

MIDCONTINENT

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william allen white (in an
engraving c. 1895)
contemplates himself costumed
for martial adventures two
decades later (see pp. 19 ff.)

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a vision in emporia: william allen white's search for community

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For many members of the Progressive movement, American society had not provided any satisfactory answers to what Herbert Croly described as “the social problem.” In *The Promise of American Life* (1909), Croly spoke of restoring “a democratic social ideal, which shall give consistency to American social life without entailing any essential sacrifice of desirable individual and class distinctions.”¹ William Allen White, the influential editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, also addressed himself to the task of creating a viable moral order that would provide the nation with a sense of community. White expounded a vision of a society untrammelled by greed, of an America dedicated to a higher purpose than the churlish squabble over the rewards of capitalism.

White’s vision consisted of a belief that the American people, as he wrote to Theodore Roosevelt, “will do more for what seems the larger good, for the intelligently unselfish end, than any other people.”² The “intelligently unselfish end” was Progressive shorthand for an America without social and economic conflict: a nation in which economic and class interests would function harmoniously. Such an equilibrium would make men honest, aspiring, neighborly and affectionate. A true community—both in terms of self and public interest—would then be created, and Croly’s “democratic social ideal” would inspire all its citizens.

Most Progressives shared White’s hopes for an organic, moral community. “The essence of the struggle,” declared Theodore Roosevelt in 1910, “is to equalize opportunity, destroy privilege, and give to the life and citizenship of every individual the highest possible value to himself and to the commonwealth.” Similarly, Woodrow Wilson insisted that Americans demanded “a government devoted to the general interest and not to special interests.” The quest of the individual for moral

roots in a materialistic society, Winston Churchill warned in *A Modern Chronicle*, remained a problem for everyone. While the search for a community was a serious task, Ray Stannard Baker, in the *American Magazine*, provided a buoyancy to the effort. "We 'muckraked,'" he wrote, "not because we hated our world but because we loved it. . . . Our magazine will be wholesome, hopeful, stimulating and uplifting."³

Such Progressives appealed to mass sentiments of guilt, indignation and responsibility. These were also the techniques employed by White in his novels, short stories and editorials. The Emporian denounced the materialism of the age in one of his first novels, *God's Puppets*, using the character of Charley Herrington to remind his readers of where unchecked acquisitiveness might lead. Herrington gave liberally to his town's library, churches, band and YMCA. While he had no real enemies, he had few friends. For Herrington thought of everything in terms of money, and it made him joyless and taciturn. In part, White maintained that the man's condition was his own fault. At the same time however, Herrington's conduct reflected society. His family had taught him that wealth brought happiness, power and moral superiority. "Much of the blame for his sordid choice in life's great decisions . . . was due to the age and its youth had few visions."⁴

Herrington had harmed himself more than anyone else, but the materialistic impulse could also touch the whole of society. In "The Man On Horseback," a short story in *Strategems and Spoils* (1901), White portrayed a malefactor of wealth who chose to dominate his society regardless of the public interest. Jacob T. Barton, "a greedy, brutal incarnation of the spirit of the times,"⁵ owned the town's street car franchise and a newspaper. When the town council voted to grant him a twenty year renewal of the franchise without so much as a discussion, the townspeople became Barton's chattels. Unchecked, great wealth not only damaged character but enabled a man to become a virtual dictator.

White recognized the powerful forces of corruption but called for slow, remedial change. And always the change must have its origin in the middle class: from lawyers, doctors, merchants, editors and other established individuals. For White's moral vision was essentially a middle class viewpoint. He distrusted those elements in the business community and the laboring classes who could not rise above their interests. Through White's bifocals, the good American was the middle class American, and it was from him that the reforming impulse should come.

In the Heart of a Fool developed more fully the idea that reform remained the soundest ally of property rights. The novel, White wrote to a publisher, "seems . . . to be more of a history of the epoch that began passing in 1914 than it is fiction."⁶ Specifically, the work concerned the industrial town of Harvey and its domination by Market Street. The businessmen of Market Street believed in fast, exorbitant

profits, a condition which White quickly pointed out did not apply to all America. "The soul of America was not reflected in that debauch of gross profit making. The soul of America still aspired for justice. . . ."⁷ As the town doctor viewed the situation, America had made tremendous progress in the late nineteenth century. Electric lights, the telephone, the phonograph, the gasoline thresher and the transcontinental railroad had revolutionized men's habits. But these developments had also unsettled the belief that man controlled his own destiny. "I have seen capital rise in the world," declared the doctor, "until it is greater than kings, greater than courts, greater than governments—greater than God himself. . . ."⁸

The appearance of Grant Adams, a union organizer threatened the hegemony of profits. Adams believed that poverty arose from social conditions, a belief that Market Street—committed to acquisitiveness and the status quo—quickly rejected. Even the town doctor found Adams' ideas unacceptable and declared: "We've given you the inheritance tax and the income tax and direct legislation to manipulate it, and instead of staying with the game and helping us work these things out in wise administration . . . you go squawking over the country with your revolution. . . ." Adams had disobeyed White's admonition against radical change and had become a dreamer who believed that he alone had truth and could remake the world. But, White insisted, the world would change only when "the common mind sees the truth and the common heart feels it." In those terms, the history of reform necessarily would be a history of disappointment. As each reform settled one problem, another would replace it. As one character remarked: "For God is ever jealous of our progeny and leaves an unfinished job always on the workbench of the world."⁹

