

*Freedom, Loyalty, Dissent.* By Henry Steele Commager.  
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. ix, 155.  
\$2.50.)

This little volume of five essays by Professor Commager combines two features, which unhappily one does not always find together: the book is both one that ought to be read and at the same time one that is eminently readable.

Briefly, Professor Commager's thesis is two-fold: (1) freedom is a necessity in a society such as the American; and (2) the necessity of freedom for America may be defended on purely "practical and pragmatic" (p. vii) grounds. And why enunciate such a thesis at this time? Obviously, because freedom is seriously threatened in contemporary America. And it is threatened not only by a whole host of demagogues whose stock in trade are witch-hunts, Red-baitings, and a constant hue and cry against intellectuals. In addition, it seems to be even more seriously threatened by the apparent indifference and unconcern on the part of the American people generally toward those attacks on the very freedoms that one would suppose were fundamental and essential to the whole American way of life.

Such being the challenge which Commager thinks of himself as facing, his defense of his thesis quite naturally proceeds neither by way of massive historical documentation nor by involved philosophical analysis, but rather by a very direct, hard-hitting line of argument. Thus in his first essay, "The Necessity of Freedom," he argues simply that freedom is the only thing that works or produces results. It's all right, if one wants to, to argue for the necessity of freedom on legal or constitutional grounds, or perhaps even on the more high-flown, idealistic grounds of natural rights and the dignity of man. But Professor Commager prefers to rely simply on the down-to-earth consideration that to discourage "independence of thought, non-conformity, and dissent," etc., just does not pay. For instance, consider the consequences of the recent attempt by the Board of Regents at the University of California to impose a test of conformity upon members of the faculty. The whole institution was thrown into an uproar, the faculty was immeasurably weakened by dismissals, resignations, and refusals of appointments, and the reputation and standard of the University declined throughout the country. And what was gained? Absolutely nothing.

Or consider Senator McCarthy's assault upon the State Department during the Truman administration. What did it accomplish? It greatly weakened American prestige abroad. It undermined the confidence of the American people in their government. It so subjected the department to the harassment of investigation that it found it almost impossible to carry on its regular work. It made it increasingly difficult for the department to recruit first-rate men for its jobs. And what were the gains to offset all these injuries? There weren't any!

Or consider, if you will, Nazi Germany and Japan, or the ante-bellum South in this country, or even contemporary Communist Russia—in all these cases it is precisely "the suppression of criticism and dissent and the insistence upon acquiescence and conformity" (p. 31) to which the greatest weakness of these systems may be traced and which invariably bring about their ultimate dissolution and downfall. In short, judged simply in terms of their practical consequences in history, the suppression of freedom and the requirement of conformity just don't pay dividends.

Moreover, it is this same theme that one finds played with appropriate variations throughout the rest of Commager's book. Thus in the second essay, "The Necessity of Experimentation," Commager argues that it is not a clinging to fixed principles and universally accepted standards that has made America great, but rather a non-conformist determination to entertain new ideas, try out new schemes, and experiment with the unusual, the untraditional, and the unhallowed.

Likewise, in "Free Enterprise in Ideas," Commager alludes to the alleged problem that supposedly confronts any society of reconciling the conflicting claims of liberty and security. A pseudo-problem, Commager thinks, simply because there is no real conflict. And there is no real conflict, simply because if one will but descend from the level of abstract principles to the level of concrete cases, one will find over and over again that whenever a society in the interest of a supposed security attempts to limit the freedom to teach or the freedom of the press or the freedom of scientific investigation, the result will be not security, but rather the very insecurity that comes from a failure to progress and advance.

Then in an unusually effective chapter entitled "Guilt by Association?" Commager shows with a wealth of concrete detail just what this doctrine of guilt by association has cost us and may yet cost us—a doctrine that is "pernicious in principle, in application and in consequences," that is "based on fear and suspicion, on ignorance and bigotry, on arrogance and vanity," that is "designed not to save us or strengthen us, but to subvert vital parts of our democracy and of our constitutional system" (p. 97).

Finally, in "Who Is Loyal to America?" Professor Commager comes right out and demands to know if we are going to permit the Rankins, the Bilbos, the Dirksens, the D.A.R.'s, the American Legion, the N.A.M., the Hearsts, the McCormicks, etc., to determine what is American and what is un-American, and consequently to say who is loyal and who is disloyal to America. The prospect of such a thing may well cause us to shudder. But Commager's point is not so much that it is these individuals and these groups who are likely to determine our standards of loyalty, but rather that it is the very principle of equating loyalty with conformity that is frightening and dangerous. For the whole tradition of America is one of recognizing that loyalty is more often than not a matter of non-conformity rather than conformity. Indeed, in Commager's own strong words, "True loyalty may require, in fact, what appears to the naive to be disloyalty" (p. 146).

Confronted with eloquence of such high order, to say nothing of the fact that what Commager says is in large measure so frightening true, a reviewer may appear captious to raise any points in criticism. And yet in reading Commager's stirring pages, one may wonder whether he is right in insisting that the necessity of freedom for America is a necessity that need be based only on what he would call "practical and pragmatic" considerations. Not that such considerations are irrelevant. Far from it. Rather it is a question as to whether such considerations are self-sufficient and can really stand alone. For suppose one grants that the denial of freedom and the discouragement of dissent are having, and will continue to have, disastrous consequences for our American society, just why is this so, and need it be so necessarily? Now one can find a ready answer to this question if one accepts certain philosophical principles as to the nature and

dignity of the human person, or certain religious principles as to man's being made in the image of God. But Commager, though he does not actually deny such principles, tends to dismiss them as largely unnecessary and as smacking too much of the "idealistic," the "transcendental," and the "absolute" for his taste.

Unfortunately, though, unless there are real standards of human worth and dignity, somehow inherent in the very nature of things, Professor Commager's whole argument would appear to rest on very shaky foundations indeed. For "disastrous consequences" then becomes a sadly relative notion: what appears disastrous from our point of view may not appear so from the point of view of a Hitler or a Stalin, and what in Professor Commager's eyes seems to constitute social stagnation and stultification may in the eyes of a Senator McCarthy, say, be a sign of genuine progress and advance.

No, to meet the intellectual and moral crises of the present day, the somewhat naive pragmatic faith of a William James or a Justice Holmes may no longer suffice; instead, appeal may have to be made to men of somewhat sterner stuff in our Western tradition—a Plato or an Aristotle, perhaps even an Aquinas or a Calvin.

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*U. S. Grant and the American Military Tradition.* By Bruce Catton. (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1954, pp. x, 201. Bibliography and index. \$3.00.)

This unpretentious volume of less than two hundred pages has more than usual significance. It is the first of a series, *The Library of American Biography*, edited by Oscar Handlin, Harvard professor and Pulitzer Prize winner. Further, it makes a good climax for Bruce Catton's studies of the Civil War, especially pertinent after *A Stillness at Appomattox*. Also one finds in it a significant contribution to recent writings that are recovering General Ulysses S. Grant from a tradition fixation that has discredited him.

The writer keeps well in line with the objectives of the new biography series not to study "the complete man, or the complete society but the points at which the two interact."