relatively calm period in America, but it may really be the kind of slough of indifference which calls for political storm signals to be set out. The history of divisive and destructive political extremism, in this country and others, has often been prefaced by such indifference.

To begin with, there is evidence that we may be more vulnerable to the political uses of bigotry than we have been for half a century. We are not just talking about prejudice; nor are we just talking about demagogues who appeal to prejudice. We are talking about the large numbers of basically decent people who are willing to "go along" with political bigotry because it is attached to some other issue about which they feel desperate -- and which they feel is unattended.

A few years back, in a calmer period, the American people were asked in a University of California survey whether they would vote for a racist Congressional candidate because of his racism; whether they would vote against him on that account; or whether his racism would not make any difference to them. Only about 5 per cent said they would vote for him because of his racism, but about one third of the American people said it would not make any difference. If he promised them lower taxes, and that's what they wanted, they would accept his racism; if he promised them jobs, and that's what they wanted, they would accept his racism.

That broad acceptance of a deep evil because of an attached good is the political phenomenon which has threatened some societies and destroyed others in the modern era. In the America of the 1920s, the Second Ku Klux Klan gained some mass membership in the Northeast, Midwest and West because it addressed the legitimate concern of many workingmen about diminishing jobs. In the America of the 1930s, Charles E. Coughlin had a followership of millions for his program, which addressed the legitimate concerns of many economically depressed people, but included vicious bigotry.

A survey of those followers found that they were initially no more or less bigoted than those Americans who rejected Coughlin. Most supported him not because of his bigotry but in spite of it. He promised them jobs in the middle of a depression; his newspaper was called Social Justice. Most of his followers supported him on that account and accepted his political bigotry because they were "indifferent" to it. There is evidence that the majority of Germans initially accepted Hitler's bigotry on the same basis. In the case of the Second KKK and Coughlin, America escaped domination by extremist politics partly because of the strength of our democratic institutions and critically because of the timely expansion of our economy.

Today, there is no mass organization like that of the Second KKK or of Coughlin on the American scene, but there are signs of a vulnerability that we have not seen for many years -- varying from a resurgent indifference to bigotry, to the sanctioned appearance of opportunistic demagogues.

There has not, for example, been a notable revulsion against or attention to some of the anti-Asian bigotry that has recently been

manifested in California and elsewhere. The ethnic assault on Asian fishermen in this area is one example. And one can only characterize as "indifference" the reaction of the California press and public to the recent slurs against Japanese Americans uttered by Assemblyman Ferguson of Orange County in the halls of our state legislature. The legitimate complaints and discontents of American small farmers are being fed upon by Midwest demagogues who address some of those complaints but also include a message of bigotry. The legitimate complaints and discontents of American blacks are being fed upon by a Louis Farrakhan, who addresses some of those complaints but also includes a message of bigotry.

In all of this, there is clearly a double indifference involved: the indifference of the society to social problems which grievously afflict many of its citizens; and the indifference of some of those aggrieved citizens to the evil politics which poison demagogically proposed remedies. Both indifferences are self-destructive.

This is not a matter of "political compromise." In a reasonable political compromise, the good obtained stands on its own and, however partial, is not destroyed by the not-so-good. But a political program which contains a core that is fundamentally anti-democratic, such as group bigotry, has no redeeming value and is totally destructive. It has been compared to a fruit infused with a poison that makes the nutritious and seductive portions of the fruit inedible. The most destructive political movements we have known in this century have all had this character.

In the face of this historical knowledge, it is ominously disturbing to see the manifest indifferences gathering on the American

scene. On the one hand, there seems to be mass group-fragmented indifference to the social problems that plague us: to the plight of the small farmers, for example; or of unemployed black youth. Stale programs may not work; inventiveness may be needed -- but will not happen in the face of current indifference. On the other hand, in the face of this mainstream political void, there seems to be a growing indifference to the group bigotry resident in the siren call of demagogues.

If we do not come together, if we are not inspired by some leadership to come together to repel these indifferences -- to communally attack our social problems again and to totally reject the messenger as well as the message of hate -- then we are laying the classic groundwork for a political extremism which can do us all in.