Critical of Adams, White nonetheless left him with some redeeming features. The organizer never advocated class hatred. Instead, he preached against what he called "the system that makes a few men rich without much regard to their talent, at the expense of all the rest." Adams' goal was to make everyone middle class. Given something else to work for besides the rear of poverty, labor would rise "just as the middle class came under the same stimulus." The need for unions would end, and class suffering—at least according to Adams—"would disappear just as they have disappeared in the classes that have risen during the last two centuries." His faith in the middle class unshaken, Adams appealed to them for what he called "a public love of the underdog that will make our present laws intolerable."¹⁰

Adams' rejection of force and appeals to understanding received their strongest test after a gory industrial accident infuriated the workers. Enraged by Adams' subsequent organization of a strike, the town formed a vigilante committee. Violence was imminent, and White intoned: "So Harvey grew class conscious, property conscious, and the town

went stark mad. It was the gibbering fear of those who make property of privilege, and privilege of property, afraid of losing both." After a mob killed Adams, White quickly pointed out that Market Street itself was not responsible. "It was the thing that Market Street had made with its greed." Before he died, Adams forgave the vigilantes, as White forgave Market Street. The organizer's death had taught the businessmen a lesson. White concluded: "He was a seed that is sown and falls upon good ground. For Market Street after all is not a stony place; seeds sown there bring forth great harvests."¹¹

In the Heart of a Fool abounded with White's anti-revolutionary sentiments and faith in the middle class. Harvey's social upheaval resulted from Market Street's unwillingness to recognize labor's middle class aspirations. Despite the initial violence, a settlement was reached, and most importantly, the social structure remained intact because of labor's gains. As one character expressed it: "We all want to help labor . . . but there can be no Democracy of Labor until Labor finds itself; until it gets the capacity for handling big affairs; until it sees more clearly what is true and what is false."¹² By the end of the novel, labor—along with Market Street—had a clarified vision. Together they saw to it that America entered the world war unsullied by greed.

As a litany to the unselfishness of Harvey and all of middle class America, *In the Heart of a Fool* drew a warm response. One publisher thought it would pull "the scales from some of the capitalistic eyes and eradicate some of the poison of impatience from labor's mind. . . ."¹³ An editor assured White that his novel "comes the nearest to being the great American novel this generation or any other has been given."¹⁴ A copy, one friend assured him, would be sent to Eugene Debs, for White had shown that the old order had gone forever.

From the earliest short stories to *In the Heart of a Fool*, the theme of corruption was an integral part of White's fiction. The problem lay in correcting this affliction: to become regenerate, men needed a moral vision; they required a shift from material to spiritual considerations. Without a change in man's nature, legislative reform had its limitations. This tension filled White's writings until World War I. America's entrance into the European conflict provided him with a process by which corruption—both in the individual and in society—could be eliminated. The war would give mankind a spiritual vision, and material considerations would be subsumed.

At no time did White support war in the abstract as means of unifying society. Like so many other Progressives of his generation, he looked with alarm at the turn of events in the summer of 1914. Nonetheless, when war existed as a brute fact, it did have its uses. In 1898 he had announced that war was one of God's weapons for fighting the devil in man. More practically, the editor felt that the Spanish-American War brought political unity, drawing together Populists, Democrats and

Republicans. "A simple but great emotion," ran one editorial, "that of patriotic joy, was stirring among the people, and they moved under the stress of strong passion."¹⁵ Thus by March, 1917, he could write: "It cannot be that a world war can be waged in which no righteousness is evident. A great moral victory and a great advance in civilization must come of the war as compensation for the devastation."¹⁶

This confidence developed slowly. At first, White expressed skepticism as to what might happen to domestic reform in the struggle against the Kaiser. Minimum wage laws and equitable railroad rates would pale in the face of news from Verdun. In addition, the rise of big business after the Civil War and evaporation of the reform impulse were all too vivid memories. But as relations with Germany deteriorated and war seemed inevitable, doubts about the viability of reform vanished. War and reform could be contiguous. White saw the conflict accomplishing one of his favorite reforms, prohibition. Moreover, the important issues of the day—military campaigns and diplomatic objectives—would replace the trivia of the society page. Editors would inform and instruct their readers, fulfilling the real functions of the press. It was with considerable gusto that the *Emporian* announced: "In this war I am going to know no politics or friends except the successful conduct of the war to a decisive end."¹⁷

What was imperative for the editor was mandatory for his readers. "Having gone into the fight we must wage it so that the world will know that our entrance has counted. We must hit and hit hard and hit as quickly as we can."¹⁸ The *Gazette* helped enforce the consensus, and anyone deviating from the course of enthusiastic support for the war soon felt the sting of its editorials. When a former senator and friend denounced wartime graft, White labeled the charge treasonous. To question the motives and ideals of the war justified, White warned, "all the mollicoddles and sapheads in their weak and wobbly attitude toward the war."¹⁹ The injection of economic issues was, in his eyes, Bolshevism. Although White insisted that American patriotism contained no germs of hatred, he called for a complete war against the German people. The allies should hang the Crown Prince along with generals Ludendorff and Hindenburg. And because the German people had supported them, they too must suffer. Like President Wilson, White held the enemy to strict accountability.

