PANIC AND ITS CONSEQUENCES*

BY

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Some weeks ago a few remarks of mine were printed† on the need for active thinking in the conduct of war. Among the subjects I named as needing attention was that of the relations between Government and people. These relations, which were at first perfect, have already shown a slight but sensible decline that must deeply concern us all. It has been said that the uses made of the great powers given to the Government by the people have not always been wise, and have sometimes been such as to stagger common sense. It is of interest, therefore, to call attention to an element in the general situation that may have had an influence on many of the decisions of the Government now causing dissatisfaction. As this element lay beyond the direct reach of the human will we can discuss it without undertaking the odious task of distributing blame amongst persons who were doubtless animated by as pure a passion to serve the country as any of us.

Anyone who was in London in September and October, 1938, must have been aware of something new in the moral attitude of the people. Trenches were being feverishly scratched open, many of those who could afford it were openly running away, and people of whose nerves better might have been expected confessed to an uncontrollable alarm. It was generally believed that a first-class air raid might kill 50,000 and wound 300,000 more, that there was no real defence, and that an attack might occur at any moment. In the blackest days of 1917 and 1918 no such moral landslide was seen. The stoical endurance of the Londoner had gone, and in its place was something to which the thoughtful mind could not refuse the ominous name of panic. The weakness did not, however, spread indefinitely. The common people—as always, the moral background of the country—resisted and at length threw it off. But it lingered elsewhere, and especially, perhaps, among those who also had the heavy strain of being responsible for the safety of the country. Innumerable critical decisions had thus to be made by people exposed to and more or less deeply affected by the insidious solicitations of panic. The results of such a condition need for their understanding no more advanced a psychological equipment than a moderately enlightened common sense.

Man experiences two kinds of fear, which we may call individual fear and panic fear. Of the former we need only say that it is by no means incompatible with mental activity of the best kind, and that it is directly related to its object. Panic fear, on the other hand, is not directly related to its object, but is derived by its subject from the reactions of his fellows; it is therefore, so to say, infectious. Being an experience solely of social creatures, it has for its function the obliteration of the individual consciousness, which becomes merged in an impulse shared by its fellows. It thus happens that panic, however mild, has an immediate effect in weakening rational judgment. Every conclusion arrived at under its influence, however plausible it may seem in that deceptive medium, will be corrupted by departures from sound sense. In examining decisions reached under the influence of panic we are not to look for blunders and errors of judgment, for the fruits of ignorance or the fatuity of office, but for something at

once more subtle and more characteristic. We are to look for decisions that could have been reached only by people in whom the faculty of practical reason was actually impaired.

The hypothesis that vast air raids were inevitable upon or even before the declaration of war was always a dubious one, and rested on all its elements being greatly magnified; it also ignored the fact that the German military command, however purged of its best minds and however infatuated with *Schrecklichkeit* as an end in itself, was the best judge of short-range strategy in the world, and little likely to waste its strength on excentric blows that could not be followed up. The idea, however, was not unreasonable and certainly deserved all consideration. Nevertheless, panic insisted that a modest probability must be treated as an immediate certainty, and used the hypothetical horrors it had foretold as part of the evidence that they would occur. A total black-out was enforced without compromise or graduation or any provision for the devoted pedestrian. The consequences may well become a classical example of the staggering paradoxes that result from mixing good intentions with panic. Deaths by violence on the roads rose in the first month of the war from 500 to 1,100. Thus by sitting quietly at home Hitler's air force was able to kill 600 British citizens at a cost to itself of exactly nothing.

With all its crudities the black-out is no more than a mild example of the effects of panic. Many other instances lie about us of which it can be maintained that they embody decisions which *no normal mind in any circumstances* could have assented to. Some happily are merely grotesque. Such escapades as carting tea about the country with the effect of eluding at once both bombs and consumers, and the outbreaks of a fatuous secrecy, deserve no more than a smile. But what are we to think of patients with infectious tuberculosis discharged to spread the disease; of medical practice half paralysed and medical education wholly disorganized; of the great hospitals three-quarters empty; of elementary education crippled and higher education almost at a standstill?

I have expressed relief that we should not be concerned in the distribution of blame. There is none to distribute. We have discussed a natural phenomenon and its results. If these observations have been just, certain considerations of practical importance proceed from them. The first is that decisions bearing the diagnostic marks of having been affected by panic should be reviewed without mercy or any regard for the saving of face. The second is to take to heart the fact that under the influence of panic it was possible to ignore almost completely two kinds of strength in which this country is eminent if not unique—its capacity for courageous endurance and its principle of reasonable compromise.

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* A paper written shortly before the author's death.

† *Times*, September 26, 1939.