THE PHANTOM PUBLIC
A Sequel to "Public Opinion"

BY
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and unbending antisentimentalist that he is, says in his "final considerations" that "it is the great task of social education to raise the intellectual level of the masses, so that they may be enabled, within the limits of what is possible, to counteract the oligarchical tendencies" of all collective action.

So I have been reading some of the new standard textbooks used to teach citizenship in schools and colleges. After reading them I do not see how any one can escape the conclusion that man must have the appetite of an encyclopedist and infinite time ahead of him. To be sure he no longer is expected to remember the exact salary of the county clerk and the length of the coroner's term. In the new civics he studies the problems of government, and not the structural detail. He is told, in one textbook of five hundred concise, contentious pages, which I have been reading, about city problems, state problems, national problems, international problems, trust problems, labor problems, transportation problems,
banking problems, rural problems, agricultural problems, and so on ad infinitum. In the eleven pages devoted to problems of the city there are described twelve sub-problems.

But nowhere in this well-meant book is the sovereign citizen of the future given a hint as to how, while he is earning a living, rearing children and enjoying his life, he is to keep himself informed about the progress of this swarming confusion of problems. He is exhorted to conserve the natural resources of the country because they are limited in quantity. He is advised to watch public expenditures because the taxpayers cannot pay out indefinitely increasing amounts. But he, the voter, the citizen, the sovereign, is apparently expected to yield an unlimited quantity of public spirit, interest, curiosity and effort. The author of the textbook, touching on everything, as he thinks, from city sewers to Indian opium, misses a decisive fact: the citizen gives but a little of his time to public affairs, has but a casual interest in facts and but a poor appetite for theory.

It never occurs to this preceptor of civic duty to provide the student with a rule by which he can know whether on Thursday it is his duty to consider subways in Brooklyn or the Manchurian Railway, nor how, if he determines on Thursday to express his sovereign will on the subway question, he is to repair those gaps in his knowledge of that question which are due to his having been preoccupied the day before in expressing his sovereign will about rural credits in Montana and the rights of Britain in the Sudan. Yet he cannot know all about everything all the time, and while he is watching one thing a thousand others undergo great changes. Unless he can discover some rational ground for fixing his attention where it will do the most good, and in a way that suits his inherently amateurish equipment, he will be as bewildered as a puppy trying to lick three bones at once.
I do not wish to say that it does the student no good to be taken on a sightseeing tour of the problems of the world. It may teach him that the world is complicated, even if he comes out of the adventure "laden with germs, breathing creeds and convictions on you whenever he opens his mouth." He may learn humility, but most certainly his acquaintance with what a high-minded author thought were American problems in 1925 will not equip him to master American problems ten years later. Unless out of the study of transient issues he acquires an intellectual attitude no education has occurred.

That is why the usual appeal to education as the remedy for the incompetence of democracy is so barren. It is, in effect, a proposal that school teachers shall by some magic of their own fit men to govern after the makers of laws and the preachers of civic ideals have had a free hand in writing the specifications. The reformers do not ask what men can be taught. They say they should be taught whatever may be necessary to fit them to govern the modern world.

The usual appeal to education can bring only disappointment. For the problems of the modern world appear and change faster than any set of teachers can grasp them, much faster than they can convey their substance to a population of children. If the schools attempt to teach children how to solve the problems of the day, they are bound always to be in arrears. The most they can conceivably attempt is the teaching of a pattern of thought and feeling which will enable the citizen to approach a new problem in some useful fashion. But that pattern cannot be invented by the pedagogue. It is the political theorist's business to trace out that pattern. In that task he must not assume that the mass has political genius, but that men, even if they had genius, would give only a little time and attention to public affairs.

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1 Logan Pearsall Smith.
The moralist, I am afraid, will agree all too readily with the idea that social education must deal primarily not with the elements and solutions of particular phases of transient problems but with the principles that constitute an attitude toward all problems. I warn him off. It will require more than a good conscience to govern modern society, for conscience is no guide in situations where the essence of the difficulty is to find a guide for the conscience.

