

H. L. Mencken: The Joyous Libertarian

di Murray N. Rothbard

«The extortions and oppressions of government will go on so long as such bare fraudulence deceives and disarms the victims – so long as they are ready to swallow the immemorial official theory that protesting against the stealings of the archbishop’s secretary’s nephew’s mistress’ illegitimate son is a sin against the Holy Ghost». ~ *H. L. Mencken*

It is typical of American *Kultur* that it was incapable of understanding H. L. Mencken. And it was typical of H. L. Mencken that this didn’t bother him a bit; in fact, quite the contrary, for it confirmed his estimate of his fellow-countrymen. It is difficult for Americans to understand a *merger* of high-spirited wit and devotion to principle; one is either a humorist, gently or acidly spoofing the foibles of one’s age, or else one is a serious and solemn thinker. That a man of ebullient wit can be, in a sense, all the more devoted to positive ideas and principles is understood by very few; almost always, he is set down as a pure cynic and nihilist. This was and still is the common fate of H. L. Mencken; but it is no more than he would have cheerfully expected.

Any man who is an individualist and a libertarian in this day and age has a difficult row to hoe. He finds himself in a world marked, if not dominated, by folly, fraud, and tyranny. He has, if he is a reflecting man, three possible courses of action open to him: (1) he may retire from the social and political world into his private occupation: in the case of Mencken’s early partner, George Jean Nathan, he can retire into a world of purely esthetic contemplation; (2) he can set about to try to change the world for the better, or at least to formulate and propagate his views with such an ultimate hope in mind; or, (3) he can stay in the world, enjoying himself immensely at this spectacle of folly. To take this third route requires a special type of personality with a special type of judgment about the world. He must, on the one hand, be an individualist with a serene and unquenchable sense of self-confidence; he must be supremely “inner-directed” with no inner shame or quaking at going against the judgment of the herd. He must, secondly, have a supreme zest for enjoying life and the spectacle it affords; he must be an individualist who cares deeply about liberty and individual excellence, but who can – from that same dedication to truth and liberty – enjoy and lampoon a society that has turned its back on the best that it can achieve. And he must, thirdly, be deeply pessimistic about any possibility of changing and reforming the ideas and actions of the vast majority of his fellow-men. He must believe that *boobus Americanus* is doomed to be *boobus Americanus* forevermore. Put these qualities together, and we are a long way toward explaining the route taken by Henry Louis Mencken.

Of course, Mencken had other qualities, too: enormous gusto, a sparkling wit, a keen and erudite appreciation of many fields of knowledge, a zest for the dramatic events of the everyday world that made him a born journalist. Despite his omnivorous passion for intellectual fields and disciplines, he had no temperament for fashioning rigorous systems of thought – but then, how many people have? All these qualities reinforced his bent for what he became.

A serene and confident individualist, dedicated to competence and excellence and deeply devoted to liberty, but convinced that the bulk of his fellows were beyond repair, Mencken carved out a role unique in American history: he sailed joyously into the fray, slashing and cutting happily into the buncombe and folly he saw all around him, puncturing the balloons of pomposity, gaily cleansing the Augean stables of cant, hypocrisy, absurdity, and cliché, “heaving,” as he once put it, “the dead cat into the temple” to show bemused worshippers of the inane that he would not be struck dead on the spot. And in the course of this task, rarely undertaken in any age, a task performed purely for his own enjoyment, he exercised an enormous liberating force upon the best minds of a whole generation.

It is characteristic of Mencken that one of the things he enjoyed the most was a Presidential convention, which he almost never failed to attend. Here he plunged into the midst of the teeming,

raucous, and absurd throng: into all the hilarity and inanity and excitement of the great American political process itself, his jacket off, swigging beer, partaking of all the fun while missing none of the folly. And then he would write up what he saw, slashing at the cant, hypocrisy, and concentrated nonsense of our governors in action. No one truly immersed in Mencken could emerge quite the same again; no one could retain the same faith in our “statesmen” or in the democratic political process itself, no one could ever be quite the same sucker for all manner of ideological, social, and political quackery, the same worshipper of solemn nonsense.

Mencken’s liberating force, of course, was exerted not on the mass of men, but on the scattered but intelligent few who could appreciate and be influenced by what he had to say; in short, like his old friend and fellow-libertarian, Albert Jay Nock, Mencken wrote for (and liberated) The Remnant who would understand.

The style is truly the man, and not the least of Mencken’s deeds of liberation was the shattering impact of his style. A scholar in the English – or the *American* – language, Mencken had a love for the language, for precision and clarity of the word, a deep respect for his craft, that few writers have possessed. It was not hyperbole when the eminent critic and essayist Joseph Wood Krutch referred to Mencken as “the greatest prose stylist of the twentieth century”; this, too, has gone unrecognized because Americans are generally incapable of taking a witty writer seriously.

