Free Speech and Plain Language

Albert Jay Nock
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Recently, under the title, "So Conceived and So Dedicated," Mr. William F. Russell published an excellent paper,* which starts an interesting train of thought. It shows that the author is a true believer in free speech. It ends with an appeal for freedom, which I found most exhilarating; so exhilarating that I at once determined to take it as a text, as I now do. Speaking of the American people's progress in safety and happiness, and of the means to be employed in promoting that progress, Mr. Russell says, "Our only hope is full, free, frank, open discussion from all sides, open propaganda, open influence upon the press, upon public opinion, upon our Congress and legislators, and upon our governors and President. Whoever thinks, let him speak. Whoever would muzzle another, let him stay his hand. Bring on the opposition. Let it be heard. Then shall we have all the forces in full play."

These are noble and inspiring words; well, just what do they mean? I am not asking what they mean to Mr. Russell. I take it that he is a literal-minded person, like the statesman of the last century who said that the way to resume specie payment is to resume. If I might do so without impropriety, I would ask Mr. Russell's permission to place myself beside him in that category. To such as Mr. Russell and myself, then, free speech means simply free speech, whether the words be conveyed by sound or by writing or by printing. That is that, and that is all there is, and there isn't any more – use no hooks. Moreover, it would appear to us that the plain provisions of the Bill of Rights mean nothing else, nor can be made to mean anything else, save through one of those processes of interpretation whereby, as a contemporary of Bishop Butler said, anything can be made to mean anything – processes, in other words, of sheer and patent shysterism. But I may remind Mr. Russell that the world seems to be rapidly going away from oldfashioned people of our kind, and it is therefore necessary to consider what free speech means to others who are not like us, and especially to those who are in a position more or less to prescribe the courses in which public sentiment concerning such matters shall run.

* *The Atlantic Monthly*, May, 1935.

A little story occurs to me in this connexion, which I shall tell, partly because it is amusing, but also because it tends somewhat to show what I am driving at.

In the interregnum following the fall of the Tsarist régime, Petersburg was full of spellbinders haranguing the crowds in the public squares, and telling them what they must do to be saved. Some were emissaries of foreign governments. One of my friends was there; he entertained himself all day and every day by wandering around among the crowds with an interpreter, to find out what was going on. In one group that was being addressed in very thick Russian, he found a knot of five or six proletarians, took them aside and questioned them about their odd attitude of docility towards the speaker. "Don't you know that this man is an agent of the German Government?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, he is a dangerous fellow. Why do you listen to him? Why don't you throw him out?"

"Anything the German Government has to say to us, we ought to hear."

This was a stupefying surprise. My friend, being a man of great humour, saw his chance, and went on:

"Is that the way you people generally feel about it?"

"Yes."

"That is your notion of free speech, is it?"

"Yes."

"But you don't seem to know the difference between liberty and license."

"No; what is it?"

"Well, when some perfectly respectable person gets up and says something that everybody agrees to, that is liberty."

They ruminated on this awhile, finally got it down, and then asked, "What is license?"

"Why, license is when some infernal scoundrel, who ought to be hanged anyway, gets up and says something that is true."

The men drew apart and had a long powwow with the interpreter, who finally came forward and said, "These men say there must be some misunderstanding on your part, probably owing to differences in language. They say we are not for liberty at all; we are for license."

I take it that, in the circumstances set forth in Mr. Russell's article, he and I are for license; but the fact remains, I fear, that most of our fellow-citizens are very strong for liberty; very strong indeed.

II

This addiction seems to be the natural fruitage of another addiction which is more or less common to all men, but with us is so inveterate and so ingrained that we might almost take out a process-patent on it; and that is, the addiction to expediency as the supreme law of conduct. Among the many observers who came over from Europe to study us in the early days of our republic, the ablest and most profound was one who for some reason is also most neglected. This was the eminent economist and Saint-Simonian, Michel Chevalier. One never hears of him; yet he is probably worth more to us, especially at the moment, than all the Tocquevilles, Bryces, Chateaubriands and Halls put together. I wish I might prevail on some enterprising editor to arrange with Professor Chinard, who not only knows our history so well but understands it so thoroughly, to write an essay on Chevalier which should bring him out of a most unmerited obscurity and introduce him to us.

Chevalier, who spent four years among us exactly a century ago, traveling everywhere, has a great deal to say about the blind devotion to expediency which he found prevailing throughout our society. He found, in short, that in any circumstances, in any matter small or great, whenever considerations of expediency collided with principle, law, precept or custom, it was invariably the latter that must give way.