When I am tempted to think that men can be fitted out to deal with the modern world simply by teaching morals, manners and patriotism, I try to remember the fable of the pensive professor walking in the woods at twilight. He stumbled into a tree. This experience compelled him to act. Being a man of honor and breeding, he raised his hat, bowed deeply to the tree, and exclaimed with sincere regret: "Excuse me, sir, I thought you were a tree."

Is it fair, I ask, as a matter of morality, to chide him for his conduct? If he had encountered a tree, can any one deny his right to collide with it? If he had stumbled into a man, was his apology not sufficient? Here was a moral code in perfect working order, and the only questionable aspect of his conduct turned not on the goodness of his heart or the firmness of his principles but on a point of fact. You may retort that he had a moral obligation to know the difference between a man and a tree. Perhaps so. But suppose that instead of walking in the woods he had been casting a ballot; suppose that instead of a tree he had encountered the Fordney-McCumber tariff. How much more obligation to know the truth would you have imposed on him then? After all, this walker in the woods at twilight with his mind on other things was facing, as all of us think we are, the facts he imagined were there, and was doing his duty as he had learned it.

In some degree the whole animate world seems to share the inexpertness of the thought-
ful professor. Pawlow showed by his experiments on dogs that an animal with a false stomach can experience all the pleasures of eating, and the number of mice and monkeys known to have been deceived in laboratories is surpassed only by the hopeful citizens of a democracy. Man's reflexes are, as the psychologists say, conditioned. And, therefore, he responds quite readily to a glass egg, a decoy duck, a stuffed shirt or a political platform. No moral code, as such, will enable him to know whether he is exercising his moral faculties on a real and an important event. For effective virtue, as Socrates pointed out long ago, is knowledge; and a code of the right and the wrong must wait upon a perception of the true and the false.

But even the successful practice of a moral code would not emancipate democracy. There are too many moral codes. In our immediate lives, within the boundaries of our own society, there may be commonly accepted standards. But a political theorist

who asks that a local standard be universally applied is merely begging one of the questions he ought to be trying to solve. For, while possibly it may be an aim of political organization to arrive at a common standard of judgment, one of the conditions which engenders politics and makes political organization necessary is the conflict of standards.

Darwin's story of the cats and clover may be recommended to any one who finds it difficult to free his mind of the assumption that his notions of good and bad are universal. The purple clover is cross-fertilized by the bumblebee, and, therefore, the more bumblebees the better next year's crop of clover. But the nests of bumblebees are rifled by field mice which are fond of the white grubs. Therefore, the more field mice the fewer bumblebees and the poorer the crop. But in the neighborhood of villages the cats hunt down the field mice. And so the more cats

1 As told by J. Arthur Thomson, The Outline of Science, Vol. III, p. 646.
the fewer mice, the more bumblebees the better the crop. And the more kindly old ladies there are in the village the more cats there will be.

If you happen not to be a Hindu or a vegetarian and are a beef-eating Occidental you will commend the old ladies who keep the cats who hunt the mice who destroy the bumblebees who make the pasture of clover for the cattle. If you are a cat you also will be in favor of the old ladies. But if you are a field mouse, how different the rights and wrongs of that section of the universe! The old ladies who keep cats will seem about as kindly as witches with pet tigers, and the Old Lady Peril will be debated hysterically by the Field Mouse Security League. For what could a patriotic mouse think of a world in which bumblebees did not exist for the sole purpose of producing white grubs for field mice? There would seem to be no law and order in such a world; and only a highly philosophical mouse would admit with Bergson that "the idea of disorder objectifies for the convenience of language, the disappointment of a mind that finds before it an order different from what it wants." For the order which we recognize as good is an order suited to our needs and hopes and habits.

There is nothing universal or eternal or unchangeable about our expectations. For rhetorical effect we often say there is. But in concrete cases it is not easy to explain why the thing we desire is so righteous. If the farmers are able to buy less than their accustomed amount of manufactured foods there is disorder and a problem. But what absolute standard is there which determines whether a bushel of wheat in 1925 should, as compared with 1913, exchange for more, as many, or less manufactures? Can any one define a principle which shall say whether the standard of living of the farmers or of any other class should rise or fall, and how fast and how much? There may be more jobs

*Creative Evolution, Ch. III.*
than workingmen at the wage offered; the employers will complain and will call it a problem, but who knows any rule which tells how large a surplus of labor there ought to be and at what price? There may be more workingmen than jobs of the kind and at the places and for the wages they will or can take. But, although the problem will be acute, there is no principle which determines how many machinists, clerks, coal miners, bankers, or salesmen it is the duty of society to provide work for.