The tragedy – for us, not for Mencken himself – is that most of The Remnant didn’t understand either; the bulk of his supposed followers made the same mistake as everyone else in presuming wit and serious purpose cannot be joined; blinded by the wit, they did not realize the positive values which should have been evident in his work. And so those who happily joined Mencken in scoffing at Babbitry, at Prohibition and the Anti-Saloon League, at the wowsers and the Uplift of the 1920’s, abandoned Mencken to enlist in the ranks of the intensified Uplift and the more extravagant wowsers of the 1930’s. The very scorners of the politicians and political nostrums of the ‘twenties, promptly and fiercely subscribed to the far more pernicious nostrums of the political quacks of the New Deal. The same Menckenians who clear-sightedly saw the folly of America’s immersion into World War I, beat the drums loudly and with no trace of humor or hesitation for the equal or greater folly of our entry into World War II. The failure of Mencken’s would-be followers to understand his “message” (a concept he would have abhorred) certainly did not depress Mencken; it only confirmed him in his judgment of the pervasiveness of the “boob-oisie.” But it was a calamity for the country.

If Mencken was not a nihilist, what positive values did he hold? His values included a devoted dedication to his craft – to his work as editor, journalist, linguist. This in turn reflected his thorough-going and pervasive individualism, with its corollary devotion to individual excellence and to individual liberty. They included a life-long passion for music. They included a perhaps excessive zeal for science, the scientific method, and medical orthodoxy; along with the zeal for science came a mechanistic type of determinism which undoubtedly helped to shape his pessimistic view of the possibility of changing the ideas and actions of men.

Mencken’s pervasive individualist *Weltanschauung* gave an unappreciated consistency to his views on many different subjects. It gave a system to his superficially piecemeal forays into innumerable fields. Let us take, for example, such a supposedly “non-political” field as folk-music. It is not accidental that both the Socialist Left and the Nationalist Right – those twin enemies of individualism – in our century have made a virtual fetish of the “people’s” folk-song. Mencken cut to the heart of the matter in his inimitable review of Dr. Louise Pound’s *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*:

“Dr. Pound’s book completely disposes of the theory upon which nine-tenths of all the pedagogical discussions of the ballad and its origins are based. This is the theory that the ballads familiar to all of us...are the product, not of individual authors, but of whole herds of minnesingers working together...in brief, that the primitive balladists first joined in a communal hoofing, then began to moan and hum a tune, and finally fitted words to it. It is difficult to imagine anything more idiotic, and yet this doctrine is cherished as something almost sacred by whole droves of professors and

rammed annually into the skulls of innumerable candidates for the Ph.D. Dr. Pound proves...that the ballads really did not originate that way at all – that they were written, on the contrary, by individual poets with talents...and that most of them first saw the light, not at vulgar shindigs on the village green, but at fashionable and even intellectual ale-parties in castle halls. The notion that *any* respectable work of art can have a communal origin is wholly nonsensical. The plain people, taking them together, are quite as incapable of a coherent esthetic impulse as they are of courage, honesty, or honor. The cathedrals of the Middle Ages were not planned and built by whole communities, but by individual men; and all the communities had to do with the business was to do the hard work, reluctantly and often badly. So with folk-song, folk-myth, folk-balladry.... German folk-song...used to be credited to a mysterious native talent in the German yokelry, but scientific investigation reveals that some of the songs regarded as especially characteristic of the folk-soul were actually written by the director of music at the University of Tubingen, Prof. Dr. Friedrich Silcher....

The English ballads are to be accounted for in the same way. Dr. Pound shows that some of the most famous of them, in their earliest forms, are full of concepts and phrases that would have been as incomprehensible to the English peasantry of Elizabeth's time as the Ehrlich hypothesis of immunity – that it is a sheer impossibility to imagine them being composed by a gang of oafs whooping and galloping around a May pole, or even assembled solemnly in an *Eisteddfod* or *Allgemeinesangerfest*. More, she shows the process of ballad making in our own time – how a song by a Paul Dresser or a Stephen Foster is borrowed by the folk, and then gradually debased”.¹

The myth of Mencken as a mocking nihilist has pervaded literary criticism; it was with surprise and much admiration, then, that the eminent critic Samuel Putnam read Mencken's great collection of short pieces – selected and edited by himself – the *Mencken Chrestomathy*. In a perceptive review, Putnam wrote that it was now evident that Mencken was a “Tory anarchist.” “Tory anarchist” is indeed an excellent summation of Mencken's life-long world-view.

Mencken's guiding passion was individual liberty. To his good friend Hamilton Owens, he once solemnly declared: “I believe in only one thing and that thing is human liberty. If ever a man is to achieve anything like dignity, it can happen only if superior men are given absolute freedom to think what they want to think and say what they want to say. I am against any man and any organization which seeks to limit or deny that freedom. . . [and] the superior man can be sure of freedom only if it is given to all men.”² At another time he wrote that he believed in absolute individual liberty “up to the limit of the unbearable, and even beyond.” In a privately written “Addendum on Aims,” Mencken wrote that “I am an extreme libertarian, and believe in absolute free speech. . . . I am against jailing men for their opinions, or, for that matter, for anything else.”³ And in a letter to one of his biographers, Ernest Boyd, Mencken wrote: “So far as I can make out, I believe in only one thing: liberty. But I do not believe in even liberty enough to want to force it upon anyone. That is, I am nothing of the reformer, however much I may rant against this or that great curse or malaise. In that ranting there is usually far more delight than indignation.”⁴

