

MERCY for the ROSENBERGS

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THE American people are a merciful people. American sympathies are ever awakened by human suffering. In a thousand ways, among which our vast benevolences furnish glorious examples, Americans have demonstrated that they are warm-hearted and not hard-hearted. Brotherhood is our ideal, recurrently acclaimed within our several religions as well as by our unchurched. All of us have, at times, fallen short of those ideals. But, deep in our souls, we cherish those ideals. Rare is the American who does not honor mercy and does not revere brotherhood.

Also among American ideals is that of loyalty to the United States. Sometimes religious ideals and national ideals conflict, and devout people occasionally affirm that there is a law of God which is higher than the law of the state. This is not our own position. Most of us defer to the laws of the state without reservation. The laws of the state should be obeyed. To the laws of the state, everyone owes allegiance.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg have been convicted of a law violation. Large numbers of people look upon this conviction as unjust, like the conviction of Leo Frank or Alfred Dreyfus or others who, though pronounced guilty, were subsequently proved innocent. Some deem Julius and Ethel Rosenberg innocent. There are also those who, while non-committal as to the couple's guilt or innocence, do nonetheless insist that the trial was unfairly conducted. Persons versed in the law have pointed out what they regard as improprieties in the proceedings. But we shall waive all this. Let us concede that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg did commit the crime with which they are charged. Let us grant that the trial entailed no breach of justice. Still, is it compatible with the finest in the American spirit that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg be put to death?

It is argued that, through the betrayal of atomic secrets by the Rosenbergs, Russia gained a military advantage. That the act alleged of the Rosenbergs imparted to Russia any military advantage has, by no means, been proved. But granted that such advantage for Russia might have ensued, others convicted of the identical crime—Fuchs, Greenglass, Gold, Sobell, Slack, Simons, May, Brothman—have not been sentenced to die: they have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment. If the death penalty was, in those other cases, not requisite for our national defense, why should it be so regarded in the case of the Rosenbergs?

UNIQUE FACTORS

THE misdeed imputed to the Rosenbergs is said to have had its inception in 1944 and 1945. At that time, the United States and Russia were allies. It is difficult to see why Russia should, at that time, have found espionage at all necessary. The United States was, at that time, sharing its military secrets with Russia as it was with England and with Canada. As matter of public record, Harry Hopkins himself, at that period, mediated the transfer of nuclear materials to the Soviets. The law against atomic espionage does not, it is true, distinguish between a friendly power and a hostile power. It forbids the betrayal of atomic secrets to *any* foreign power. But must the punishment be made equally severe in both

instances? There is a huge difference between a friendly power and a hostile power. In the breadth of that difference, is there no room for mercy?

The law violation of which the Rosenbergs are accused is alleged to have occurred at a time when the atomic bomb was unknown to everyone except a few highly trained experts; it was prior to Hiroshima. The day after Hiroshima, all of us knew about the atomic bomb. Previous to Hiroshima, none of us knew. Even if the Rosenbergs did conspire to betray atomic secrets, they could not possibly have comprehended the import of what they were doing. Clemency to the Rosenbergs can, in no way, constitute a precedent against the death sentence for future infractions. The factors in the case are utterly unique. Never can those same factors recur.

All of this applies regardless of what might be said about the people by whom the Rosenbergs are being aided. Among those seeking to save the Rosenbergs are people of all political parties, several religious cults, and various walks of life. All of them are people like the reader and the writer of these words, Americans whose interests lie in America, who have everything to gain if America gains and everything to lose if America loses. By no stretch of the imagination, can any friend of the Rosenbergs, in any way, profit by anything through which America is injured.

The sinister word "Communism" has entered into the situation. There are words which, by a kind of fatal spell, dissipate thought and generate fury. Among such words, "Communism" plays at present a dreadful role. The word conveys so many different meanings that it has become almost void of meaning but, the less meaning a word holds, the greater sometimes its potency for passions which unbalance thinking.

THE OMINOUS WORD

LONG before the cold war began, a communist was understood to be someone who aims to overthrow the United States government "by force and violence." Our imbroglio with Russia has, during the last seven years, woefully intensified this charge. A communist is now asserted to be someone who promotes the interests of Russia in opposition to the interests of the United States. Would it be out of place to ask the reader: Have you ever met anyone who advocated the overthrow of the United States? Have you ever read any book, article or pamphlet which urged such overthrow? Have you ever heard any public speaker recommend such overthrow? It is sometimes maintained that people harbor such designs but keep them secret, forbearing to express them openly. Yet how can we possibly know anyone's unexpressed thoughts? With equal warrant, one might accuse, of clandestine subversiveness, Dwight Eisenhower, Adlai E. Stevenson, Harry S. Truman or Robert A. Taft. Still, let us suppose that the friends of the Rosenbergs consist only of traitors. How does that touch the merits of the Rosenberg case? How does that alter the preciousness of mercy? Must the Rosenbergs suffer because of the sins of their friends?

The truth will have to be sought in the sinuosities of the human mind. Every life is beset with frustrations. All of us suffer vexation and disappointment. Psychologists have studied the tendency of organisms, whether human or animal, to retaliate for frustrations by striking back. If the organism can not reach its real offender, it attacks some substitute, some "displacement," as the psychologists call it; like the man who, reprimanded by his employer, yet not daring to answer his employer, comes home and vents his spleen on his wife and his children; or like the boy who resented the domination of his father but, powerless to get even with his father, waited twenty-five years and shot down "Father" Abraham. That boy's name was John Wilkes Booth. This displacement of grievances is a familiar psychological phenomenon. Unable to get at those who are the real causes of our woes, we wreak vengeance on scapegoats.

OUR BASIC TROUBLE

FOR some people, the scapegoat is the Jew. For others, it is the Catholic. For still others, it is the "capitalists" or "Wall Street." The favorite scapegoat of the present hour is the "communists." This does not deny that there really are people who call themselves communists and who feverishly advance extreme theories about the obligations of the privileged toward the under-privileged. Most of us Americans dissent from those theories, even though the Republican Party and the Democratic Party to which we belong may count, among their followers, people holding views but slightly less radical. The fact is that the opinions propounded by the communists have little to do with the conflict. Communism is, for us, hardly a vehicle of political or economic ideas. It has grown to be an unconscious symbol of the troubles which embitter our lives.

Regrettably the Rosenberg case has become implicated with that deadly word. Were the case to be judged on its merits, a great swell of protest would arise against the sentence of death. Public opinion would encourage and support the President in commuting the sentence.* The issue has unhappily gotten entangled in clichés which cause Americans to forget that Americans are merciful.

One is reminded of the adage, "Know thyself." If we would look deeply into our souls, we might find that our troubles are rooted not in the "communists" but in the frustrations of our private lives. Once aware of this, we would recall words spoken more than nine decades ago by the noblest American of them all. Ours would then be the hope that America's splendid ideals of mercy and of brotherhood will yet reign within all hearts "when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

* The case can not come before the President until all juridical expedients have been exhausted. The Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case is engaged in raising funds to finance an appeal to the Supreme Court and, if granted, a new trial.