It requires intense partisanship and much self-deception to argue that some sort of peculiar righteousness adheres to the farmers' claim as against the manufacturers', the employees' against the wage-earners', the creditors' against the debtors', or the other way around. These conflicts of interest are problems. They require solution. But there is no moral pattern available from which the precise nature of the solution can be deduced.

If then eugenics cannot produce the ideal democratic citizen, omnicompetent and sovereign, because biology knows neither how to breed political excellence nor what that excellence is; if education cannot equip the citizen, because the school teacher cannot anticipate the issues of the future; if morality cannot direct him, first, because right or wrong in specific cases depends upon the perception of true or false, and, second, on the assumption that there is a universal moral code, which, in fact, does not exist, where else shall we look for the method of making the competent citizen? Democratic theorists in the nineteenth century had several other prescriptions which still influence the thinking of many hopeful persons.

One school based their reforms on the aphorism that the cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy. It was assumed that the popular will was wise and good if only you could get at it. They proposed extensions of the suffrage, and as much voting as possible by means of the initiative, referendum and
recall, direct election of Senators, direct primaries, an elected judiciary, and the like. They begged the question, for it has never been proved that there exists the kind of public opinion which they presupposed. Since the Bryan campaign of 1896 this school of thought has made great conquests in most of the states, and has profoundly influenced the federal government. The eligible vote has trebled since 1896; the direct action of the voter has been enormously extended. Yet that same period has seen a decline in the percentage of the popular vote cast at presidential elections from 80.75 per cent in 1896 to 52.36 per cent in 1920. Apparently there is a fallacy in the first assumption of this school that "the whole people" desires to participate actively in government. Nor is there any evidence to show that the persons who do participate are in any real sense directing the course of affairs. The party machines have survived every attack. And why should they not? If the voter cannot grasp the details of the problems of the day because he has not the time, the interest or the knowledge, he will not have a better public opinion because he is asked to express his opinion more often. He will simply be more bewildered, more bored and more ready to follow along.

Another school, calling themselves revolutionary, have ascribed the disenchantment of democracy to the capitalistic system. They have argued that property is power, and that until there is as wide a distribution of economic power as there is of the right to vote the suffrage cannot be more effective. No serious student, I think, would dispute that socialist premise which asserts that the weight of influence on society exercised by an individual is more nearly related to the character of his property than to his abstract legal citizenship. But the socialist conclusion that economic power can be distributed by concentrating the ownership of great utilities in the state, the conclusion that the pervasion of industrial life
by voting and referenda will yield competent popular decisions, seems to me again to beg the question. For what reason is there to think that subjecting so many more affairs to the method of the vote will reveal hitherto undiscovered wisdom and technical competence and reservoirs of public interest in men? The socialist scheme has at its root the mystical fallacy of democracy, that the people, all of them, are competent; at its top it suffers from the homeopathic fallacy that adding new tasks to a burden the people will not and cannot carry now will make the burden of citizenship easily borne. The socialist theory presupposes an unceasing, untiring round of civic duties, an enormous complication of the political interests that are already much too complicated.

These various remedies, eugenic, educational, ethical, populist and socialist, all assume that either the voters are inherently competent to direct the course of affairs or that they are making progress toward such an ideal. I think it is a false ideal. I do not mean an undesirable ideal. I mean an unattainable ideal, bad only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer. An ideal should express the true possibilities of its subject. When it does not it perverts the true possibilities. The ideal of the omnicompetent, sovereign citizen is, in my opinion, such a false ideal. It is unattainable. The pursuit of it is misleading. The failure to achieve it has produced the current disenchantment.

The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought, that the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs.
Chapter IV

WHAT THE PUBLIC DOES

I

I do not mean to say that there is no other attainable ideal of public opinion but that severely practical one which this essay is meant to disclose. One might aim to enrich the minds of men with charming fantasies, animate nature and society with spirits, set up an Olympus in the skies and an Atlantis at the end of the world. And one might then assert that, so the quality of ideas be fine or give peace, it does not matter how or whether they eventuate in the government of affairs.