It seemed indisputable that the struggle against Germany had raised the whole moral tone of American society. The war hardened the nation physically and spiritually. It made distinct lines between right and wrong where previously many men distinguished only shades. White expounded this viewpoint in editorials and letters. Writing to one draftee, the son of a friend, he envied the boy's opportunity to go overseas. "You are going into the most beautiful experience a man may have, the chance to serve a great cause and in a great way. . . ." The boy would

see France at its best, for the nation had keyed its soul high in the crisis. Historians, White continued, would look back upon this period as the most dynamic in the world. Only the birth of Christ and the discovery of America equalled it. "And you are going forth to be a soldier of this great change. It is a high and blessed privilege, Chauncy."²⁰

The value of military service, White insisted, lay not only in serving a splendid cause but also in the fact that regional ties could be broken down. Young men from Kansas could train in New England, others in Alabama, and still others in Oregon. New impressions and new inspirations would come to American youth. Emporia, he concluded in a letter to a member of Congress, would be a good site for a military camp. It was a clean town, the type of place fit for the training of soldiers.

These soldiers will be country town boys for the part, who are clean, wholesome, vigorous young chaps, and who should not have the temptation of the saloon, the gambler and the prostitute anywhere near them. To locate this camp near Emporia means that that is absolutely guaranteed. Our community wouldn't stand for it for a minute.²¹

But the saloonkeeper and prostitute were not the only dangers that beset a dedicated America. White also declared war on the slackers, those who seemed only perfunctorily loyal to the crusade. The *Gazette* published the names of all those requesting draft exemptions, including the young men who suddenly found matrimony a desirable state. In a similar move, the *Emporian* abused German-Americans. The suspension of the German-American press, he felt, should continue even after the war. If loyal German-Americans could make money by using English in their business transactions, they could think in English. Still another editorial attacked Gottlieb Sattler, who lived in Lyon County, Kansas, for thirty-seven years but who, according to the *Gazette*, "had kept his soul in Germany."²² The paper demanded his deportation and the expropriation of his property. Helping to generate this atmosphere, White also joined the Vigilantes, a group dedicated to converting mothers to the idea that their sons should enlist.

Clearly White had departed from his prewar concern that American involvement in the European conflict would throttle reform. In 1916 he had written to Theodore Roosevelt that American entrance would be tantamount to fighting in an insane asylum, where the deranged had guns. With the streets full of lunatics, he insisted, America should stay indoors.²³ A comparison of this stand with his attitude toward the Non-Partisan League reveals a striking change in his Progressive stance. Founded in 1916, the League called for state-owned grain elevators, mills and packing plants. By 1918 White feared that the League would sweep across Kansas as the old Farmer's Alliance had done in the late 1890's, and for a man whose journalistic fame came from denouncing

Populists in “What’s the Matter with Kansas?” this parallel made him stir uneasily.

Concerning the nature of the League’s demands, White had no real quarrel. But when certain spokesmen for the League criticized various aspects of the war effort, the editor’s determination to maintain a consensus at any cost again revealed itself. “I think it is the most righteous war ever started on this planet, and the Non-Partisan League is so thoroughly tainted with pacifism and pro-Germanism, that I should regard it as an enemy to the country no matter what its economic doctrines were.”²⁴ In the pages of the *Gazette*— by now the most famous rural paper in America—the League faced a shrill critic. “Every man who has the taint of pro-Germanism in his blood,” ran one editorial, “is in open sympathy with the Non-Partisan League.”²⁵ The absence of logic in this attack was as impressive as its vehemence. Labeled a “gang of camouflaged Huns,” the League supposedly would bring Bolshevism to America. The editor knew better and in a private moment admitted that *after* the war the League might serve a useful function.²⁶ During the war, however, it symbolized radical obstructionism.

For the Sage of Emporia, the World War meant a total commitment to the concept that regeneration would result from sacrifice and dedication. Increasingly the pudgy editor left his chair at the *Gazette* and spoke to various groups about war objectives. For two weeks at a time, he enjoyed his wife’s tasty cooking only once; the rest of his hours were spent in hectoring farmers. “I feel the town people are tremendously for the war, but the farmer hasn’t gotten up to it yet. So it seemed that my job was . . . to talk to them. All of the farmer’s complaints will be ironed out in time and it has been my job to iron them out.”²⁷ The war, he assured General Leonard Wood, was a “great social adventure,” and in time the farmer would see it that way.²⁸

The Creel Committee—the official organ of government propaganda—appreciated White’s efforts and asked him to write a series of articles for European consumption. “We want the human kind of thing that I know you can do so well.”²⁹ By Christmas of 1917, White could truthfully boast about his output: “My articles reached over forty newspapers from Boston to San Diego, with a total circulation of over five million. Every fellow can do his damnest in the line for which he is fitted, and I am trying to do mine.”³⁰

