

III. THE CONSPECTUS

The history of a publishing venture often helps to explain the final form in which it appears. The editors of the ANNALS originally planned to produce a topical collection of source readings in American history. There were to be six, or ten, or twenty volumes — the number was not determined until fairly late in the process — each on a single theme of importance. According to the original plan, the selections within a volume were to be reprinted in chronological order, and each topical volume would tell its separate and distinct story without the aid of any master index.

But history refuses to be pigeonholed. In the process of trying to construct the topical volumes, it was soon realized that no such organization would or could work. The best selections in a volume dealing, say, with the development in America of the institution of private property were also about many other things: taxation, the freedom of business and government control thereof, conservation and the frontier, and the general welfare from various points of view. While all of these themes fall more or less nearly into the sphere of economics,

it was not even possible to construct a volume dealing with economic issues as such. When discussing economic questions, writers insist on treating constitutional and other political issues, and they are both unable and unwilling to confine themselves to those, reaching out, as the occasion demands, to scientific matters as well. Nor is even that all. The process of industrialization, which has had a potent effect on the institution of private property, has had equally potent effects on the institution of the family, and on the life of workers in general. And a few writers go so far as to treat the relation between private property and art, noting, for example, that copyright laws have significance for both.

It was decided, therefore, that the only way the selections could be presented was in straight chronological order from start to finish (or to 1968, which, we hope, is not the finish of anything). No other arrangement would tell us the true story and at the same time avoid either wearying repetition or serious distortion.

At first, that seemed to mean that any kind of topical organization would have to go by the board. But the example of the Syntopicon that is included in *GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD* provided a clue to the way out of the difficulty. Reaching back to the experience acquired in the production of the Syntopicon, the editors hit on the device of referencing the entire body of the 2,202 selections to an as yet undetermined number of major themes.

The Great Issues

A first stab at a list of major themes was made before any referencing was done. A group of senior editors, along with a small number of expert consultants — historians, political commentators, and the like — convened to consider what these themes should be. The first and almost the only question asked at these meetings was: "What are we, and Americans generally, worried about, concerned with, talking about *today*?" It was seen from the beginning that the emphasis must be contemporary, otherwise the set would have an archaic quality that would not recommend it to most readers. These meetings produced a list of about 50 major themes that appeared to exhaust the current concern of citizens of the United States.

Then the process of refinement began. A few of the themes on the first list were ruled out as being *only* contemporary, having no roots in our past and thus being unlikely to persist into the future. Others were seen, on examination, to be dependent rather than independent; and their placement under more important themes helped to decrease the size of the list. This stage of the work ended when about 30 themes had been identified as being not only contemporary but also important throughout the long past of our country. The longer and richer a subject's past, the more certain it seemed that it would survive for a reasonably long time to come.

The preliminary choice of selections had gone on concurrently with the identification of the major themes, and it was at this point that the first stage of

indexing began. This first indexing was a crucial test of both selections and themes. For if, on the one hand, a given theme was not actually discussed, or but little discussed, in the very large number of selections that had been tentatively chosen — some 4,500 of them, as has been noted — then it was not a proper one and had to be either restated, or subsumed under another theme, or dropped from the list. The first indexing was thus a test of the validity of the themes. But, on the other hand, if a given selection dealt only very narrowly with one theme, or even a part of it, then it was not a proper choice considering the immense number of richer and more broadly significant readings that were available. Hence the first indexing was also a test of the validity of the selections.

The first round of indexing, which occupied the editorial staff for upward of two years, had three main results. The first result was a useful set of criteria for the choice of texts to be included in the set (these criteria were discussed above). The second result was the narrowing down to 25 of the list of major themes that would ultimately form the chapters of the *Conspectus*. These 25 major themes, or chapters, withstood every test from then on. The staff indexed every chosen selection at least one more time, and in many cases twice or thrice more. But, after the list of 25 themes was finally determined, the staff never again found it necessary either to expand or decrease it. These 25 subjects *are* the major concerns of Americans, both present and past. They have stood up to the most stringent examination that any such list has ever been subjected to.

A third and final result was hardly less significant. It was soon realized, and as the work of indexing proceeded it became more and more evident, that "subject" and "theme," despite their widespread popularity and use in other works, were not the right terms to describe what we were dealing with. The right term, instead, was "issue." An issue is a matter about which men dispute, and on or toward which they have differing views. Each of the 25 chapters deals with what is and has been an issue in this sense. The dispute about each has been continuous and has sometimes been violent; and Americans have differed in the past, differ now, and will differ in the future about every one. It is in this sense, furthermore, that each is "great." The 25 issues are great because they are perennial, not perennial because they are great.

The claim that any list of 25 Great Issues is canonical must, of course, be accompanied by an important proviso. The terms in which these issues are stated may not be the ones that every reader might expect. Indeed, other terms could have been chosen. For example, the title of Ch. 19, "Rural and Urban America," could have been "City and Country," or "City Versus Country," or "Conflicting Claims of City and Country," or something of the sort. In that event, the word "city" would have appeared in the title of one of the chapters, as in fact it does not do. This does not mean, of course, that the subject of the city is not treated in this chapter, and indeed in other chapters as well. The *Conspectus* contains various devices for coping with what is after all merely a terminological difficulty, the main one of which is discussed below, in the section headed *Index of Subjects*.

Terminology aside, the 25 Great Issues remain as an — or as the — exhaus-

tive list of the major subjects that have been of concern to Americans throughout their history. They are what we have talked about; they are what we will talk about. And they form the backbone and constitute the intellectual structure of this set of books.

