

WILL THE ENGINEER STAY PUT?*

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WAR took the engineer by the scruff of the neck and placed him at the forefront of a political muddle. He acted as though he liked it. Now it is proper to ask what is he going to do about it?

In pre-war days, almost every one had become accustomed to see engineers dodge their political responsibilities. Somehow it had become fashionable in the engineering world to be a poor citizen. Once in a great while some engineer would break out and take part in political affairs. Then his brethren would sit around the stove and call him a "good politician." All the time, while so doing, they were thinking about a bad politician. In any case they were not giving their brother praise.

Lawyers Depend Upon Engineers

Looking back to pre-war times it will be recalled that every little while some impetuous engineering brother would set some trap by which the American Society of Some Kind of Engineers would have been drawn into politics. But the wiser heads were on the watch, the trap was never sprung, and the impetuous brother was usually sorry he spoke. At the end of the war we do not find ourselves debating whether it is proper and dignified for engineers to perform their duties in the political life of the nation. That question is irrelevant. The controlling fact is that "we are in." The question now before us is, shall we go skulking back to our old lairs or shall we stay put and, in the words of the immortal Roosevelt, "hit the line hard."

If it be our duty to build bridges, roads, cantonments and piers; if it be a patriotic privilege to devise destructive engines of war whereby this nation may succeed in its holy desire to keep men free, then it must also be the duty and privilege of engineers to put forth as patriotic efforts in guiding the nation to use that freedom wisely. In other words, the duty of engineers does not end with destruction and construction; it covers maintenance and operation.

No one would urge engineers to take part in government and to seek and hold elective offices therein if the object were merely that of holding the office. The real object is to give the government engineering brains. The need for such brains is gaining in importance along with the increase in complexity of our civilization. Time was when the lawyer was the most necessary person in the making of laws, and he is so to-day in the making of some kind of laws. But, in the making of laws which most acutely affect our present and future well-being, and which have the most profound influence on the development of our state of society, the lawyer, if he makes laws, must be instructed and prompted by the engineer. Look over the legislative program of to-day. You will see mines, highways, motor trucks, railroads, ships, arid lands, swamps, buildings, dams, generators—a great engineering exhibit. Can anyone think of any reason why the activities of the engineer in political life should be confined to giving advice and counsel to legislative committees, and then returning home and allowing the laws to be made by lawyers, farmers, journalists and business men? Sit down in any group of engineers and you will not have to wait long before you will hear caustic comments about poor laws, stupid legislators, etc. If the subject of conversation were a bad road, a weak bridge, or an unsafe dam, those men would roll up their sleeves and apply proper remedies. Did anyone ever hear of engineers employing the same processes with respect to the making of laws?

Need for Engineering Participation

There is profound need for this engineering participation, not only in the halls of congress, but in those of state legislatures and in the councils of municipalities. There should be an engineer in the president's cabinet, in governors' chairs,

and in the office of mayor. Why not? The Secretary of the Interior, for example is, in normal times, the chief of a larger number of engineers than any other individual in the United States. The engineering functions falling under that office so far outweigh all others in extent and importance that the Department of the Interior is essentially an engineering department. Why then would it not be logical to place an engineer as Secretary of the Interior? These are very practical questions. It may be hard to imagine that any engineer in active practice will put down his life work and take up the functions of a political office, but that is just what should occur. The time has come when engineers must make those sacrifices and perform their proper share of political duty. Legislatures and executive departments need an intimate mixture of human temperaments, and the engineering temperament is as important as any other.

A Menace to Liberty

There is, however, another aspect to this question. We have before us a grave menace to that liberty which engineers have done so much to preserve. One of the best ways to destroy that menace is to employ that stabilizing influence which arises out of engineering training and engineering habits of thought. This grave menace is that of loose political thinking. We call it by many names, but just now Bolshevism is the current expression. But the loose thinking which does real damage is not being done by the "Red." The most pernicious loose thinker of to-day in every community is a highly presentable man; an educated man, a man of science and of arts.

Two Kinds of Thinking

When the highly specialized man steps out of his specialty and occupies his intellect with the common affairs of life, his brains too often run amuck. So far as his science is concerned he follows the truth wheresoever it may lead. He critically examines all premises and when he reaches conclusions it may be certain that he has gone to the uttermost limit of proof and inquiry without accepting any rumor, or any report, or any interpretation, save that which can be verified by unmistakable evidence. However, when he relaxes and comes out of his cloister and partakes mentally of the things in the world at large his relaxation is apt to be fairly complete. Disregarding the fundamental principles that are his daily guide, he thinks loosely, jumps at conclusions and accepts as evidence any rumor that he may find in any newspaper, however yellow. So it is that his conclusions are radical, ill-digested, and totally unbefitting the mentality of him who brings them forth. Such are the men, some perchance occupying university chairs, who are to-day the most profound menace that we have in our midst. By virtue of their attainments and their demonstrated mental qualifications they attract a following, and that following seems not to appreciate the fact that one and the same individual may do two kinds of thinking.

We, as engineers, cannot lay claim to clean skirts. Among our own professional brethren there are those who see double when they relax from engineering considerations. This should not be so. Let the principle be established among engineers that the processes that guide and fix an engineering conclusion are the very ones that must apply in a political conclusion. Facts form the basis in each case. We seek and find and judicially interpret the facts in the one case, while in the other we are prone to accept half-truths, rumor and prejudice.

A Stabilizing Influence

Engineers, by virtue of their war conduct, are standing in an enviable place before their countrymen. It is well-nigh axiomatic that they will fulfill all worthy expectations. It will facilitate progress, however, if we accept right now as a fixed principle the idea that we must cultivate new habits of thought with respect to political matters, must sacrifice our personal and professional inclinations for the common good, and by applying the mental processes of engineering to matters of political economy, become one of the stabilizing influences by which this nation shall retain its greatness. All of which is but another way to say that the engineer, having been put, must stay put.

*From the Journal of the Engineers' Club of St. Louis.