In short, the war was an exhilarating experience. And it was even more so when White had the opportunity to visit Europe in the summer of 1917 with Henry Allen, a Wichita friend, as inspectors for the Red Cross and YMCA. In England, White met with the men of affairs. “I had a beautiful time in London; lunched with H. G. Wells, and dined with James Barrie and had tea with Lord Bryce and missed an engagement with Kipling and Lloyd George because they sailed the boat ahead of time.”³¹ The biggest thrill came in France at the front. After picking

up a warm shell fragment, he exulted: "We felt the war had come to us."³²

The experiences of the two men reached thousands through *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me*, a thinly fictionalized novel which contained many of the letters White had written home during his tour. On the surface it was a casual story about two middle-aged Kansas men going to war without their wives along to keep them happy and well-fed. Together the two men would "celebrate the eternal Wichita and Emporia in the American heart . . ." As the novel described the boat trip to Europe, it was obvious that White was also celebrating the spontaneity and dedication of youth. American youth was no better symbolized than by Miss Ingersoll, a red-haired, blue-eyed Red Cross nurse from the Midwest. In turn she was admired by a clean-cut American ambulance driver. "The renewal of youth in their faces through unstinted giving is beautiful to see. They are going into a new adventure—a high and splendid adventure." The boat contained all types of young Americans, "all hurrying across the world to help in the great fight for democracy. . . ."³³

This was heavy handed symbolism, and White intended it so. "It seemed to me," he wrote to a friend,

that if our people could get the panorama of the war rolling across a background, which they could understand, the war would come nearer to them. Now of course Emporia was only put in as a symbol—a symbol of all America—all middle class, with no particular beginnings . . . and with no pride of ancestry, but a vast hope of posterity. So I kept working in details of the Emporia background to make these Americans see that their very life was woven into the vast fabric of destiny that is passing over the loom of fates in this War.³⁴

In France, White and his friend had their first contact with battle. They visited Verdun, a shattered place inhabited only by two scraggly cats. But if the war brought destruction it also brought change: not merely alterations of boundaries, but also social and economic change. "The hungry guns out there at the front have eaten away the whole social order that was!" Girls working in munitions factories, were moved by "deep and beautiful emotions." In the postwar world White predicted they would have a greater voice in the political affairs of men. In addition, labor would receive higher wages and in time would help determine the production policies of their factories. The rich would pay higher taxes; they would carry their share of the war. The conflict, White insisted, was a people's war, and the people would win.³⁵

Above all, the war had shown that democracies could organize efficiently under the stimulus of sacrifice. And White concluded: "In crises the rich man, the poor man, the thief, the harlot, the preacher, the teacher, the laborer . . . all go to death for something that defies death, something immortal in the human heart." War made soldiers, with

various social backgrounds, “brothers in the democracy of courage.” War “refreshed life” by removing men from stagnating routine. A “tremendous whiff,” it changed men and societies.³⁶

The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me received the accolades of numerous members of the intellectual community. Progressives like Ray Stannard Baker, Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann hailed the novel as a monumental contribution to America’s understanding of the war. White had sent Lippmann a copy, saying: “I was rather aiming it at men like you.” Lippmann, usually so very reserved in his *New Republic* columns, found it profoundly moving.

If I started to tell you how much I love you for it, you’d be embarrassed. It isn’t only that I agree with what you’re saying in every particular. That right might almost have been expected. It’s the fact that, in all the tangles of human emotion which this war produces, you don’t ever seem to me to have gone ugly or sour or blatant. You have written a very noble book.

Appreciation came from a variety of sources: from Hamlin Garland, Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge and even Max Eastman, whose *Masses* was a casualty of the war.³⁷

For White the world war seemed to accomplish what he had affirmed in his novels. “Every industry in America,” he wrote to the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, “every commercial institution, indeed all of commerce and all the various expressions of organized labor are feeling the impulse of this war, and are changing their methods by reason of their changed ideals.” The controls that the Wilson administration had placed over business and labor seemed to have worked successfully, and White urged their permanent adoption. Government must regulate transportation; labor must have decent working conditions; price fixing should be permanent, as should arbitration of labor disputes.³⁸

In the summer of 1918, as victory seemed imminent, White wrote a revealing letter to the President of Washington University. More than anything else, this letter attested to White’s faith that Americans were a regenerate people. From 1885 to 1917, the editor declared, the dominant theme of American history had been the rise and fall of plutocracy. Progressivism had checked the forces of plutocracy in America. But then Germany had become the new Plutocracy. Both groups had tried to rule the world; both had failed. With this litany to victory, White affirmed that World War I had done nothing less than save the American community. It brought discipline and a sense of dedication; it erased class lines. Untainted by material considerations, Americans had defeated the forces of corruption. And in doing so, America had become regenerate.³⁹

That the war might unleash the forces of cooperation and discipline was a belief held by reformers of different generations. The aging