Utopia and Nirvana are by definition their own sufficient reason, and it may be that to contemplate them is well worth the abandonment of feeble attempts to control the action of events. Renunciation, however, is a luxury in which all men cannot indulge. They will somehow seek to control the behavior of others, if not by positive law then at least by persuasion. When men are in that posture toward events they are a public, as I am here defining the term; their opinions as to how others ought to behave are public opinions. The more clearly it is understood what the public can do and what it cannot, the more effectively it will do what lies within its power to do well and the less it will interfere with the liberties of men.

The rôle of public opinion is determined by the fact that its relation to a problem is external. The opinion affects an opinion, but does not itself control the executive act. A public opinion is expressed by a vote, a demonstration of praise or blame, a following or a boycott. But these manifestations are in themselves nothing. They count only if they influence the course of affairs. They influence it, however, only if they influence an actor in the affair. And it is, I believe, precisely in this secondary, indirect relationship be-
tween public opinion and public affairs that we have the clue to the limits and the possibilities of public opinion.

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It may be objected at once that an election which turns one set of men out of office and installs another is an expression of public opinion which is neither secondary nor indirect. But what in fact is an election? We call it an expression of the popular will. But is it? We go into a polling booth and mark a cross on a piece of paper for one of two, or perhaps three or four names. Have we expressed our thoughts on the public policy of the United States? Presumably we have a number of thoughts on this and that with many buts and ifs and ors. Surely the cross on a piece of paper does not express them. It would take us hours to express our thoughts, and calling a vote the expression of our mind is an empty fiction.

A vote is a promise of support. It is a way of saying: I am lined up with these men, on this side. I enlist with them. I will follow. I will buy. I will boycott. I will strike. I applaud. I jeer. The force I can exert is placed here, not there.

The public does not select the candidate, write the platform, outline the policy any more than it builds the automobile or acts the play. It aligns itself for or against somebody who has offered himself, has made a promise, has produced a play, is selling an automobile. The action of a group as a group is the mobilization of the force it possesses.

The attempt has been made to ascribe some intrinsic moral and intellectual virtue to majority rule. It was said often in the nineteenth century that there was a deep wisdom in majorities which was the voice of God. Sometimes this flattery was a sincere mysticism, sometimes it was the self-deception which always accompanies the idealization of power. In substance it was nothing but a transfer to
the new sovereign of the divine attributes of kings. Yet the inherent absurdity of making virtue and wisdom dependent on 51 per cent of any collection of men has always been apparent. The practical realization that the claim was absurd has resulted in a whole code of civil rights to protect minorities and in all sorts of elaborate methods of subsidizing the arts and sciences and other human interests so they might be independent of the operation of majority rule.

The justification of majority rule in politics is not to be found in its ethical superiority. It is to be found in the sheer necessity of finding a place in civilized society for the force which resides in the weight of numbers. I have called voting an act of enlistment, an alignment for or against, a mobilization. These are military metaphors, and rightly so, I think, for an election based on the principle of majority rule is historically and practically a sublimated and denatured civil war, a paper mobilization without physical violence.

Constitutional democrats, in the intervals when they were not idealizing the majority, have acknowledged that a ballot was a civilized substitute for a bullet. "The French Revolution," says Bernard Shaw, "overthrew one set of rulers and substituted another with different interests and different views. That is what a general election enables the people to do in England every seven years if they choose. Revolution is therefore a national institution in England; and its advocacy by an Englishman needs no apology." It makes an enormous difference, of course, whether the people fight or vote, but we shall understand the nature of voting better if we recognize it to be a substitute for fighting. "There grew up in the 17th and 18th Centuries in England," says Dwight Morrow in his introduction to Professor Morse's book, "and there has been carried from England to almost every civilized government in the world, a procedure through which party

1 Preface to The Revolutionist's Handbook, p. 179.
government becomes in large measure a substitute for revolution." 2 Hans Delbrück puts the matter simply when he says that the principle of majority rule is "a purely practical principle. If one wants to avoid a civil war, one lets those rule who in any case would obtain the upper hand if there should be a struggle; and they are the superior numbers." 3