The *Chrestomathy* contains some brilliant writing on what Mencken captioned as the “inner nature” of government:

“All government, in its essence, is a conspiracy against the superior man; its one permanent object is to oppress him and cripple him. If it be aristocratic in organization, then it seeks to protect the man who is superior only in law against the man who is superior in fact; if it be democratic, then it seeks to protect the man who is inferior in every way against both. One of its primary functions is to regiment men by force, to make them as much alike as possible and as dependent upon one another as possible, to search out and combat originality among them. All it can see in an original idea is potential change, and hence an invasion of its prerogatives. The most dangerous man, to any government, is the man who is able to think things out for himself, without regard to the prevailing superstitions and taboos. Almost inevitably he comes to the conclusion that the government he lives under is dishonest, insane and intolerable, and so, if he is romantic, he tries to change it. And even if he is not romantic personally he is very apt to spread discontent among those who are....

The average man, whatever his errors otherwise, at least sees clearly that government is something lying outside him and outside the generality of his fellow-men – that it is a separate, independent and often hostile power, only partly under his control, and capable of doing him great harm. In his romantic moments, he may think of it as a benevolent father or even as a sort of *jinn* or god, but he never thinks of it as part of himself. In time of trouble he looks to it to perform miracles for his benefit; at other times he sees it as an enemy with which he must do constant battle. Is it a fact of no little significance that robbing the government is everywhere regarded as a crime of less magnitude than robbing an individual?...

What lies behind all this, I believe, is a deep sense of the fundamental antagonism between the government and the people it governs. It is apprehended, not as a committee of citizens chosen to carry on the communal business of the whole population, but as a separate and autonomous corporation, mainly devoted to exploiting the population for the benefit of its own members. Robbing it is thus an act almost devoid of infamy.... When a private citizen is robbed a worthy man is deprived of the fruits of his industry and thrift; when the government is robbed the worst that happens is that certain rogues and loafers have less money to play with than they had before. The notion that they have earned that money is never entertained; to most sensible men it would seem ludicrous. They are simply rascals who, by accidents of law, have a somewhat dubious right to a share in the earnings of their fellow men. When that share is diminished by private enterprise the business is, on the whole, far more laudable than not.

This gang is well-nigh immune to punishment. Its worst extortions, even when they are baldly for private profit, carry no certain penalties under our laws. Since the first days of the Republic, less than a dozen of its members have been impeached, and only a few obscure understrappers have ever been put into prison. The number of men sitting at Atlanta and Leavenworth for revolting against the extortions of government is always ten times as great as the number of government officials condemned for oppressing the taxpayers to their own gain.... There are no longer any citizens in the world; there are only subjects. They work day in and day out for their masters; they are bound to die for their masters at call.... On some bright tomorrow, a geological epoch or two hence, they will come to the end of their endurance...”.⁵

Mencken had little faith in the ability of revolutions to effect an overthrow on behalf of liberty: “Political revolutions do not often accomplish anything of genuine value; their one undoubted effect is simply to throw out one gang of thieves and put in another. After a revolution, of course, the successful revolutionists always try to convince doubters that they have achieved great things, and usually they hang any man who denies it. But that surely doesn’t prove their case.” This blend of libertarian doctrine and pessimism on achieving it was summed up by Mencken: “The ideal government of all reflective men...is one which lets the individual alone – one which barely escapes being no government at all. This ideal, I believe, will be realized in the world twenty or thirty centuries after I have passed from these scenes and taken up my public duties in Hell.”⁶

Mencken saw clearly the fallacy of treating government officials as uniquely motivated by the public weal:

“These men, in point of fact, are seldom if ever moved by anything rationally describable as public spirit; there is actually no more public spirit among them than among so many burglars or street-walkers. Their purpose, first, last and all the time, is to promote their private advantage, and to that end, and that end alone, they exercise all the vast powers that are in their hands.... Whatever it is they seek, whether security, greater ease, more money or more power, it has to come out of the common stock, and so it diminishes the shares of all other men. Putting a new job-holder to work decreases the wages of every wage-earner in the land... Giving a job-holder more power takes something away from the liberty of all of us....”

Mencken goes on to add, on the nature of government and attempts to stem its incursions:

“It is, perhaps, a fact provocative of sour mirth that the Bill of Rights was designed trustfully to prohibit forever two of the favorite crimes of all known governments: the seizure of private property without adequate compensation and the invasion of the citizen’s liberty without justifiable

cause.... It is a fact provocative of mirth yet more sour that the execution of these prohibitions was put into the hands of courts, which is to say, into the hands of lawyers, which is to say, into the hands of men specifically educated to discover legal excuses for dishonest, dishonorable and anti-social acts".⁷

One of the major forces keeping governmental tyranny unchecked, Mencken pointed out, was the credulity of the masses of men: "The State is not force alone. It depends upon the credulity of man quite as much as upon his docility. Its aim is not merely to make him obey, but also to make him want to obey."⁸

Is government sometimes useful? Answered Mencken:

"So is a doctor. But suppose the dear fellow claimed the right, every time he was called in to prescribe for a bellyache or a ringing in the ears, to raid the family silver, use the family tooth-brushes, and execute the *droit de seigneur* upon the housemaid?"⁹

Neither did Mencken have any greater affection for the military caste than for the civilian bureaucracy:

"The military caste did not originate as a party of patriots, but as a party of bandits. The primeval bandit chiefs eventually became kings. Something of the bandit character still attaches to the military professional. He may fight bravely and unselfishly, but so do gamecocks. He may seek no material rewards, but neither do hunting dogs. His general attitude of mind is stupid and anti-social. It was a sound instinct in the Founding Fathers that made them subordinate the military establishment to the civil power. To be sure, the civil power consists largely of political scoundrels, but they at least differ in outlook and purpose from the military..."¹⁰

No one excelled Mencken in what he called "Utopian flights" – hilarious and magnificent projects for libertarian reform of government, or of society in general. Thus, in a piece written in 1924, before, as he put it, "the New Deal afflicted the country with a great mass of new administrative law and extra-tyrannical jobholders," Mencken proposed a searching reform in our system of administrative law. He begins by saying that "in the immoral monarchies of the continent of Europe, now happily abolished by God's will, there was, in the old days of sin, an intelligent and effective way of dealing with delinquent officials." Not only, he adds, were they subjects to ordinary criminal law but *also* to special courts for "offenses...peculiar to their offices." Prussia maintained a court where any citizen was free to lodge a complaint against an official, and a guilty official could be punished in many ways – forced to pay damages against a victimized citizen, removed from office, and/or sent to jail. "Had a Prussian judge in those far-off days of despotism, overcome by a brainstorm of *kaiserliche* passion, done any of the high-handed and irrational things that our own judges, Federal and State, do almost every day, an aggrieved citizen might have hailed him before the administrative court and recovered heavy damages from him..." Furthermore, the law "specifically provided that responsible officials should be punished, not more leniently than subordinate or ordinary offenders, but more severely. If a corrupt policeman got six months a corrupt chief of police got two years. More, these statutes were enforced with Prussian barbarity; and the jails were constantly full of errant officials."

Mencken adds that he does not precisely propose, "of course," the Prussian system for the United States:

"As a matter of fact, the Prussian scheme would probably prove ineffective in the Republic, if only because it involved setting up one gang of jobholders to judge and punish another gang. It worked very well in Prussia before the country was civilized by force of arms because, as everyone knows, a Prussian official was trained in ferocity from infancy, and regarded every man arraigned before him, whether a fellow official or not, as guilty *ipso facto*; in fact, any thought of a prisoner's possible innocence was abhorrent to him as a reflection upon the *Polizei*, and by inference, upon the Throne, the whole monarchical idea, and God. But in America...judge and prisoner would often be fellow Democrats or fellow Republicans, and hence jointly interested in protecting their party against scandal and its members against the loss of their jobs".

“What is needed,” concluded Mencken, “is a system (a) that does not depend for its execution upon the good-will of fellow jobholders, and (b) that provides swift, certain and unpedantic punishments, each fitted neatly to its crime.” Mencken’s proposed remedy

“provides that any [citizen]...having looked into the acts of a jobholder and found him delinquent, may punish him instantly and on the spot, and in any manner that seems appropriate and convenient – and that, in case this punishment involves physical damage to the jobholder, the ensuing inquiry by the grand jury or coroner shall confine itself strictly to the question whether the jobholder deserved what he got. In other words, I propose that it shall no longer be *malum in se* for a citizen to pummel, cowhide, kick, gouge, cut, wound, bruise, maim, burn, club, bastinado, flay, or even lynch a jobholder, and that it shall be *malum prohibitum* only to the extent that the punishment exceeds the jobholder’s desserts. The amount of this excess, if any, may be determined very conveniently by a petit jury, as other questions of guilt are now determined.... If it decides that the jobholder deserves the punishment inflicted upon him, the citizen who inflicted it is acquitted with honor. If, on the contrary, it decides that the punishment was excessive, then the citizen is adjudged guilty of assault, mayhem, murder, or whatever it is, in a degree apportioned to the difference between what the jobholder deserved and what he got, and punishment for that excess follows in the usual course....

The advantages of this plan, I believe, are too patent to need argument. At one stroke it removes all the legal impediments which now make the punishment of a recreant jobholder so hopeless a process.... Say a citizen today becomes convinced that a certain judge is a jack-ass – that his legal learning is defective, his sense of justice atrophied, and his conduct of cases before him tyrannical and against decency. As things stand, it is impossible to do anything about it.... Nor is anything to be gained by denouncing him publicly and urging all good citizens to vote against him when he comes up for re-election, for his term may run for ten or fifteen years, and even if it expires tomorrow and he is defeated the chances are good that his successor will be quite as bad, and maybe even worse.