William Dean Howells, writing his "Easy Chair" column for *Harper's*, concluded that the sturdy Altrurians would support conscription as "the favorite form of devotion to national welfare. . . ." Recalling his experience with the Creel Committee, historian James T. Shotwell spoke of "the need of conceiving of Uncle Sam as an American sovereign—some kind of individualizing of the national purpose such as the English have in the Crown." And Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of *The Nation*, remembered that his strictures against war earned him the wrath of many colleagues. "It was beyond their comprehension that anyone could refuse to agree that the war was the greatest of moral undertakings, bound to result in the regeneration of the world. . . . They thought I was crazy because I revolted against the whole idea that good could come out of the slaughter of millions."⁴⁰

The notion of war as a force for regeneration appeared most concretely in the thought of numerous Progressives. To be sure, there were some Progressives—such as George W. Norris, Robert M. LaFollete, Amos Pinchot and Frederic C. Howe—who opposed the war on the grounds that it would promote the interests of the munitions makers and other business groups. Most of this opposition, however, occurred in the years 1914-17; once America was involved, their opposition was stifled.⁴¹ For Herbert Croly, Walter Weyl and Walter Lippmann—the editors of *The New Republic*—the conflict presented a unique opportunity to reconstruct American society. In their opinion, engineers, inventors and social experts would make the struggle a "war of co-operation, technique, productivity, and sacrifice." Everyone must understand, the editors warned, that in fighting Germany, America was also disciplining itself. "There is daily coming into complete operation the forced moral draught with which during a war a patriotic nation is infused." As Floyd Dell, a young novelist, remarked sadly some years later, Lippmann and Croly thought that a "war patronized by *The New Republic* could not but turn out to be a better war than anyone had hoped."⁴²

Hutchins Hapgood, a reform journalist whose career paralleled White's, perhaps expressed the hopes of a generation when he wrote that the war "corresponded to the latent possibility of explosion in our own souls." From its beginning, he noted, "we felt the War as social upheaval rather than as war. . . a turmoil from within as well as from without. . . . Where were we? What were we?" White shared these impressionistic sentiments. "I hope this will be the last war," he wrote a friend, "and am inclined to think it will be the last war for many generations if we win the war decisively. . . ."⁴³ White's vision, like that of so many Progressives, was that war had created an organic community.

The war's heady draught of discipline and cooperation vanished with the New Era, and for some Progressives the comparison between the periods was an odious one. Postwar America, it appeared, had re-

turned to the selfish acquisition of wealth; the national purpose was forgotten. Along with Walter Lippmann—who in *Public Opinion* (1922) concluded that democracy inevitably lacked direction—White saw few signs of hope. “What a God damn world this is!” he complained to a friend in 1920.⁴⁴ Since the American people seemed satisfied with Warren Harding, reformers would have a hard time. “We who feel like going in to make a rough house in the temple will only be crucified in the attempt.”⁴⁵ The whole world seemed gripped “in some sort of spiritual glacial epoch, which threatens chaos.”⁴⁶ As for himself, “God, how I would like to get out and raise hell for righteousness.”⁴⁷

To a Progressive, righteousness meant establishing a balance between capital, labor and the state. But the stock market crash and the Great Depression unsettled White’s vision of such a balance. “I feel we are living in a dangerous age,” he wrote. Falling prices and unemployment might win new converts to communism. And here the editor evoked the old progressive analysis of affairs. “I distrust the proletariat because it is ignorant and selfish, and the plutocrat because it is cunning and greedy . . . the middle class will be able to protect the proletariat from destruction through its own ignorance and the plutocracy from destroying society through plutocratic greed.”⁴⁸

This remark, made in 1930, showed that the Emporian had not strayed from the rhetoric of *In the Heart of a Fool*. Despite the Depression, White clung to the fantasy world of Harvey and the enlightenment of its responsible citizens, all of them middle class. The economic problems of nearly 12 million unemployed were viewed through the bifocals of Emporia. White compared the situation of his employees on the *Gazette* with those of labor everywhere. The *Gazette* had no union and did not need one because its owner and editor paid good wages. The men respected him; he respected them, and everyone worked hard and was satisfied.⁴⁹ Good sense and good will—always abundant in White’s novels—were expected to carry much of the economic burden. But above all he resurrected the Progressive faith in voluntarism. The nation must “recreate the dynamic altruism outside of government which moved us during the war. . . .” Relief funds should be raised in the same manner as Liberty Loans, Red Cross drives and YMCA funds had been handled in the struggle against the Kaiser. This point was not lost upon President Hoover, whose experiences in the war suggested just such a parallel.⁵⁰

The New Deal challenged some of the assumptions of the older Progressives, and White found himself in the role of a baffled spectator. Concerning the National Recovery Administration, he voiced grudging approval. “These are strange times. . . we [are] facing a new attitude toward the labor question.” Still, Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal “have been doing in ten years what we should have been doing in a generation.” The public must learn that “equitable and equal do not mean the same thing.” Society, White concluded as late as 1943, must

see to it that “the bully and the cheat should be yanked back into the area of common decency and Christian morality . . . because it is just naturally indecent for them to thrive in an *ordered* society. . . .” The New Deal’s reliance upon federal intervention in the economy threatened the world view of those Progressives like White who believed in securing an organic society through voluntaristic principles. Roosevelt nursed American along by “feeding her pink pills [and] a hypodermic needle . . . and if we don’t watch out the old girl will be a ‘chronic.’” What happened in Washington seemed a dangerous departure from the cooperative society portrayed in White’s pre-war novels.⁵¹