Witnessing these collisions, he would ask such questions as, "Where are your principles of action? What about the doctrine set forth in the Declaration of Independence? What about your belief in the natural rights of man?" – and he would get but the one answer, that the action taken in the premises must be regulated by expediency.

Truly, it would seem that Americans of Chevalier's day were temperamentally more ill-fitted for the undertaking of self-government by written statutes, and under a written constitution, than any people who had passed beyond the patriarchal stage of political development. In this very matter of free speech which we are discussing, it is worth remembering that the ink was barely dry on the Bill of Rights when the Sedition Act was passed; and since then the history of free speech in America has pretty well been a history of efforts to show, as Mr. Dooley said, "that th' Constitution iv th' United States is applicable on'y in such cases as it is applied to on account iv its applicability."

So I believe it is unquestionably the inveterate devotion to expediency that has left Mr. Russell and myself standing together in this rather forlorn hope for

the future of free speech. It is coercion based on expediency that suppresses what we loosely call "Communist propaganda." It is coercion based on expediency that enforces silence about this or that flagitious transaction in public affairs; and so on. As an abstract issue, free speech comes in for a good deal of discussion now and then, for instance during the late war, when coercion based on expediency was widely applied; and the general run of argument pro and con is probably well enough known. There is one line of argument, however, that is not often brought out. It proceeds from the fact that while, as a rule, action based on pure expediency gets the immediate results it aims at, those results always cost a great deal more in the long run than they are worth; and moreover, the most expensive items in the bill are those that were not foreseen and never thought of.

For example, expediency suggested that the evils of the liquor-traffic be suppressed by coercion. It got results, after a fashion, but it got them for us at the price of making corruption and hypocrisy respectable. A heavy price – were they worth it? Again, expediency suggested that the care of our poor be made a government job. It gets results, but at what price? First, the organization of mendicancy and subvention into a permanent political asset. Second, the indoctrination of our whole citizenry with a false and dangerous idea of the State and its functions – that the State is something to be run to in any emergency, trivial or serious, to settle matters out of hand.

This idea encourages, invites, nay, insists upon what Professor Ortega y Gasset rightly calls the gravest danger that to-day threatens civilization: the absorption of all spontaneous social effort by the State. "When the mass suffers any ill-fortune, or simply feels some strong appetite, its great temptation is that permanent, sure possibility of obtaining everything – without effort, struggle, doubt or risk – merely by touching a button and setting the mighty machine in motion."

There is no trouble about seeing how deeply our people are penetrated with this idea; even the cartoons in our newspapers show it. I saw one not so long ago, a caricature of the Revolutionary reveille, the fine old picture that everybody knows, of the old man, his son and grandson, marching three-abreast, with banner, drum, and fife. The cartoon showed three ill-looking adventurers marching on Washington and their banner bore the word, "Gimme."

This degrading enervation of a whole people is rather a heavy offset to the benefits gained through a policy of expediency. The devotees of expediency, however, never consider the final cost of their policies; they are after the immediate thing, and that only. Their case was never better put than by Mr. George

Horace Lorimer, in his observations on the young man who pawned a razor for fifteen cents to get a shave.

I had a desultory talk with one devotee of expediency not long ago, a good friend and a thoroughly excellent man. He was all worked up over the activities of Communists and what he called pink Socialists, especially in the colleges and churches. He said they were corrupting the youth, and he was strong for having them coerced into silence. I could not see it that way. I told him it seemed pretty clear that Mr. Jefferson was right when he said that the effect of coercion was "to make one half the people fools and the other half hypocrites, and to support roguery and error all over the earth"; look at Germany and Italy! I thought our youth could manage to bear up under a little corrupting – they always have – and if they were corrupted by Communism, they stood a first-rate chance to get over it, whereas if they grew up fools or hypocrites, they would never get over it.

I added that Mr. Jefferson was right when he said that "it is error alone which needs the support of government; truth can stand by itself." One glance at governments anywhere in the world proves that. Well, then, the surest way to make our youth suspect that there may be something in Communism would be for the government to outlaw it.

"That is all very well for Mr. Jefferson," my friend said, "but think of this: Some years ago an anarchist agitator went up and down the land, preaching the doctrine of terrorism. A weak-minded young man heard it, was unbalanced by it,* went forth and shot President McKinley. The State executed him and buried his body in quicklime to show its abhorrence of the deed, but nothing was done about the agitator who provoked it. Is this logical? Lincoln did not think so. When a delegation of liberals complained to him about the Sedition Act, he said, 'Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier-boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of the wily agitator who induces him to desert?' "

This is, of course, a sound argument, provided one accept the premise implied. On the other hand, one might suggest that in shooting simple-minded boys and burying lunatics in quicklime, the State is not taking precisely the right way with them under any circumstances. We avoided this digression, however, and returned to the subject in hand.

