

# The Tyranny Of Democratic Manners

*"If Woodrow Wilson were in politics today, he would probably have to submit to 'Woody' — if not 'Willie' — and wipe that purposeful, responsible look off his face."*

by MORTON CRONIN

**I** MAINTAIN that democratic manners—typified by the practice of calling the boss by his first name—have reached the point in our country where they conduce not to the preservation of personal dignity but to the abject submission of one man to another. These manners, gradually developed in colonial and post-revolutionary days, worked well in a society largely of self-sufficient farmers. But circumstances have changed, with the usual ironical result.

What happens on the job at the present time? An employee greets the boss by his first name, sits down in his presence, wears the same kind of clothes the boss wears, avoids the use of *sir*, and ostensibly comports himself in general as if he and the boss were as equal as two farmers. But of course he and the boss are not equal, and this inequality must be signalized. It must be signalized, first, because the employee is anxious to please the boss, who can advance or impede his fortunes; and, secondly, because the boss is anxious that his authority receive recognition, without which he cannot function with any confidence.

In the absence of overt and conventional methods of expressing deference, how then does the American employee acknowledge the boss's superior status? He does so by perfecting a subtle repertoire of body movements and vocal expressions. This repertoire includes the boyish grin, the deprecatory cough, the unfinished sentence, the appreciative giggle, the drooping shoulders, the head-scratch and the bottom-waggle. But there are employees, the truly gifted ones—as actors, they would adorn the Stanislavski school—who can dispense with these definable maneuvers and simply *live* the part, their whole being radiating a kind of sweet eloquence of submission.

Now this body language, in both its definable and indefinable forms, is almost impossible to fake successfully,

at least in any long-continued relationship. If it is not accompanied quite genuinely by the emotions appropriate to it, it will be contradicted and rendered sinister by involuntary movements and expressions which accord with the individual's true feelings. It is easy to execute a military salute, regardless of one's private thoughts, but the deprecatory cough—to say nothing of the Stanislavski method—requires great sincerity, else they appear villainous.

American manners, in short, decree egalitarian behavior in a hierarchical society. The result is that a subordinate, compelled to behave formally and superficially in a democratic way, is forced in making his adjustments to the facts of life to behave informally and profoundly in a hierarchical way. It should be just the opposite—the system of etiquette ought to furnish him with formal gestures of respect for his superiors and let his informal self work out its own salvation. It should be easier to render the boss what is the boss's without throwing in one's soul too.

Out of a doctrinaire devotion to palsy-walsy manners has sprung that misshapen, anomalous growth, the despotism of the nice guy. It is a truism that success on the job depends less on competence in performing one's duties than it does on ability to Get Along With People. But what is left out of this statement—it is not sporting to mention it—is that the word *People* refers to just one person—the boss. And the boss, barred from receiving any obvious obeisance, is commonly in a chronic state of insecurity—what he craves most of all is the assurance that he is really and truly the boss. The nice guy, with his fine talent for the right body language, provides this assurance better than the man who is merely efficient, is rewarded accordingly, and thus sets the pace for his clumsy fellows.

But the despotism of the nice guy reaches its fully convoluted luxuriance when, as happens, he himself is made the boss. He has not been soft-spoken, unassertive,

accommodating and eager to please out of sheer masochism. However various the motives which explain his personality, ambition is one of them. Good Old Charlie likes the idea of being a boss. And if his underlings could give him a snappy salaam every day, all might be well. But Charlie would recoil from anything so Oriental in its disrespect for human dignity. All that he expects is that his subordinates will make the same sensitive, informal adjustments to his person which he used to make for the boss, a process which practically requires that they exchange their personalities for his. Only a few of them are capable of such virtuosity—Charlie's word for it is *loyalty*—but most of them do well enough to demonstrate that it is really the nice guy in authority, more than the rambunctious one, who has made America the natural habitat of the yes-man. Of course the situation is complicated by the fact that Charlie soon becomes pitifully dependent on his loyal supporters, one of whom usually emerges as a split-personality and, like a skillful wife, sweetly dominates Charlie in all things.