The threat of another war stirred memories of the organization and discipline under Woodrow Wilson. As in 1914, White viewed the possibility of American involvement against Germany with considerable misgivings. But the Nazi threat to American interests would not go away, and at the request of Cordell Hull he helped found The Non-Partisan Committee For Peace Through Revision Of The Neutrality Law. Congress revised the law—which made it easier for Britain to secure war supplies—on November 3, 1939, but the European situation seemed unimproved. In 1940 White and others founded the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, an organization which sought to defeat Nazism by dispatching war supplies to the British. As chairman of the Committee, White had no great admiration for England but felt that a German victory meant “we will have to go on with the battle or let Hitler control our commerce which is unthinkable.” By aiding the allies, the United States could protect its own interests without resorting to war.⁵²

The Committee had 750 chapters, all of them autonomous, and the National organization had no disciplining powers. Some members—like Sophia Mumford, wife of critic Lewis Mumford, and Philip Wyllie, author of *Generation of Vipers*—vehemently criticized the chairman for not urging America’s direct entry into the war. Attacks also came from conservative spokesmen such as Bruce Barton, author of the best selling *The Man Nobody Knows*. The most vocal spokesmen for the interventionist position belonged to the New York chapter. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Herbert Bayard Swope insisted that the United States should not wait for Hitler to attack before entering the conflict. White found himself caught between the interventionists and the conservative attacks. Feeling that he had lost control of the organization and concerned over his wife’s failing health, he resigned in January, 1941. Most political leaders, he felt, understood the dangers of the international situation. “But . . . we do not have the unanimous public opinion we need.”⁵³

The quest for a unanimous public opinion had concerned White since before World War I. And when America entered World War II, he was pleased with his own role in preparing the nation for unity. As one of the editors of the Book of the Month Club he had insisted that

a certain number of books dealing with European affairs be placed on the Club's list. "No other agency . . . has done so much as we have to prepare the ground for December 7 . . . I should like to brag in a gentlemanly way about giving a considerable faction of the leaders of American public opinion a consistent view of modern Europe. . . ."54 At 73, the editor clung to his belief that war, with its imposed unity, could create a national purpose.

But for the impatient White this purpose developed far too slowly. America had not absorbed the martial spirit with the alacrity shown in the struggle against the Kaiser. "[T]he whole trouble is," the editor declared on December 30, "that Democracy doesn't think straight or logically. It feels. Both Pearl Harbor and Manila are the shadows of our light of liberty. We weren't sure, and I doubt if the country is sure now, whether we have an imperial destiny." The country lacked the nerve to say that it would retain possessions previously won from Spain, and under those circumstances America lacked vigorous direction. "The result was unpreparedness because *we didn't have a national will and we don't have much of a national will about domestic problems.*" The war, he complained in 1942, had come so quickly that the masses did not understand its purpose. To correct this drift, he proposed "some kind of agency to pull us together." Citizens wanted "someone to tell us how and why and where we are going. Which means to say that the country is aching for patriotic leadership."⁵⁵

The leadership should come from the chief executive, but Roosevelt had missed a great opportunity. "I think the country is longing for a direct sock in the jaw at minority pressure groups who are trying to influence the government to their own advantage and against the obvious leadership of the country." The president must stand up "before the nation and show that he is a knock-down and drag-out scrapper and to hell with everything but the country." This verbal pugilism echoed White's earlier Progressive resentment toward factions. In his search for an organic community, the Emporian once had resorted to fictional presentations. All groups—business and labor—had been balanced in Market Street. And in World War I, these dreams had become a reality in the minds of many Progressives. Business and labor had cooperated; consensus had replaced conflict, and now there was an opportunity to do so again. "This is not the time to think in political terms. It is the time to go out into the deep and let down your net."⁵⁶

In World War II, as in World War I, White's pursuit of consensus permitted him no sympathy for dissenters and minority groups. When a syndicalist wishing to speak in Kansas City received harsh treatment from the police chief, who cancelled the proposed meeting and jailed the radical, Roger Baldwin, Director of the American Civil Liberties Union, asked the editor for help. White requested the police chief to be more lenient but declined to involve himself further. Similar pleas

for support from Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, involving the imprisonment of Earl Browder for passport violations, were turned down. While bemoaning the plight of the American Negro, White felt that the racial situation must remain in the hands of intelligent white Southerners. He excused his non-involvement on the grounds that racial injustice so filled him with anger that he could not fight effectively.⁵⁷

In 1917 the German-Americans suffered the wrath of many vigilante groups dedicated to a war consensus. In 1942, the Japanese-American community was the object of hysteria when the federal government ordered their incarceration into re-location camps. Just as he excused what had happened to the German-Americans, White justified what befell the Japanese-Americans and refused to support those elements of the American Civil Liberties Union which hoped to challenge the action. White's only concessions were that some Japanese might enter the University of Kansas or work on farms to alleviate the labor shortage. Those suffering the indignities of the camps must realize that America appreciated their sacrifices. "We are proud of your patriotism," the editor wrote to a camp inmate, "under what might seem persecution. And yet you must realize that under the circumstances the self-defense of a nation is a paramount instinct." In one of his rare speculative moments about the injustices produced by the war, White concluded that errors were inevitable. "If you get war, you get intolerance, the curse of war!"⁵⁸