"McKinley's death was a shocking thing, truly," I said, "but let us try to strike a balance. Don't you think, when all comes to all, that the life of a President, now and then, maybe, – such things seldom happen, – is a moderate price for

*My friend may have been misinformed. This story was current at the time, but no evidence of it was ever brought forward, and it was probably an invention.

keeping you free of a civilization made up half of fools and half of hypocrites? Men have thought so before now, and pretty good men too. On the occasion of Shays's Rebellion, Mr. Jefferson said, 'If the happiness of the mass of the people can be secured at the expense of a little tempest now and then, or even of a little blood, it will be a precious purchase. *Malo libertatem periculosam quam quietam servitutem.*' Again," I added, "you remember that when Sir Robert Peel proposed to organize a police-force for London, Englishmen said openly that half a dozen throats cut annually in the Whitechapel district was a cheap price to pay for keeping such an instrument of potential tyranny out of the hands of the government.

"That sounds rather cold-blooded, but the immense augmentation and strengthening of the police-forces in all countries in the past fifty years go far to show that they were right. Get up in one of our industrial centres to-day and say that two and two make four, and if there is any financial interest concerned in maintaining that two and two make five, the police will bash your head in. Then what choice have you, save to degenerate either into a fool or into a hypocrite? And who wants to live in a land of fools and hypocrites?

"Mr. Jefferson was right," I continued. (I could not resist winding up with a little flourish.) "Error is the only thing that needs the backing of government, and when you find the government backing anything you are pretty safe in betting that it is an error. Truth is a very proud old girl, and if you or any crew of ignorant black guards in public office think she cares two pins for your patronage, or that you can put her in debt to you, you have another guess coming. She will look at your little efforts with an amused eye, perhaps give you one or two mild Bronx cheers, and then when she gets around to it – in her own good time, no hurry, she is never in a hurry – she will stand you on your head. Rome, Moscow and Berlin papers, please copy."

To be on the popular side at the moment is not especially interesting; the thing is to be on the right side in the long run. As I see it, the best argument for free speech is what the suppression of it does to the character of a people. This is the only thing in the whole contention that interests me, though I have every respect for the Bill of Rights. Mr. Jefferson said that "it is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution." Nothing promotes this degeneracy more effectively than a check on free speech. We all remember, for example, what the "spirit of a people" was like in 1917, when free speech was suppressed, and when any low-minded scoundrel might make

character for himself by spying and eavesdropping. The Bill of Rights is all very well, so long as it has the manners and spirit of a people behind it; but when these are hopelessly impaired, it is not worth the paper it was written on.

But, as Mr. Jefferson saw clearly, we can not hope to get something for nothing; and here, I think, is probably the real issue between old-fashioned persons like Mr. Russell and myself, and the believer in expediency like my good and honoured friend whom I have just now cited. My friend unquestionably wants the manners and spirit of our people kept up to par, – it would be a base slander to suggest the contrary, – but when it comes to digging up for it, he boggles at the price; in short, he wants to get something for nothing, and this simply can not be done. The whole order of nature is against it.

I believe I may count on Mr. Russell being with me when I say that, if the spirit of a people is worth maintaining, we must be prepared to accept the offenses, inconveniences and injuries incidental to its maintenance. We must take a chance on terrorists, pink Socialists, Communists and what not; a chance on a fracas or two, on a few youths being corrupted, maybe on losing a President once in a long while, and all the rest of it. Possibly those chances are not quite so desperate as the believer in expediency imagines; I think it very likely. I have a letter just now from a French friend, who says that *quand les Américains se mettent a être nerveux, ils dépassent tout commentaire*; and I too have often thought I noticed something of the kind. However, desperate or not, those chances must be taken.

Julius Cæsar went unattended; he said that life was not worth having at the expense of an ignoble solicitude about it. Considering the outcome, the believer in expediency might say this was quixotic. Yet, on the other hand, it is conceivable that this example was better for the spirit of the Roman people than the spectacle of a *Führer* guarded by squads of secret-service men and plug-uglies. One of the greatest men that England ever produced was Lucius Cary, Viscount Falkland; he was killed in the battle of Newbury, at the age of thirty-three. He held the job of Secretary of State for a year, just when things were warming up nicely for the Civil War. He refused to employ spies or to censor correspondence; he would not open a single private letter. Horace Walpole sneers at this, saying that it "evinced debility of mind." Well, no doubt it incurred the chance of considerable inconvenience, even of some injury; but Falkland seemed to think it better to run that chance, rather than turn loose a swarm of sneaking vermin to deprave the spirit of the people.