The chapter introductions

Each chapter of the *Conspectus* begins with a long essay by the editors on the issue with which the chapter is concerned. In several ways, these essays represent a wholly new kind of writing. As such, they require some comment here.

Two kinds of issues have been discussed in the foregoing pages. One kind consists of historical issues, which were touched on in our discussion of the criteria for the choice of selections. The other consists of substantive issues, which were treated in the last section. An examination of the similarities and differences between the two kinds of issues will help us to understand the kind of writing that is found in the chapter introductions.

An historical issue arises when events fall out in such a way as to make people think more deeply, and talk more intensely, and perhaps act passionately, about a perennial substantive issue. An historical issue that does not contain the germ of such an old problem is not really an issue at all, although there may be transient debate about it, and although a decision or set of decisions may be made regarding it. An important historical issue — one that engages the attention of the entire country — arises when a really important old problem, or set of important old problems, appears in a new light.

The American Civil War was such an issue. In the 1850s, and particularly in the election of 1860, events fell out in such a way that it was no longer possible for people to accept the compromises that, for at least a generation, had held the country together. These events included violence, as has been true so often in America — in this case in Kansas; a Supreme Court decision, which has also often been true — in this case the Dred Scott decision; and an election, once more a perennial begetter of historical issues — in this case of the candidate of a minority party, the Republicans, who won because the majority party was sharply divided. But it was not these events that made the Civil War. It was the old problems — the perennial substantive issues — that they intensified, and that they heated to a boil.

These old problems, of course, were those of the Union and of slavery. On the one hand, the essential political problem of the nation from the very beginning had been the creation of unity out of multiplicity. This was a fact that had not escaped the discerning eye of a Madison, a Jefferson, a Hamilton; nor was it any less clear to the winning candidate in 1860, Abraham Lincoln. The Union had been pasted together with the glue of good faith and compromise, and there had always been the danger that the faith would turn from good to bad, and that compromise would cease to be possible. And now that had happened.

On the other hand, the fundamental moral problem of the nation had been

slavery. As long as slavery could be confined to the section of the country that accepted and approved of it, the other sections could live with it peacefully, if uneasily. But when the institution of slavery threatened to burst out of the territorial bounds of the South; threatened, in fact, to become the law of the land, so that freedom would become the "peculiar institution"; the situation became unbearable. And the war came.

The Civil War itself was not a substantive issue. It began at a certain date, and it ended at a certain date; it is merely metaphorical to say, as some still do, that it never ended, that it continues to this day. The war ended, the shooting stopped, and the problems of slavery and of the Union were solved — at least for a time.

But of course they were not solved. As substantive issues, as persistent problems seen in new lights in 1860-1865, but seen also in still other lights in subsequent epochs, they were and are perennial. The fundamental political problem of unity in multiplicity — of creating, *e pluribus unum* — was not finally solved in 1865, and it is not solved to this day. The fundamental moral problem of slavery was not completely solved, either; for Negroes, if henceforth legally free, continued to be treated as second-class citizens, a fact that of course has had profound repercussions in our own time.

Even union, however, and even slavery, are strictly speaking not substantive issues, for both problems received a kind of solution in 1865. Other, larger, and more serious problems lie behind and beneath them. The problem of unity in multiplicity is not only a political problem in America; it is also a social problem, and perhaps also an artistic one. And although the Negroes have always been the most clearly defined American minority group, they have not been alone in the suffering their minority status has brought upon them. The Irish, the Germans, the Jews, and now the Puerto Ricans — and, from another point of view, the Catholics and Mormons — have also suffered, if not for so long or so intensely. Hence the great substantive issues that underlay the Civil War, from what may be called the conspective point of view, were those of pluralism in American society and politics, and of the status and rights of minorities. These issues are treated in Chs. 10 and 12.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find the introductory essays to these chapters dealing with the Civil War. The conflict was a moment in time when these issues came to particular prominence. But these essays do not, nor could they, confine themselves to the war itself. They must, and they do, treat the issues as they developed and changed throughout the 300-year history of the country.

The problem of unity in multiplicity was not confined to the moment in time that we call the Civil War. It was also an issue in colonial times, in the 1780s and 1790s, and — to mention no other epochs — during the so-called McCarthy period of the 1950s, when the impulse toward conformity in thought as well as action seemed, to many people, to threaten the pluralism on which the nation had in some sense been based. And the problem of minorities has never ceased, at least since the Alien and Sedition acts of the 1790s, to trouble the country, and of course it troubles it agonizingly today.

The chapter introductions, then, attempt to set forth the full sweep of the great substantive issues with which they deal, touching on historical issues where that is necessary or appropriate, but moving on, in every case, to the present, for all the issues are contemporary ones. They are all alive today. At the same time, the essays attempt to avoid taking any position on the issues. These are genuine issues, and as such are matters on which good men do not agree. It would be wrong in every way for the essays to reflect a particular viewpoint. The issues belong to all Americans, and all Americans should have their say.

One procedure adopted to make neutrality possible is frequent quotation, both from works included in the *ANNALS* and from works not found there. The reader of the essays will come upon many familiar statements, and some not so familiar. Of greater importance, however, is the stance or attitude that the essays may be said to take. This is objective in the most profound sense, in the sense of the term developed by the Institute for Philosophical Research. In this sense, "objective" means the balanced presentation of opposing views on questions that are never finally answerable — although passionately asserted answers to them abound. In the last analysis, such balanced presentations are what the essays try to provide.

The 25 essays constitute, all told, some 350,000 words, the equivalent of a very large book. They differ in style, depending on their subject matter; but they have in common an approach to the writing, and more significantly the understanding, of history that is perhaps unique.