Doubts about war made little impact considering White's busy schedule. Age and uncertain health prevented him from visiting the European or Pacific theatres of operation, but the government—as it had during World War I—asked White to contribute propaganda. The Office of War Information wanted a statement of purpose from the man whose name "stands for all that is America." White responded with a script that underscored the great social and economic changes brought by the war. Returning soldiers would not recognize their native Kansas. "All over Kansas are rising war towns, even war cities. . . . Every town in Kansas is doing its part for the war effort. We are bending our whole energies to the art and science of war." The lines between the political parties evaporated as everyone devoted his energies to victory, and the whole state was being regenerated. "We are no longer a rural state. . . . Indeed Kansas . . . is the mother of the god of war." It sounded very much like an extract from *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me* adapted to the 1940's. At age 73, the Sage of Emporia still found excitement in the whole experience. "I have always been in the thick of it. There isn't an organization or activity in town that I don't work with. Just now I am up to my neck trying to get a bomber roundhouse for Emporia."⁵⁹

Sustained as he was by energetic involvement in the war effort, White nonetheless expressed anxiety about securing and maintaining a society unscathed by internal conflict. There were divisive forces—those ubiquitous selfish interest groups—that made him "just plain, plumb scared."

There had to be “an intelligent plan to compromise economic differences and tear down the walls of arrogance. . . .” War was one way, a hideously painful way, of doing it. The next ten years, he predicted in 1943, would require the entire force of American production, along with sacrifice, to refurbish capitalism. “The capitalistic system must not break down. But unless capitalism is willing to organize, to sacrifice, to envision its own self-interest in the renewal and revival of civilization, the war will be a failure.” The menace lay not in military defeat but in a lack of intelligent dedication to an organic, inter-dependent society. “Perhaps this world war and another and another will be required to get the truth to Duchess County and rural Texas.”⁶⁰

White clung to his vision of a cooperative society until his death on January 29, 1944. The *Emporian*, Walter Lippmann wrote in an obituary, showed that democracy was a fraternity which held men together against divisive forces, preventing “those irreconcilable, irreparable, ineradicable things which burst asunder the bonds of affection and trust.”⁶¹ White had spent a lifetime searching for the bonds of affection and trust, but they had proved to be elusive. The difficulty lay in making democracy organize efficiently. Men needed a national will; they must regenerate themselves by sacrificing self-interest. Capital and labor must see that their relationship was one of concert, not conflict. And it was through the institution of war—first against the Kaiser and then against the Axis—that White hoped to create a consensus. War supplied the catalyst for a national will by requiring discipline, cooperation and consensus. History, like one of White’s novels, would then have a happy ending.

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footnotes

1. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (Indianapolis, 1965), 139.
2. William Allen White to Theodore Roosevelt, June?, 1910, in Walter Johnson, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Allen White* (New York, 1947), 110.
3. Theodore Roosevelt, *The New Nationalism* (Englewood Cliffs, 1961), 26; Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom* (Englewood Cliffs, 1961), 32; Robert W. Schneider, *Five Novelists of The Progressive Era* (New York, 1965), Chapter V; Ray Stannard Baker, *An American Chronicle* (New York, 1945), 226-227.
4. William Allen White, *God's Puppets* (New York, 1916), 209.
5. William Allen White, *Strategems and Spoils* (New York, 1901), 43.
6. White to Ellery Sedgwick, October 22, 1918. William Allen White Papers, Library of Congress. Unless otherwise indicated, all correspondence is from this collection.
7. William Allen White, *In the Heart of a Fool* (New York, 1918), 69-70.
8. *Ibid.*, 346-347.
9. *Ibid.*, 330, 395, 497-498, 524-525.
10. *Ibid.*, 437, 458, 465, 486-487, 499.
11. *Ibid.*, 570-581, 603, 607, 609-610.
12. *Ibid.*, 486, 614.
13. Marcellus Murdock to White, November 29, 1918.
14. S. T. Clover to White, November 25, 1918.
15. Quoted in Walter Johnson, *William Allen White's America* (New York, 1947), 111.
16. *Emporia Gazette*, March 31, 1917.
17. White to Senator Charles Curtis, December 5, 1917.
18. *Emporia Gazette*, March 27, 1917.
19. White to Rodney Elward, June 8, 1917.
20. White to Chauncy Williams, May 5, 1917.