But now imagine any citizen free to approach him in open court and pull his nose. Or even, in aggravated cases, to cut off his ears, throw him out of the window, or knock him in the head with an ax. How vastly more attentive he would be to his duties! How diligently he would apply himself to the study of the law! How careful he would be about the rights of litigants before him!”¹¹

Mencken’s concern for the parlous state of liberty in America, and with the virtual immunity granted to its oppressors, was never expressed with more hilarity or bitter irony than in his article on “The Nature of Liberty” – written in the early 1920’s but in no sense out of date. His theme is the police vs. the individual citizen. He begins in irony: “Every time an officer of the constabulary, in the execution of his just and awful powers under American law, produces a compound fracture of the occiput of some citizen in his custody, with hemorrhage, shock, coma, and death, there comes a feeble, falsetto protest from specialists in human liberty.” “Is it a fact without significance,” Mencken continues, “that this protest is never supported by the great body of American freemen, setting aside the actual heirs and creditors of the victim? I think not.” For the plain people understand that policemen are given night-sticks “for the purpose of cracking the skulls of the recalcitrant plain people, Democrats and Republicans alike.”

It is clear, therefore, Mencken continued to spoof, that this minority of intellectuals concerned with civil liberty and individual rights as against the police are subversive and un-American:

“The specialists aforesaid are the same fanatics who shake the air with sobs every time the Postmaster-General of the United States bars a periodical from the mails because its ideas do not please him, and every time some poor Russian is deported for reading Karl Marx, and every time a Prohibition enforcement officer murders a bootlegger who resists his levies, and every time agents of the Department of Justice throw an Italian out of the window, and every time the Ku Klux Klan or the American Legion tars and feathers a Socialist evangelist. In brief, they are Radicals, and to scratch one with a pitchfork is to expose a Bolshevik. They are men standing in contempt of American institutions and in enmity to American idealism....

What ails them primarily is...that...having mastered...the theoretical principles set forth in the Bill of Rights, they work themselves into a passionate conviction that those principles are identical with the rules of law and justice, and ought to be enforced literally, and without the slightest regard for circumstance and expediency.

They did not realize, added Mencken, that the Bill of Rights as originally adopted by the Fathers of the Republic...was gross, crude, idealistic, a bit fanciful and transcendental. It specified the rights of a citizen, but it said nothing whatever about his duties. Since then, by the orderly processes of legislative science and by the even more subtle and beautiful devices of juridic art, it has been kneaded and mellowed into a far greater pliability and reasonableness. On the one hand, the citizen still retains the great privilege of membership in the most superb free nation ever witnessed on this earth. On the other hand, as a result of countless shrewd enactments and sagacious decisions, his natural lusts and appetites are held in laudable check, and he is thus kept in order and decorum.... Once a policeman, he is protected by the legislative and judicial arms in the peculiar rights and prerogatives that go with his high office, including especially the right to jug the laity at his will, to sweat and mug them, to subject them to the third degree, and to subdue their resistance by beating out their brains. Those who are unaware of this are simply ignorant of the basic principles of American jurisprudence, as they have been exposed times without number by the courts of first instance and ratified in lofty terms by the Supreme Court of the United States".¹²

Mencken's devoted services to civil liberty, his opposition to censorship as editor of the *American Mercury*, are too well-known to need repeating here. But less known is Mencken's searching dissection of the myth of Mr. Justice Holmes as, in his dissenting opinions, a great civil libertarian. Mencken keenly pointed out that "it is impossible to see how...[Holmes' opinions] can conceivably promote liberty." It was misleading to consider Holmes an advocate of the rights of man; rather, "he was actually no more than an advocate of the rights of law-makers. There, indeed, is the clue to his whole jurisprudence. He believed that the law-making bodies should be free to experiment almost *ad libitum*, that the courts should not call a halt upon them until they clearly passed the uttermost bounds of reason, that everything should be sacrificed to their autonomy, including, apparently, even the Bill of Rights. If this is Liberalism, then all I can say is that Liberalism is not what it was when I was young".¹³

Mencken had no particular interest in economic matters, but he saw clearly that capitalism, the consequent of individual liberty in the economic sphere, was the most productive and rational economic system. He bitterly opposed the New Deal for being anti-capitalist as well as anti-libertarian. Of capitalism, Mencken wrote:

"We owe to it almost everything that passes under the general name of civilization today. The extraordinary progress of the world since the Middle Ages has not been due to the mere expenditure of human energy, nor even to the flights of human genius, for men have worked hard since the remotest times, and some of them had been of surpassing intellect. No, it has been due to the accumulation of capital. That accumulation...provided the machinery that gradually diminished human drudgery, and liberated the spirit of the worker, who had formerly been almost indistinguishable from a mule".¹⁴

His old friend, Hamilton Owens, writes of Mencken's vehement anger at Roosevelt's taking America off the gold standard. "With all the vehemence of which he was capable he insisted it was downright robbery. He talked about taking court action in person."¹⁵ In correspondence with the famous socialist, Upton Sinclair, who had evidently plied him with the old well-tested bromide on the supposed efficiency of government post offices, fire departments, public health services, etc., Mencken, instead of hastily retreating and compromising, as most conservatives do when faced with similar challenges, riposted:

"Your questions are easy. The government brings my magazine to you only unwillingly. It tried to ruin my business, [*The American Mercury*] and failed only by an inch. It charges too much for postal orders, and loses too many of them. A corporation of idiot Chinamen could do the thing

better. Its machine for putting out fires is intolerably expensive and inefficient. It seldom, in fact, actually puts out a fire; they burn out.... The Army had nothing to do with the discovery of the cause of yellow fever. Its bureaucrats persecuted the men who did the work. They could have done it much more quickly if they had been outside the Army. It took years of effort to induce the government to fight mosquitoes, and it does the work very badly today”.¹⁶

And, in a significant but forgotten review of the individualist Sir Ernest Benn’s *The Confessions of A Capitalist*, Mencken wrote that Benn

“devotes most of his book to proving what the majority of Americans regard as axiomatic: that the capitalistic system, whatever its defects, yet works better than any other system so far devised by man. The rest of his space he gives over to proofs that government is inevitably extravagant and wasteful – that nothing it does is ever done as cheaply and efficiently as the same thing might be done by private enterprise. I see nothing to object to here”.

And Mencken immediately adds:

“Even the most precious functions of government – say, collecting taxes or hanging men – would be better done if the doing of them were farmed out to Ford”.¹⁷

The great individualist Albert Jay Nock has written that, while in the 1920’s he was generally considered a flaming “radical,” and in the 1930’s as a bitter “reactionary,” his political philosophy remained, in these decades, exactly the same. The same might be said of his friend Mencken, who also remained, throughout, an individualist and a libertarian. In the 1920’s, Mencken directed his fire against the tariff and other special privileges to favored business groups, against laws and edicts against free speech and other personal liberties, and especially against the monstrous tyranny of Prohibition. In the 1930’s, Mencken directed his major attacks against the major threat to liberty of that era: the New Deal. The former Menckenites of the 1920’s and his new-found conservative champions of the 1930’s, each, in believing that Mencken had now shifted from Left to Right, showed that they understood neither Mencken nor the principles of liberty. Often, what was mistaken for anti-capitalism was simply a cultural and esthetic distaste that Mencken had for the bulk of businessmen (“Babbitts”) as persons – a distaste which they shared with the common run – the “mass-men” – of other occupations. But Mencken’s antipathy to the cultural tastes of individual capitalists must not be confused – as he never did – with opposition to capital-ism as such.

Looking back on the two eras as early as 1934, Mencken wrote to a friend:

“If I really believed that I had Left a Mark upon my Time I think I’d leap into the nearest ocean. This is no mere fancy talk. It is based on the fact that I believe the American people are more insane today than they were when I began to write. Certainly the Rotarians at their worst never concocted anything as preposterous as some of the inventions of the Brain Trust. They were harmless fools, seeking to formulate a substitute for the Christianity that was slipping from them. But the Brain Trusters, at least in large part, are maniacal fanatics, and will lead us down to ruin if they are not soon suppressed”.¹⁸

One of the delightful aspects of Mencken, indeed, is the constancy of his views. As he once, at the age of sixty, playfully wrote to a friend: “On all known subjects, ranging from aviation to xylophone-playing, I have fixed and invariable ideas. They have not changed since I was four or five years old.”¹⁹

In his charming, mellow, affectionate, and witty autobiography on his life as a child, *Happy Days*, Mencken recalls imbibing his “reactionary” views at his father’s knee:

“His moral system, as I try to piece it together after so many years, seems to have been predominantly Chinese. All mankind, in his sight, was divided into two great races: those who paid their bills, and those who didn’t. The former were virtuous, despite any evidence that could be adduced to the contrary; the latter were unanimously and incurably scoundrels.

He had a very tolerant view of all other torts and malfeasances. He believed that political corruption was inevitable under democracy, and even argued, out of his own experience, that it had its uses. One of his favorite anecdotes was about a huge swinging sign that used to hang outside his place of business in Paca street. When the building was built, in 1885, he simply hung out the sign, sent for

the city councilman of the district, and gave him \$20. This was in full settlement forevermore of all permit and privilege fees, easement taxes, and other such costs and imposts. The city councilman pocketed the money, and in return was supposed to stave off any cops, building inspectors, or other functionaries who had any lawful interest in the matter, or tried to horn in for private profit. Being an honorable man according to his lights, he kept his bargain, and the sign flapped and squeaked in the breeze for ten years. But then, in 1895, Baltimore had a reform wave, the councilman was voted out of office, and the idealists in the City Hall sent word that a license to maintain the sign would cost \$62.75 *a year*. It came down the next day.

This was proof to my father that reform was mainly only a conspiracy of prehensile charlatans to mulct tax-payers. I picked up this idea from him, and entertain it to the present day. I also picked up his doctrine that private conduct had better not be inquired into too closely – with the exception, of course of any kind involving beating a creditor”.²⁰

The firmness of Mencken’s libertarianism may also be gauged by the numerous quotations from libertarian and even unknown anarchist authors in his *New Dictionary of Quotations*.²¹ Thus, in his section on the “State,” the great bulk of the quotations are anti-State, and the remainder are so extremely pro-State that the effect on the reader is emphatically ironic. An example of the latter is “The National Socialist party is the state – Adolf Hitler.” And the anti-State quotations are taken largely from highly individualist or anarchist sources: Emerson, Max Stirner, Thoreau, Bakunin, William Graham Sumner, Kropotkin, Tolstoy, and Benjamin R. Tucker. It is doubtful if someone not highly sympathetic with these authors would (1) know their writings with such familiarity, and (2) “pack” such sections with their quotations. The section on “Speech, Free” is, again, almost exclusively filled with pro-free speech quotations, including not only Macaulay, Jefferson, James Mill, and various judges, but also the quasi-anarchistic English individualist, Auberon Herbert.