Everybody complains that life is too competitive, but our national imagination is so limited that the principal remedies proposed for this or any other social disease are economic remedies—better jobs, better houses, and more social security. However justified on other grounds, these remedies, beyond a certain point, just hot up this particular fire, for life becomes not less competitive but decidedly more so as one moves up the ladder. Naturally. There is more to compete for. But still the fever could be brought down a few points by a modification of manners. Once men acquire everything they need—a condition soon reached in this country—they struggle primarily for recognition. But with manners as frustratingly egalitarian as they are, who knows when he has it made? Under present circumstances the ambitious can discern no resting place short of a crushing superiority of popular fame or material wealth. Hence, the devotion of many originally fine minds to Hollywood, Broadway and the medical profession.

Consider, for instance, the folly of our disparagement of honorific titles. If a mayor were regularly addressed as *Your Honor*, and could count on this distinction after leaving office, he would be heartened in his efforts to remain honest. As it is, he must play it democratic, pooh-pooh his title, and prepare against the day when, defeated for re-election, he must face the indifference of the public at large. Mayors are commonly corrupt, judges rarely. But judges are unfailingly objects of formal homage in office, and keep their titles for life.

The sobriquets which used to attach to politicians—*Old Hickory*, *Tennessee Johnson*, *The Little Giant*, *The Plumed Knight*—conferred distinction. They were titles of a sort and reflected a popular disposition to honor character, individuality and superior force in public men. But now the popular taste, encouraged by gee-whiz pol-

iticians who tutoyed one another in public, is for first names and demure diminutives—Ike, Dick, Stu, Bob, Estes and Foster. What makes these familiarities characteristic of our time is precisely that they ignore what is distinctive in either the personalities or the duties of the men they designate and thus suggest that government is best which is managed by Good Joes recently graduated from a basketball team. If Woodrow Wilson were in politics today, he would probably have to submit to *Woody*—if not *Willie*—and wipe that purposeful and responsible look off his face.

**B**UT the avoidance of titles of respect is equally the fashion among highbrows. Professors in famous universities, for instance, make fun of their fellows in teachers' colleges because the latter often call one another *professor* or *doctor*, instead of plain *mister*, and are notorious for responding benignly when their students use these terms. But on this point it is the prominent professors whose perception is defective, for an examination of their total behavior reveals that they are much less democratic than those they smile at for putting on airs. Occupying positions in institutions of outstanding prestige—positions for which they have scrambled ferociously—they can afford to underemphasize their status, like wealthy men who insist that their limousines be inconspicuously black. The fact is that they maintain great distance between town and gown and also between their students and themselves.

Many of them deplore their remoteness, but without an improvement of manners there is little they can do about it. Since they discourage formal acknowledgments of their status, any meeting between them and townfolk, or even between them and their own students, imposes on both sides such a strain on their respective capacities for the appropriate body language that it is almost unbearable. The man at Lower South Central Normal suffers his students to call him professor—doctor—sir—but he can often be observed chatting loftily and genially among them, snapping his suspenders the while, undisturbed by their politely impudent questions.

But the deprecation of titles and of formal manners in general characterizes all sorts of highbrows, not just those in universities. Yet no group in America complains so clamorously that it is not sufficiently respected and appreciated. And those among them who complain most bitterly are the ones who embrace the mucker pose passionately, not only in their speech and manners but even in their dress. This furious contradiction necessitates a furious resolution. Men who will not permit their attainments to be recognized conventionally and symbolically will seek such recognition radically and violently.

But democratic manners have not promoted unnatural relations among men in their economic and professional careers. They have also corrupted relations between men and women in their romantic and domestic lives. Here,

however, the democratization of manners has been one-sided. Many suitable formalities still govern the man's behavior—he follows a woman through a door, sashays around to the gutter-side of the street, etc., etc., in all of which he pays decorous tribute to her as a woman. But our culture has relieved her almost entirely of any reciprocal gestures of conventional tribute to him as a man. She does not curtsy, nor use respectful forms of address, nor stand at his shoulder when he has his picture taken. Her grandmother practiced a sweet, conventional smile. She grins, laughs uproariously, and talks in a loud voice. For her the emphasis is now completely on body language—but, unlike that used by men with their bosses, hers is *challenging* rather than deferential.