21. White to Dudley Doolittle, May 15, 1917.
22. *Emporia Gazette*, October 19, 1918. See also December 12 and April 19, 1917.
23. White to Theodore Roosevelt, August 27, 1916. Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress.
24. White to R. M. McClintock, February 23, 1918.
25. *Emporia Gazette*, March 13, 1918.
26. White to Victor Murdock, February 23, 1918.
27. White to Helen ?, March 26, 1917.
28. White to General Leonard Wood, November 26, 1917.
29. Ernest Poole to White, March 22, 1918. Poole was one of the directors in the Foreign Press Bureau of the Creel Committee.
30. White to Senator Charles Curtis, December 5, 1917.
31. White to Helen ?, November 26, 1917.
32. *Emporia Gazette*, October 8, 1917.
33. William Allen White, *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me* (New York, 1918), 5-6, 170, 31.
34. White to Dr. ? Lull, October 14, 1918.
35. White, *Martial Adventures of Henry and Me*, 318, 281, 319, 321-322.
36. *Ibid.*, 79, 83.
37. White to Walter Lippmann, April 30, 1918; Lippmann to White, May 7, 1918. See also R. S. Baker to White, May 29, 1918; Croly to White, April 22, 1918; H. C. Lodge to White, April 24, 1918; Eastman to White, May 6, 1918.
38. White to George Lorimer, May 7, 1918. See also White to Mark Sullivan, January 28, 1918; White to Senator Charles Curtis, May 24, 1918.
39. White to Herbert Hadley, August 20, 1918. Hadley Papers, University of Missouri.
40. *Harper's CXXXVII* (September, 1918), 589-592; James T. Shotwell, *The Autobiography of James T. Shotwell* (Indianapolis, 1961), 74-75; Oswald Garrison Villard, *Fighting Years: Memoirs of a Liberal Editor* (New York, 1959), 328.
41. Walter I. Trattner, "Progressivism and World War I: A Re-Appraisal," *Mid America*, Vol. 44 (July, 1962), 135-137. Trattner cites only those dissenters writing *prior* to 1917.
42. *The New Republic*, X (April 21, 1917), 336, 338; Dell's remark quoted in Charles Forcey, *The Crossroads of American Liberalism* (New York, 1961), 275.
43. Hutchins Haggood, *A Victorian in the Modern World* (New York, 1939), 385; White to Mrs. Margaret H. McCarter, December 10, 1917.
44. White to Ray Stannard Baker, December 8, 1920, in Johnson, ed., *Letters*, 213.
45. White to Herbert Croly, September 11, 1920. White Papers.
46. Quoted in Johnson, ed., *Letters*, 19.
47. White to Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., July 15, 1926, in *ibid.*, 261.
48. White to Chester Rowell, July 14, 1931; to Charles Morgan, November 26, 1930, in *ibid.*, 314, 307-8.
49. White to James J. Davis, June 18, 1921, in *ibid.*, 217-9.
50. White to David Hinshaw, August 10, 1931, in *ibid.*, 315. For Hoover's use of war similes and metaphors, see Albert U. Romasco, *The Poverty of Abundance: Hoover, The Nation, The Depression* (New York, 1965), 179-180, and William E. Leuchtenburg, "The New Deal and the Analogies of War," in John Braeman, et al, *Change and Continuity in America* (Columbus, 1964), 82-83, 93.
51. Quoted in James C. Carey, "William Allen White and Dan Casement on Government Regulation," *Agricultural History*, XXXIII (January, 1959), 20, 18, 21, 19. Carey draws extensively upon letters exchanged between White and Carey Casement, a wealthy rancher, concerning the New Deal.
52. Johnson, *William Allen White's America*, 516-517; White to Cordell Hull, November 6, 1939, in Johnson, ed., *Letters*, 400; White to Verne Marshall, July 5, 1940, quoted in William Tuttle, Jr., ed., "William Allen White and Verne Marshall: Two Midwestern Editors Debate Aid to the Allies Versus Isolationism," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, XXXII (Summer, 1966), 207.
53. Richard L. McBane, "The Crisis in the White Committee," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, IV (Fall, 1963), 29-33; Sophia Mumford to Clark Eichelberger, October 18, 1940; Philip Wylie to White, December 30, 1940; Bruce Barton to Roy Roberts, December 16, 1940; White to Miss Lentilhen Gilford, July 23, 1940, in Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies Papers, L.C.
54. White to Bruce Bliven, December 29, 1941.
55. White to Dan Casement, December 30, 1941; to Nelson Johnson, August 4, 1942. See also White to Frank Knox, March 14, 1941.
56. White to Harold Ickes, March 17, 1942; to George Fitzpatrick, December 6, 1941.
57. White to Roger Baldwin, May 19, 1941; to L. B. Reed, May 19, 1941; to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, November 22, 1941; to the Reverend A. E. Henry, January 22, 1942; to Mrs. Edward Crawford, July 29, 1942; to Thomas Sancton, May 18, 1943.

58. White to Roger Baldwin, May 5, 1942; to Fred Harris, October 12, 1943; to Payne Ratner, October 12, 1942; to Seijiro Matsui, November 4, 1942; to John C. Sasser, April 29, 1942.

59. Betty Carter to White, February 4, 1943; "Text of a Speech by William Allen White on the Kansas War Effort," Office of War Information, April, 1943; White to Charles Vernon, December 2, 1941.

60. White to Paul Hutchinson, February 2, 1942; to George Field, May 25, 1943; to Clark Eichelberger, August 27, 1942.

61. New York *Herald Tribune*, February 1, 1944, 17.