H. L. Mencken’s contempt for democracy is well-known. It stemmed largely from his primary devotion to individual liberty, and his insight that the bulk of men – the democratic majority – is generally inclined to suppress rather than defend the liberty of the individual. Mencken once summed up his view of the nature of democracy, the common man, and the State in this eight-word definition of “democracy”: “Democracy is the worship of jackals by jackasses.” Other Menckonian definitions: “Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.” “If x is the population of the United States and y is the degree of imbecility of the average American, then democracy is the theory that x times y is less than y .” All of democracy’s axioms “resolve themselves into thundering paradoxes, many amounting to downright contradictions in terms. The mob is competent to rule the rest of us – but it must be rigorously policed itself. There is a government, not of men, but laws – but men are set upon benches to decide finally what the law is and may be.”²² On democracy’s inherent tendency to suppress liberty, Mencken wrote in a private letter:

“All appeals to any intrinsic love of free speech are futile. There is no such passion in the people. It is only an aristocracy that is ever tolerant. The masses are invariably cocksure, suspicious, furious, and tyrannical. This, in fact, is the central objection to democracy: that it hinders progress by penalizing innovation and non-conformity”.²³

Mencken’s atheism is, again, well-known, but for him passionate hostility was reserved for those religious groups which persisted in imposing their moral codes by coercion upon the rest of the population. In Mencken’s day, the prime example was Prohibition: and therefore Mencken’s hostility was directed chiefly toward the Methodists and Baptists. In contrast, Mencken had no particular animus against the Roman Catholics (especially the non-Irish sections): “Catholics are not Prohibitionists, they have more humor than the Methodists,” he is supposed to have said once, and he was apparently friendly with quite a few members of the Catholic clergy.

The linkage in Mencken’s thought between religious coercion of morals, democracy, the common man, and tyranny over the individual, may be seen in one of his most uproarious articles – his blistering attack upon the American farmer:

“The same mountebanks who get to Washington by promising to augment his [the farmer’s] gains and make good his losses devote whatever time is left over from that enterprise to saddling the rest of us with oppressive and idiotic laws, all hatched on the farm. There, where the cows low through the still night, and the jug of Peruna stands behind the stove, and bathing begins, as at Biarritz, with the vernal equinox – there is the reservoir of all the non-sensical legislation which makes the United States a buffoon among the great nations. It was among country Methodists, practitioners of a theology degraded almost to the level of voodooism, that Prohibition was invented, and it was by country Methodists...that it was fastened upon the rest of us, to the damage of our bank accounts, our dignity and our viscera. What lay under it, and under all the other crazy enactments of its category, was no more and no less than the yokel’s congenital and incurable hatred of the city man – his simian rage against everyone who, as he sees it, is having a better time than he is”.²⁴

Mencken’s view of the hostility of the common man toward liberty was also expressed in his insight into the truly puzzling question: How did the overwhelming majority of conscripts manage to adjust so readily to the enslavement of Army life?

“All save a small minority of them came from environments a great deal less comfortable than an Army camp.... At one stroke they were relieved of that haunting uncertainty about subsistence which is the curse of all poor and ignorant young men, and also of all need to experiment and decide for themselves. They were fed and clothed at the public expense...and could engage freely in sports and other divertissements forbidden in their native places. Their lives, in brief, were not unlike those of the inmates of a well-run prison, but with...the constant expectation of release on some near tomorrow – not as wards of nosey cops and parole officers, but as heroes.... Not only did someone else decide what they should wear, where they should sleep, when they should get up and when they should go to bed, and what they should eat and when: all these accommodations were provided for them plentifully, and at no expense to themselves. In brief, the burden of responsibility was lifted from them altogether.

The average soldier...found in the Army a vastly more spacious life, with many of the privileges of a chartered libertine.... If he did a little stealing it was one of his privileges as a savior of humanity. If he was rough and brutal it was a sign of his fighting spirit. Moreover, he could look forward to distinction and respect for the rest of his life, with a long list of special privileges. In every community in America, however small, there are local notables whose notability rests wholly on the fact that they were once drafted into some war or other.... Their general intelligence is shown by the kind of ideas they advocate. They are, in the main, bitter enemies of the liberty of the individual, and are responsible for some of the worst corruptions of politics. The most grasping of all politicians is the war veteran”.²⁵

Mencken, in fact, was an arch “isolationist” who bitterly opposed American entry into both World Wars I and II. He often remarked that he was opposed to intervention in both wars, but that if America *had to* intervene, it should have intervened on the other side. In April, 1942, he wrote jocularly to a friend: “The coming summer promises to provide Christian men with the best show seen on earth since the Crusades. I am looking forward to it with the most eager anticipations. I only hope that if the Japs actually take California they are polite to you.”²⁶ And to his old friend Harry Elmer Barnes, Mencken wrote, in September, 1943, that “I am so constituted that I have to either Tell It All or stay silent altogether. In this war, as in the last, it seems to me to be most rational to save up what I have to say until it can be said freely.”²⁷