But, while an election is in essence sublimated warfare, we must take care not to miss the importance of the sublimation. There have been pedantic theorists who wished to disqualify all who could not bear arms, and woman suffrage has been deplored as a falsification of the value of an election in uncovering the alignment of martial force in the community. One can safely ignore such theorizing. For, while the institution of an election is in its historical origins an alignment of the physical force, it has come to be an align-

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1 Parties and Party Leaders, p. xvi.
2 H. Delbrück, Government and the Will of the People, p. 15. Translated by Roy S. MacElwee.
3 America is the test of political progress.
Instead we must adopt the theory that, by their occasional mobilizations as a majority, people support or oppose the individuals who actually govern. We must say that the popular will does not direct continuously but that it intervenes occasionally.

CHAPTER V
THE NEUTRALIZATION OF ARBITRARY FORCE

If this is the nature of public action, what ideal can be formulated which shall conform to it?

We are bound, I think, to express the ideal in its lowest terms, to state it not as an ideal which might conceivably be realized by exceptional groups now and then or in some distant future but as an ideal which normally might be taught and attained. In estimating the burden which a public can carry, a sound political theory must insist upon the largest factor of safety. It must understate the possibilities of public action.

The action of a public, we had concluded, is principally confined to an occasional intervention in affairs by means of an alignment
of the force which a dominant section of that public can wield. We must assume, then, that the members of a public will not possess an insider’s knowledge of events or share his point of view. They cannot, therefore, construe intent, or appraise the exact circumstances, enter intimately into the minds of the actors or into the details of the argument. They can watch only for coarse signs indicating where their sympathies ought to turn.

We must assume that the members of a public will not anticipate a problem much before its crisis has become obvious, nor stay with the problem long after its crisis is past. They will not know the antecedent events, will not have seen the issue as it developed, will not have thought out or willed a program, and will not be able to predict the consequences of acting on that program. We must assume as a theoretically fixed premise of popular government that normally men as members of a public will not be well informed, continuously interested, nonpartisan, creative or executive. We must assume that a public is inexpert in its curiosity, intermittent, that it discerns only gross distinctions, is slow to be aroused and quickly diverted; that, since it acts by aligning itself, it personalizes whatever it considers, and is interested only when events have been melodramatized as a conflict.

The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain of the piece. Yet usually that judgment will necessarily be made apart from the intrinsic merits, on the basis of a sample of behavior, an aspect of a situation, by very rough external evidence.

We cannot, then, think of public opinion as a conserving or creating force directing society to clearly conceived ends, making deliberately toward socialism or away from it, toward nationalism, an empire, a league of nations or any other doctrinal goal. For
men do not agree as to their aims, and it is precisely the lack of agreement which creates the problems that excite public attention. It is idle, then, to argue that though men evidently have conflicting purposes, mankind has some all-embracing purpose of which you or I happen to be the authorized spokesman. We merely should have moved in a circle were we to conclude that the public is in some deep way a messianic force.

The work of the world goes on continually without conscious direction from public opinion. At certain junctures problems arise. It is only with the crises of some of these problems that public opinion is concerned. And its object in dealing with a crisis is to help allay that crisis.

I think this conclusion is unescapable. For though we may prefer to believe that the aim of popular action should be to do justice or promote the true, the beautiful and the good, the belief will not maintain itself in the face of plain experience. The public does not know in most crises what specifically is the truth or the justice of the case, and men are not agreed on what is beautiful and good. Nor does the public rouse itself normally at the existence of evil. It is aroused at evil made manifest by the interruption of a habitual process of life. And finally, a problem ceases to occupy attention not when justice, as we happen to define it, has been done but when a workable adjustment that overcomes the crisis has been made. If all this were not the necessary manner of public opinion, if it had seriously to crusade for justice in every issue it touches, the public would have to be dealing with all situations all the time. That is impossible. It is also undesirable. For did justice, truth, goodness and beauty depend on the spasmodic and crude interventions of public opinion there would be little hope for them in this world.

Thus we strip public opinion of any implied
duty to deal with the substance of a problem, to make technical decisions, to attempt justice or impose a moral precept. And instead we say that the ideal of public opinion is to align men during the crisis of a problem in such a way as to favor the action of those individuals who may be able to compose the crisis. The power to discern those individuals is the end of the effort to educate public opinion. The aim of research designed to facilitate public action is the discovery of clear signs by which these individuals may be discerned.