So the issue is that "you pays your money and you takes your choice." The believer in expediency appreciates the benefits of freedom, but thinks they are likely to come too high. The old-style doctrinaire, like Mr. Russell and myself, is doubtful that they will come so high as all that, but never mind. Let them cost what they may, he is for them. He is for them unreservedly and unconditionally and world without end.

III

Thought on this subject opens the way for a few words about plain language; and here I must party company with Mr. Russell, for nothing in his article warrants the assumption that he would go with me, though he might – his article intimates nothing either way.

I am thinking particularly about the current treatment of public affairs though in general I wish we were in the habit of conveying our meanings in plain explicit terms rather than by indirection and by euphemism, as we so regularly do. My point is that habitual indirection in speech supports and stimulates a habit of indirection in thought; and this habit, if not pretty closely watched, runs off into intellectual dishonesty.

The English language is of course against us. Its vocabulary is so large, it is so rich in synonyms, it lends itself so easily and naturally to paraphrase, that one gets up a great facility with indirection almost without knowing it. Our common speech bristles with mere indirect intimations of what we are driving at; and as for euphemisms, they have so far corrupted our vernacular as to afflict us with a chronic, mawkish and self-conscious sentimentalism which violently resents the plain English name of the realities that these euphemisms intimate. This is bad; the upshot of our willingness to accept a reality, provided we do not hear it named, or provided we ourselves are not obliged to name it, leads us to accept many realities that we ought not to accept. It leads to many and serious moral misjudgments of both facts and persons; in other words, it leads straight into a profound intellectual dishonesty.

The glossary of business has many such euphemisms; for example, when you hear that a concern is being "reorganized," it means that the concern is bankrupt, unable or unwilling to meet its bills; it is busted. "Bankruptcy" has, however, become an unfashionable word; we are squeamish and queasy and nasty-nice about using it or hearing it used. We prefer to fall back on the euphemism of "reorganization."

The glossary of politics is so full of euphemistic words and phrases – as in the nature of things it must be – that one would suppose politicians must sometimes strain their wits to coin them. For example, when Secretary A. tells Congressman B. that unless he votes right on a certain measure there will be no more pork-barrel funds distributed in his district, that is blackmail, – there is no other name for it, – but we prefer to lump off transactions of this sort under the general and euphemistic term "patronage." Sometimes we find a euphemism on a euphemism; for example, what we used to call an indemnity is what our ruder ancestors called booty, plunder, which is precisely what it is. But the word "indemnity" became in turn unfashionable, for some reason, – overwork, perhaps, – and for the last few years we have been saying "reparations." Some literary artist spread himself to give us "unemployment relief," when it became evident that the good and sound word "dole" was a little heavy for our pampered stomachs; and while we all know well enough what "mandated" territory is, and what "mandates" are, we are quite indisposed to saying what they are, or to hearing anyone say what they are.

A person never sees so clearly how absurd these euphemisms are until he translates a few of them from another language into his own. The French language has a small vocabulary, and its genius is rather against euphemism, – as much against it as English is for it – but it can turn out a few very handsome ones. Embezzlement, for instance, is known as an "indelicacy"; you will read in French newspapers that yesterday's cashier who made off with the contents of the safe "committed an indelicacy." Italian newspapers, reporting a bad accident on the railway, will begin by telling you that the Sunrise Express "disgraced itself" yesterday morning, at such-and-such time and place; casualties, so-and-so many. These sound as ridiculous to us as our pet euphemisms must sound to a Frenchman or an Italian; the reason being that all such sophistications of speech are intrinsically ridiculous. They sound silly because they are silly; and, being silly, they are debilitating.

Bad as euphemism is, however, indirection is worse. I notice that a writer in a recent magazine gives this advice to budding newspaper men:

> Even where opinion is admitted, as on the editorial page, fact is often more desirable than opinion. Thus it is better to scrap an editorial calling the mayor a liar and a crook, and to write another which, by reciting facts without using adjectives and without calling names, makes it obvious that the mayor is a liar and a crook.

In the view of journalism, that is first-class good advice, because we are all so accustomed to indirection that a lapse from it affects us unpleasantly and

sets us against the person or organ that indulges in any such lapse; and that will not do for journalism, because it makes people stop their subscriptions.

