
A Talk With Mr. Burleson

by George P. West

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The views of Albert S. Burleson of Texas on political and economic subjects have suddenly become of the greatest importance. For Mr. Burleson as Postmaster General has been clothed with the power to suppress any newspaper or periodical that, in his judgment, is indulging in illegitimate criticism of the government and the war, or saying things "that will interfere with enlistments or that will hamper and obstruct the government in the prosecution of the war." Nor may any newspaper say that the government is the tool of Wall Street and the munitions makers. This is Mr. Burleson's own interpretation of the clause in the Espionage Act under which his new authority is being exercised. It is the language of an authorized statement issued by him after Congress had adopted a rider to the Trading-With-The-Enemy Act which makes it unlawful to transport or sell publications that have lost their mailing privileges.

When I met Mr. Burleson by appointment at his office I had some difficulty in making it clear to him that *The Public* was in no fear of suppression, and that I had come, not as an apologist or suppliant, but merely as a reporter.

"You needn't have the slightest fear provided you stay within the limits," he assured me again and again. "But the instant you print anything calculated to dishearten the boys in the army or to make them think this is not a just and righteous war — that instant you will be suppressed, and no amount of influence will save you."

Mr. Burleson brought his fist down on his desk by way of emphasis, and I almost looked to see the mangled form of some pacifist editor lying there as he removed it. When this happened for about the third time, I lost my patience and told him sharply I didn't need him or anyone else to tell me to be a good American.

I finally explained to him that I wanted to raise questions that had nothing to do with *The Public's* status. The first was as to the

wisdom of suppressing pacifist papers as a practical political problem. Would it not be better, in the government's own interest, to let them have their say and trust to the rightness of the government's course to counteract and nullify any influence they might have? Mr. Burleson said Congress had answered in the negative and that as an executive officer he had nothing to do with it. I suggested that the administrative departments had great influence with Congress, and that it was said William Lamar, solicitor for his department, had written the clause in the Trading-With-The-Enemy Act which closes every other avenue of circulation to publications under the department's ban. I mentioned *The Masses* as an example of a pacifist publication that is open-minded and sincere. In his last issue, Max Eastman had in effect given an enthusiastic endorsement to the President's policy, and it would have great influence with just the elements that the government most needed.

"I regard Max Eastman as no better than a traitor, and the stuff he has been printing as rank treason," thundered Mr. Burleson. "I myself showed the President where he said it was the People's Council, another vile, traitorous organization, that had forced him to write his note to the Pope."

"Eastman is absolutely sincere and has the best interests of the people of this country at heart," I said.

"Traitors all look alike to me," said the Postmaster General, "I don't care whether they are sincere or not."

"What some of us fear," I said, is that officials of this department will let a class prejudice against radical publications influence them, and that the movement for economic democracy will suffer because of it. What I should like to see if for you to suppress Colonel [Theodore] Roosevelt's articles charging broomstick preparedness. They certainly give aid and comfort to the enemy."

"What he says is not true," said Mr. Burleson, "but I don't think it would affect the morale or fighting spirit of our soldiers. As for the others, we shall not permit them to say that this war was brought on by Wall Street and that the President is a tool of their interests. This administration has done more for labor than any other. We have given them all they ought to have. Mind you, I don't think they have got anything they weren't entitled to, except that we should have enacted a compulsory arbitration law. I believe in compulsory arbitration.

“No man has any more sympathy than I have for the poor fellow bent over working with a pick for \$1.50 a day. I’ll do all I can to lighten that man’s burdens. But when he takes out the torch or the bomb—”

Again Mr. Burluson’s fist came down on the table.

“Give him a show for his white alley and he’ll have no inclination to,” I suggested.

“Mr. West,” said the Postmaster General kindly, “do you know why that man can’t make more money? It’s up here,” and he pointed to his forehead. “It’s the shape of his brain. It’s fatality. God Almighty did that, and you can’t change it. You’re challenging Providence. Distribute all the wealth in the country with absolute equality, and what would happen within a year? It would all be back in the same hands.”

“Let’s waive the question of grown-up men,” I said, “and take children. They, at least, ought to have equal opportunity.”

“Do you mean to tell me,” said Mr. Burluson, “that the child of the poorest farmer or the poorest factory hand in New England hasn’t just as good a chance to go to school and get an education and become a bank director or a railroad president as J.P. Morgan?”

“I certainly do,” I said. “Very few finish grammar school. Take your Bureau of Labor Statistics. Take the report of your Public Health Service, which shows that less than half of the adult male wage earners in this country were earning enough to support their families in decency and comfort.”

“It’s their own fault,” said Mr. Burluson. “It’s their own fault. This is the freest and finest country God ever made. Your quarrel is with God. You have a perverted view of these things. If that’s the stuff you’re preaching, I think, probably, you’re doing more harm than good.”

“God never intended that a man should be allowed to grow rich just from the ownership of land that others worked,” I suggested.

Mr. Burluson chuckled.

“As a land owner, you can’t expect me to believe that,” he said.

“Take you own state of Texas,” I said. “The hearings and report of the Walsh Commission on Tenant Farming—”

“That was the most vicious and untrue document ever published,” said Mr. Burluson, very much aroused. “If the rest of that report was like that part of it, the whole thing was vicious. The people don’t get on the land because they like to stay in town where the lights are bright and they can go to the movies. Take two twin broth-

ers. One succeeds and the other doesn't. One saves his money and works hard; the other must go to the movies every night and the opera every week, and at 50 he has nothing. It's a difference in people that you can't change. It's fatality.

"But don't think I am going to interfere with any publication because it may preach these ideas. Take Socialism. I don't care about Socialism. As a political party it's insignificant, its views are not making any headway. During the war it has a little importance, but that will end with the war. I'll not interfere with any publication that stays within the limits laid down by the law."

I asked Mr. Burleson about methods, and whether a publication would have its day in court.

"Every editor is his own censor," he said. "The lines are clearly laid down, and no editor will have any difficulty in keeping out of trouble if he wishes to do so. And the courts are open to them. Judge Hough supported my contention."

"But he said that to take away *The Masses's* mailing privilege because it had been denied continuity of publication by your department was like a policeman knocking a man down and then arresting him for obstructing the sidewalk."

"You've been reading only one side of that," said Mr. Burleson. "That was not the reason. It was because *The Masses* had been printing unmailable matter. What these editors want is a chance to spew out all their poison and do all the mischief they are capable of before we can reach them. They won't succeed."

Mr. Burleson at the end referred me to Mr. Lamar, solicitor for the department, for a copy of his authorized statement. Mr. Lamar is the official who initiates proceedings against periodicals and who presses the case against them. He is devoting all his time to the work. I talked with him for a few minutes and found him in much the same frame of mind as his chief. He asked me if I had read *The Masses* for a few months back, and when I told him I'd read it for several years with enjoyment, if not always with full agreement, he lost interest in me.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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