

## P R O

by Stuart Chase

A PLANLESS national economy if it is to avoid disaster must give way to a planned economy. The ship must be docked and redesigned. It must be reconstructed according to a unified engineering scheme, which is mindful of the number of passengers to be carried, and the proper relationship of fuel to engine to propeller to pumps to siren to galley ranges to power requirements generally. It is only too obvious, furthermore, that an intelligent marine engineer cannot allow a siren so loud as this one, a mast so high, or a searchlight battery so dazzling. The ship after all has to cross the ocean. For that it needs a good propeller far more than ballyhoo. Also, it demands a conning tower, a trained technical staff and a good seaman at the wheel, far more than speeches in the main saloon.

If we are going to have a mechanical civilization—and we have so elected—we have got to control it. It cannot be allowed to drift aimlessly without ultimately wrecking us. A handicraft culture needs neither design nor technical operation; its economic security is guaranteed, save for acts of God, by food and shelter from its neighboring fields. But a great sprawling machine culture, where a million cogwheels must mesh if food is to be forthcoming, must, in my opinion, either plan or some day go to smash.

The billion wild horses of mechanical power have brought us certain manifest assets, and promise us, if they can be tamed, many more.

These assets form an impressive beginning, but the present depression, a phenomenon impossible in a handicraft society, hardly allows us to rest on our laurels. The liabilities are equally imposing, and at the moment the world balance is in the red.

Behind the shoulder of nearly every man and woman in the Republic stand the ghosts of economic insecurity. Day and night they whisper: "How long is your job to last? What is going to happen to you in your old age? When will a machine or a merger displace you? When will your bank fail? How long will your income be forthcoming? How can you further abase your self to hold your position?" A handicraft people have ghosts galore, but not these ghosts. Perhaps they are the most terrible ghosts that have ever wracked mankind.

The liabilities stand ready to crush the assets altogether, failing an early reconstruction of the economic ship.

The bulk of the liability schedule can be liquidated through economic planning within our own frontiers, but one, perhaps the most threatening of all, can be stopped only by world planning and agreement. I refer to mechanized warfare.

To redesign the ship, to cast a society primarily acquisitive into one primarily functional, will never be accomplished without fresh and vigorous thought, and the abandonment of many slogans which now pass for thought. The corporation executive who calls most loudly for less government in business is the first to board a train for Washington shouting for a higher tariff—the

most sublime interference of the state with trade which the modern world knows. To such phrases as "rugged individualism," "the octopus of Wall Street," "free competition," "less government in business," "the dole," "Bolshevism" the reaction, on the part of millions of our fellow citizens, is as automatic and unthinking as the knee jerk.

Yet what is it (to split one of these slogans open) that is crucifying individualism, in its best sense, today? It is that same ghost of economic insecurity which turns us into yes men by the army corps. It is important that we see just how many of our personal aches and problems come from the chaotic organization of the ship we sail in.

If we really want to meet the challenge we are peculiarly fortunate in the United States—as against England, for instance. We can feed ourselves from our own soil. We have the natural resources, despite their shocking waste to date, we have the skilled engineers, the magnificent technical plant, the laboratories, the research bureaus; above all the able and vital population, to work out a national plan for a safe and prosperous journey into the future. We have another potential aid, which very few have realized: the economy of abundance, the clear potentiality of high living standards for everybody. Previous ages have ever lived in an economy of scarcity, with population straining against the food supply. Privileged classes in earlier ages, on the principle of self-preservation, have fought savagely for the maintenance of the status quo. Only bloody revolutions have dislodged them. Today, with more than enough to go around, their opposition, while we may expect it to be bitter, has no such logical foundation. The volume of goods thrown off by a planned society would be sufficient to keep them at the luxury level to which all but their sublimest ornaments have been accustomed, and still supply abundance for the wayfaring man. Psychologically, of course, the point is not so clear. The privileged classes may prefer to wreck the mechanism rather than give up the relative grandeur of super-conspicuous consumption.

Until a plan is made we cannot do most of the things which individual Russians, for instance, can do in accomplishing their Five-Year Plan. Even when the blueprint is before us, our part will not be like theirs—to strain every nerve to produce more goods. We are menaced with overproduction as it is. We can not go around salvaging rags and old metal, presenting peasants with hens, or even scouting out new mineral deposits, like the young Pioneers of Russia. But we can school ourselves personally to face a sober future without the easy profits and easy escapes of the pioneer psychology which has so long survived its excuse for being.

For our pioneering days in this Republic are over. The frontier has been reached and the stream backs up. No longer can we bid the young man go West; spear carrying in Hollywood is a career which becomes daily more precarious. The great era of something for nothing, of living by the luck of our natural resources, draws to its close. It may be that the Florida Boom and the Big Bull Market were the last two joy-rides of an age that has passed. Or, we may have one more rocket of speculation before the final reckoning.—*Extracts, see 3, p. 128.*