In the view of intellectual integrity, on the other hand, this advice seems to me about the worst imaginable. In the first place, if the mayor is a liar and a crook, saying so is certainly "reciting facts." It is not "calling names," it is not uttering abuse or vituperation; it is a simple and objective recital of fact, and only a weak and sticky supersensitiveness prevents our seeing it as such. In the second place, indirection is so regularly the vehicle of propaganda that the use of it marks the man with an axe to grind. The advice which I have just cited contemplates a person who is more concerned with producing an effect on people's minds than he is with the simple expression of truth and fact. This may be good journalism, – I am not entitled to an opinion about that, – but I can find nothing to say for it on general grounds.

After the jury in the Beecher-Tilton trial disagreed, and the case against Beecher had lapsed, Charles Anderson Dana said editorially in the New York *Sun*, "Henry Ward Beecher is an adulterer, a perjurer, and a fraud; and his great genius and his Christian pretenses only make his sins the more horrible and revolting." To me that piece of plain language sounds purely objective. On the one hand, it has not the accent of mere vituperation, it is thoroughly dignified; and on the other, it is not the language of a person who is mainly concerned with wangling somebody into believing something. When Mr. Jefferson wrote that one of his associates in Washington's cabinet was "a fool and a blabber," his words, taken in their context, make exactly the same impression of calm, disinterested and objective appraisal as if he had remarked that the man had black hair and brown eyes.

Or again, while we are about it, let us examine the most extreme example of this sort of thing that I have so far found in English literature, which is Kent's opinion of Oswald, in *King Lear*:

> *Kent.* Fellow, I know thee.
> *Osw.* What dost thou know me for?
> *Kent.* A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd, in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch.

Now, considering Kent's character and conduct, as shown throughout the play, I doubt very much that those lines should be taken as merely so much indecent blackguarding. I appeal to Mr. Walter Hampden to say whether I am not right in thinking that an actor who ranted through them in the tone and accent of sheer violent diatribe would ruin his part. Frank Warrin cited those lines the other day, when he was telling me how much he would enjoy a revival of *Lear*, with our gifted friend Bill Parke cast for the part of Kent. He said, "Can't you hear Bill's voice growing quieter and quieter, colder and colder, deadlier and deadlier, all the way through that passage?" Angry as Kent is, and plain as his language is, his tone and manner must carry a strong suggestion of objectivity in order to keep fully up to the dramatist's conception of his rôle. Kent is not abusing Oswald; he is merely, as we say, "telling him."

IV

I repeat that I have no thought of weaving a web of implications to entangle Mr. Russell. I may say, however, how greatly I wish he would go at least some little way with me in the belief that, with the revival of free speech which he so ably urges, there should go a revival of plain language.

When we speak freely, let us speak plainly, for plain speech is wholesome; especially, plain speech about public affairs and public men. Mr. Justice McReynolds gave us a noble specimen of it in his dissenting opinion and his accompanying remarks on the gold-clause decision. Such language has not been heard from the Supreme Bench since the days when John Marshall Harlan used to chew up about half a pound of plug tobacco, just "to get a good ready," and then turn loose on his affirming associates with a dissenting opinion that would burn a hole through a rawhide. Nothing like it, indeed, has been heard from any public man in America, as far as I know, since the death of William Jay Gaynor; and it bucked me up almost to the point of believing that there might be some sort of future for the country, after all.

That is the sort of talk we should be hearing on all sides of any and every public question, and with reference to every public man. I have long since given up reading political editorials and the "interpretations" of political reporters. I detest a flavoured stink; and the stench of propaganda that has been soaked in the musk and patchouli of indirection is peculiarly odious. If these interpreters set out, say, to deal with some public man of rank and responsibility who is on the other side of the political fence, they usually begin by buttering up his

good intentions, fine gifts and excellent character, and then proceed to associate him with some flagrant piece of political rascality; thus by indirection making it appear that he is actually a knave and a dog. Really, one loses patience with this perpetual and exclusive concern with making people believe something, with "putting something over," rather than with plain objective statement. Even the editorial technique of Mr. Pott and Mr. Slurk had at least the merit of eschewing indirection.

It seems to me indeed that the association of plain language with free speech is a natural one; that legality alone is not enough to ensure free speech. Freedom of speech means more than mere freedom under law. It means freedom under a régime of candour and objectivity; freedom under a paramount concern with truth and clearness of statement, rather than a paramount concern with making one's statements acceptable to the whims and sentimentalisms of an enervated people.

This thought tempts me to go on and examine some specific infringements on the relation between freedom of speech and plainness of language; it brings Jeremy Bentham back to mind, with his chapter on what he calls "impostor-terms." But this essay is already too long, and I must end it here. If my reader's patience holds out, I may take the matter up again and carry it on from where I now leave it.