The signs are relevant when they reveal by coarse, simple and objective tests which side in a controversy upholds a workable social rule, or which is attacking an unworkable rule, or which proposes a promising new rule. By following such signs the public might know where to align itself. In such an alignment it does not, let us remember, pass judgment on the intrinsic merits. It merely places its force at the disposal of the side which, according to objective signs, seems to

be standing for human adjustments according to a clear rule of behavior and against the side which appears to stand for settlement in accordance with its own unaccountable will.

Public opinion, in this theory, is a reserve of force brought into action during a crisis in public affairs. Though it is itself an irrational force, under favorable institutions, sound leadership and decent training the power of public opinion might be placed at the disposal of those who stood for workable law as against brute assertion. In this theory, public opinion does not make the law. But by canceling lawless power it may establish the condition under which law can be made. It does not reason, investigate, invent, persuade, bargain or settle. But, by holding the aggressive party in check, it may liberate intelligence. Public opinion in its highest ideal will defend those who are prepared to act on their reason against the interrupting force of those who merely assert their will.

The action of public opinion at its best
would not, let it be noted, be a continual crusade on behalf of reason. When power, however absolute and unaccountable, reigns without provoking a crisis, public opinion does not challenge it. Somebody must challenge arbitrary power first. The public can only come to his assistance.

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That, I think, is the utmost that public opinion can effectively do. With the substance of the problem it can do nothing usually but meddle ignorantly or tyrannically. It has no need to meddle with it. Men in their active relation to affairs have to deal with the substance, but in that indirect relationship when they can act only through uttering praise or blame, making black crosses on white paper, they have done enough, they have done all they can do if they help to make it possible for the reason of other men to assert itself.

For when public opinion attempts to govern directly it is either a failure or a tyranny. It is not able to master the problem intellectually, nor to deal with it except by wholesale impact. The theory of democracy has not recognized this truth because it has identified the functioning of government with the will of the people. This is a fiction. The intricate business of framing laws and of administering them through several hundred thousand public officials is in no sense the act of the voters nor a translation of their will.

But although the acts of government are not a translation of public opinion, the principal function of government is to do specifically, in greater detail, and more continually what public opinion does crudely, by wholesale, and spasmodically. It enforces some of the working rules of society. It interprets them. It detects and punishes certain kinds of aggression. It presides over the framing of new rules. It has organized force which is used to counteract irregular force.

It is also subject to the same corruption as
public opinion. For when government attempts to impose the will of its officials, instead of intervening so as to steady adjustments by consent among the parties directly interested, it becomes heavy-handed, stupid, imperious, even predatory. For the public official, though he is better placed to understand the problem than a reader of newspapers, and though he is much better able to act, is still fundamentally external to the real problems in which he intervenes. Being external, his point of view is indirect, and so his action is most appropriate when it is confined to rendering indirect assistance to those who are directly responsible.

Therefore, instead of describing government as an expression of the people's will, it would seem better to say that government consists of a body of officials, some elected, some appointed, who handle professionally, and in the first instance, problems which come to public opinion spasmodically and on appeal. Where the parties directly responsible do not work out an adjustment, public officials intervene. When the officials fail, public opinion is brought to bear on the issue.

This, then, is the ideal of public action which our inquiry suggests. Those who happen in any question to constitute the public should attempt only to create an equilibrium in which settlements can be reached directly and by consent. The burden of carrying on the work of the world, of inventing, creating, executing, of attempting justice, formulating laws and moral codes, of dealing with the technic and the substance, lies not upon public opinion and not upon government but on those who are responsibly concerned as agents in the affair. Where problems arise, the ideal is a settlement by the particular interests involved. They alone know what the trouble really is. No decision by public officials or by commuters reading headlines in the train can usually and in the long run be so good as
settlement by consent among the parties at interest. No moral code, no political theory can usually and in the long run be imposed from the heights of public opinion, which will fit a case so well as direct agreement reached where arbitrary power has been disarmed.

It is the function of public opinion to check the use of force in a crisis, so that men, driven to make terms, may live and let live.