Since he does not receive from women any standard courtesies, courtesies which, besides telling him that just being a man is a thing of some consequence, would remind him of his responsibilities, the American male gravitates in his dealings with women toward one of two roles—that of a little boy or that of a predator. Frequently he ricochets between the two. In the first role he simply abandons the effort to command respect as a male and, oddly enough, often becomes an abstract enthusiast for women, like a dull student whose every humiliation in class somehow increases his school spirit. In the role of predator he compels specific respect for himself as a man in the one decisive way that is still open. And, fortunately or unfortunately, such consolation has grown steadily more available. Women as well as men are symbolic creatures, and the radical elimination of ceremony reduces the human element in them and increases the animal part. Frustrated in her naturally human desire to express her feelings formally and stylistically, the American woman must express them directly and elementally.

**B**UT the inhuman effects of democratic manners afflict another fundamental relationship, that between parents and children. They spawn the ultimate in absurdity in those instances where parents, assuming the character of domestic politicians, encourage their youngsters to abjure the use of *mother* and *father* in favor of their parents' first names. The trouble with *mother* and *father* of course is that they suggest authority (as well as love), and thus strike an undemocratic note in the family. Often the parents' real motives, like those of tail-wagging politicians, are more complicated, for people who shun authoritative titles commonly shrink from responsibility too. But they could not persevere in this self-deception if our dedication to democratic manners did not furnish them with an exalted rationale.

Fortunately, this first-name business for parents is as yet limited. But manners generally are primitive enough in American homes, as anyone knows who accepts invitations from his friends to dine *en famille*. It is undemocratic to set up a children's table. It is also undemocratic to encourage children to listen to adult con-

versation. Parents and guests, consequently, listen to children's conversation. During intervals—when little mouths happen simultaneously to be stuffed up with food, for instance—the parents inevitably discuss the subject of children. Children, they tell you, are *people*. The children express themselves. The parents preen themselves. The only person who does not get a piece of this democracy is the guest. This lopsided egalitarianism even favors dogs and cats, with whom a guest must often cope with no assistance whatever from his host. They too, it seems, are *people*.

**I** HAVE nearly finished. But I know that some fool—most likely, one with a Ph.D.—will read this article and forever after assert as a well-known fact that I yearn for a restoration of Tsardom, for a reinvigoration of the Hindu caste system and for a truly Chinese subjugation of women and children. So let me recapitulate, in the course of which I shall add one or two points that I forgot to mention earlier.

A sensible system of manners, sensibly formal, performs various services. Besides acting as a constant reminder of some important facts of life, it affords human beings the distinctly human satisfactions of symbolic expression. Besides making collective living possible, it provides a person, thanks to its formalities, with protective armor against collective pressures. For these formalities allow the individual to acquiesce in the social order while reserving his final judgment of it. They enable him to pledge his loyalty to men in authority without making those fine adjustments whose long-term results are the same as those of brainwashing.

Democratic manners in America are eating the heart out of American democracy. With no impressive way of saluting the system, and the position which a given official occupies in it, one must prostrate himself before the man. There is a country where such prostration is even more prostrate than in America. There the humblest citizen calls his mighty ruler *comrade*.

I suggest a prudent reform in American manners, not a revolution. If the only alternative to egalitarian manners is a nerveless society exhausted by protocol and ceremony, then this discussion is futile. But that is not the only alternative, except in the minds of latter-day Jacobins for whom the stratifications of the *ancien regime* are more real than the proletarianizations of their own time. There are in-between solutions, attuned to reality, however they resist simple and consistent formulation, as the English know, and as America, in her own fashion, can discover. Pedantic democrats presume to speak for wisdom, creative ability and service, as against mere money in the bank. But without a rectification of manners most men would rather achieve a Cadillac than such virtues, for these virtues, unacknowledged in any regular way, do not show on a man, at least not conspicuously, whereas a Cadillac shows on anyone, conspicuously.

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