The Domestic Parallel To War

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As Told To George F. Havell

In the Vermont town where I live a retired schoolteacher bought a lot about a year ago. He began to build a house this spring; and in front of the excavation he put out a sign—"For Sale." Construction reached the roof-raising stage; the sign remained. The house was completed and the owner moved in. The sign, "For Sale," is still there.

This man seems to be saying to himself something like this: "I am getting old; I want and deserve a home. That is why I bought this lot. However, the lot is increasing in value and I must prove to myself that I am not a fool. I shall hang out this sign. Thus will I placate the economic man within myself. If a buyer comes, I shall sell. If not, I shall enjoy those values that lie beyond the laws of supply and demand: beauty, peace, home."

This seems to be a fair rendering of the inner dualism that pervades all of us. And in this war crisis I hope that my readers will appreciate its true significance. The sign "For Sale" transforms the homestead into something unreal: sale is now the final destiny of the land—we "realize" real estate when we sell it for cash.

Modern man could never have invented the term, "real estate" for land. It appears in our age as an anachronism from a past in which money realization had not yet been thought of. Land was once the end of man's economic odysseys. In fact, the "Odyssey" itself gives us a clue to the meaning of "real estate." In this first book to be written on the aftermath of a world war, Odysseus at last returns to a place on the mainland; there he will bury his rudder, and re-establish the real estate of man on peaceful earth.

The ownership of land today involves little obligation to the community. My neighbor need not discuss with me, nor with the town, the effect upon us when he sells his property. Modern man is torn between money and home, and as long as the conflict between values has to be locked in the solitude of the heart, the communicable values will have unfair advantage. People must translate values into action, or they wither: they must find expression in the national life. Without group expression, there are no values. "For Sale"—a communicable consideration— is given expression by every real estate broker in the country. But "For ever"—a consideration which is not communicable—remains unexpressed.

One may say: "Haven't we created national parks and recreation areas?" Here are leisure, beauty and pleasure. True enough, the aesthetic sense is satisfied. But mere visual appreciation is an unreal relationship towards the soil—a pallid fragment of a full attitude.

Of this we become keenly aware in wartime. Then, land suddenly comes to be regarded solely from the standpoint of its military importance—we think in terms of naval bases, army camps, and airfields. Greenland and Guam quickly increase in value: and this has nothing to do with the cash price or with beauty; it is strategic value. All land, then, may possess at least three values: economic, aesthetic, and strategic. The sign "For Sale" symbolizes economy; the national parks stand for beauty; an ugly army cantonment may represent strategic value.

Can the case rest here? Many people seem to think so. They accept an infinite number of values, and lose all power of decision between them. But before any value makes sense it must be related to the whole. If modern man is ever to recover his sense of belonging, the unity of his relation to the earth must find expression in a domestic equivalent of war,—a form of service to the land. Land as home, as our's, must be symbolized. And this cannot be done through the institution of private property or by creating public parks. Land will take on the value of home. The dignity of Odysseus' "real estate," only by a ceremony of communal investiture, by enlisting soldiers of the land in a land corps.

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In the United States, trees were
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both contain the underlying warning
that the whole earth must become
man's home, or man will perish.

In 1905, feverish efforts were
commenced to give reality to this
new concept of the whole earth as
man's permanent dwelling place.
They were spontaneous and world­
wide and they took many forms: we
cannot possibly review all of
them here. To sketch a few of
them, David Lubin, a Californian,
owned the support of the King of
Italy for an International
Institute of Agriculture. Its pur­
pose was to protect the land and
those who work upon it from the
influence of stock market specula­
tion and those merely temporal
fluctuations which bear no essential
relation to the soil. The Institute
quickly degenerated into a statis­
tical bureau in majorum gloriaum
of the Italian hosts. Institutes are
not the solution.

In the United States, trees were
planted, conservation began to be
planned, the pollution of rivers
became a topic of discussion. The
climax of all this came—a quarter of a
century later—with the TVA and the CCC. But the TVA has
been a bureaucracy and the CCC
a relief organization. These cannot
give expression to a country's deep­
est values: they divert human
energy into side issues.

Our Mexican neighbors have
gone through an agricultural revo­
lation. When we started Camp
William James in Vermont a
member of the Mexican cabinet
wrote to us: "The agrarian revolu­
tion has given to the Mexican peon
the only release from his otherwise
inspiring life. Sanguinary as it
was, it will not be superseded by
disarmament and friendly acts, but
only by a more positive and equally
heroic service offered to the com­
mon man in his dear existence."

He went on: "Art and science
give an outlet for creative energy,
but they will always belong to a
relatively small number. That
which the scientists and artists ex­
perience must be realized by the
millions, through other social ac­
tivities of the same high standing."

During the last twelve years of
his life, William James became
more and more concerned with the
lack of heroism in American educa­
tion. As early as 1899 he said:
"This question dominates the
whole problem of individual and
national education." In his dis­
may over the disappearance of
the martial virtues he wrote his
"Moral Equivalent For War."
About the same time Popper Lyn­
keu advocated armies of youth in
central Europe. After the first
World War Pierre Ceresole and
Christian Florens Rang preached
the gospel of international work
armies. I, myself, was allowed to
pursue a line of thought first out­
lined in 1912, in the work camps
for farmers, laborers, and students
in Silesia.

In 1940, United States govern­
ment officials, with the support of
the National Defense Council, un­
dertook to make the existing con­
servation service something better
than mere relief. Their efforts did
not meet with success. But in this
same year some Harvard and Dart­
mouth students volunteered to
work on farms and in farming
communities. They sensed the ur­
gent necessity of bringing new life
to our depopulated and neglected
rural districts; instead of seeking to
earn their substance in Boston or
New York they elected to cast their
lot with farmers who must work
under conditions as adverse as any
to be found the country over.
These young men were not forced
by circumstances to exchange places
with their countrymen who had
deserted the farming communities
in which they had been raised; they
deliberately chose to lend their ef­
forts to the rehabilitation of rural
America. Their experiences are re­
lated by one of their number in
this issue of FREE AMERICA.

Today, the youth of the whole
country must help to man the out­
lying districts. The domestic par­
allel to war is the use of land,—
not as private property and not as
public parks, but as the hearth and
home of America. Men and women
from every stratum of our popula­
tion must win the right to enter
into this home by an act of initia­
tion. In each generation initiation
must become a representative act by
which the novitiates earn the privi­
lege of taking possession of the
settlements their forefathers made.
And as our young men go to war,
our girls must take their places in
the back hills.—our bastions for
peace. Land is man's "real estate,"
—his home. And by positive ac­
tion we must reclaim it, all of us.
year after year, by a solemn act of
investiture.