Mencken’s reaction to the dropping of the atom bomb was understandably bitter. Two years after the event, he wrote to Julian Boyd that

“The atom bomb, I have long preached, is the greatest invention that Yahweh has made since Leprosy. Certainly it has given great glory to the Christian physicists of this country. Try to imagine a decent cannibal throwing it on a town full of women and children”.²⁸

Mencken was particularly concerned with the well-nigh absolute suppression of civil liberties that seems inevitably to stem from participation in war, and in the conduct of World War I he saw the exemplar of his jaundiced view of democracy, the State, foreign intervention, and the common man.

One of Mencken's funniest "buffooneries" was his proposal to decorate lavishly the "home front" heroes of World War I:

"What I propose is a variety of the Distinguished Service Medal for civilians...to mark off varying services to democracy.... for the university president who prohibited the teaching of the enemy language in his learned grove, heaved the works of Goethe out of the university library, cashiered every professor unwilling to support Woodrow for the first vacancy in the Trinity, took to the stump for the National Security League, and made two hundred speeches in moving picture theaters for this giant of loyal endeavor let no 100 percent American speak of anything less than the grand cross of the order, with a gold badge in stained glass, a baldric of the national colors, a violet plug hat with a sunburst on the side, the privilege of the floor of Congress, and a pension of \$10,000 a year....

Palmer and Burleson leave for special legislation. If mere university presidents, such as Nicholas Murray Butler, are to have the grand cross, then Palmer deserves to be rolled in malleable gold from head to foot, and polished until he blinds the cosmos..."²⁹

There is no space here to discuss Mencken's other notable contributions – his dissections of Veblen, Wilson, and Theodore Roosevelt, his being the first person to write books on Nietzsche or George Bernard Shaw, his.... But let it suffice to say that America desperately needs another Mencken, and that the reader should consider the above a tantalizing sample of Menckeniana to spur him toward more of the rich and copious product available. There is no better way of concluding than to turn to Mencken's noble and moving Credo, written for a "What I Believe" series in a leading magazine:

"I believe that no discovery of fact, however trivial, can be wholly useless to the race, and that no trumpeting of falsehood, however virtuous in intent, can be anything but vicious.

I believe that all government is evil, in that all government must necessarily make war upon liberty, and that the democratic form is as bad as any of the other forms....

I believe in complete freedom of thought and speech – alike for the humblest man and the mightiest, and in the utmost freedom of conduct that is consistent with living in organized society.

I believe in the capacity of man to conquer his world, and to find out what it is made of, and how it is run. I believe in the reality of progress. I --

But the whole thing, after all, may be put very simply. I believe that it is better to tell the truth than to lie. I believe that it is better to be free than to be a slave. And I believe that it is better to know than to be ignorant"³⁰.

Notes

1 H. L. Mencken. *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf. 1949). pp. 471-72.

2 Guy J. Fogue. ed., *Letters of H. L. Mencken* (New York: Knopf. 1961), p. xiii.

3 Ibid., p. 189.

4 Ibid., p. 281.

5 Mencken *Chrestomathy*, pp. 145-48.

6 Ibid., p. 146.

7 H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: A Selection*, ed. by James T. Farrell (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), pp. 180-82.

8 H. L. Mencken. *Minority Report: H. L. Mencken's Notebooks* (New York: Knopf. 1956). p. 217.

9 Mencken. *Prejudices*, p. 187.

10 Mencken. *Minority Report*. p. 217.

11 *Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 384-387.

12 Mencken. *Prejudices*. pp. 138-43.

13 *Mencken Chrestomathy*, p. 259.

14 Ibid., p. 294.

15 Mencken. *Letters*, p. xii.

- 16 Ibid., p. 295.
- 17 [H. L. Mencken] , “Babbitt as Philosopher,” *The American Mercury* (September, 1926), pp. 126-27. For a definitive bibliography of Mencken’s writings, see Betty Adler, comp., *H. L. M.: The Mencken Bibliography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1961).
- 18 Mencken, *Letters*, pp. 374-75.
- 19 Ibid., p. 444.
- 20 H. L. Mencken. *The Days of H. L. Mencken* (New York: Knopf, 1947), pp. 251-52.
- 21 H. L. Mencken. *A New Dictionary of Quotations: On Historical Principles from Ancient and Modern Sources* (New York: Knopf, 1942).
- 22 *Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 167-68.
- 23 Mencken. *Letters*, p. 109.
- 24 Mencken *Chrestomathy*, pp. 363-64.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 93-95.
- 26 Mencken, *Letters*, p. 463.
- 27 Ibid., p. 476.
- 28 Ibid., p. 501.
- 29 *Mencken Chrestomathy*, pp. 601-05.
- 30 H. L. Mencken, “What I Believe,” *The Forum* (September, 1930), p. 139.