

Hobson's Choice

One night past some thirty thousand tons of ships went hurtling at each other through the darkness. When they had met, two thousand tons of ship and a hundred and seventy-six men lay at the bottom of the sea in a far off place.

Now comes the cruel business of accountability. Those who were there must answer how it happened and whose was the error that made it happen.

It is a cruel business because it was no wish of destruction that killed this ship and its hundred and seventy-six men; the accountability lies with good men who erred in judgment under stress so great that it is almost its own excuse. Cruel, because no matter how deep the probe, it cannot change the dead, because it cannot probe deeper than remorse.

And it seems more cruel still, because all around us in other places we see the plea accepted that what is done is beyond discussion, and that for good men in their human errors there should be afterwards no accountability.

We are told it is all to no avail to review so late the courses that led to the crash of Pearl Harbor, to debate the courses set at Yalta and Potsdam, to inquire how it is that one war won leaves us only with wreckage and with two worlds still hurtling at each other through the darkness. To inquire into these things, now, we are reminded, will not change the dead in Schofield Barracks or on Heartbreak Ridge, nor will it change the dying that will come after the wrong courses.

We are told, too, how slanderous it is to probe into the doings of a Captain now dead who cannot answer for himself, to hold him responsible for what he did when he was old and tired and when he did what he did under terrible stress and from the best of intentions. How useless to debate the wrong courses of his successor caught up in a storm not of his own devising. How futile to talk of what is past when the pressing question is how to keep from sinking.

Everywhere else we are told how inhuman it is to submit men to the ordeal of answering for themselves. To have them before committees and badger them with questions as to where they were and what they were doing while the ship of state careened from one course to another. This probing into the sea seems more merciless because almost everywhere we have abandoned accountability. What is done is done and why torture men with asking them afterward, why?

Whom do we hold answerable for the sufferance of dishonesty in government, for the reckless waste of public monies, for the incompetence that wrecks the currency, for the blunders that killed and still kill many times a hundred and seventy-six men in Korea? We can bring to bar the dishonest men, yes. But we are told men should no longer be held accountable for what they do as well as for what they intend. To err is not only human; it absolves responsibility.

Everywhere, that is, except on the sea. On the sea there is a tradition older even than the traditions of the country itself and wiser in its age than this new custom. It is the tradition that with responsibility goes authority and with them goes accountability.

This accountability is not for the intentions but for the deed. The Captain of a ship, like the Captain of a state, is given honor and privileges and trust beyond other men. But let him set the wrong course, let him touch ground, let him bring disaster to his ship or to his men, and he must answer for what he has done. No matter what, he cannot escape.

No one knows yet what happened on the sea after that crash in the night. But nine men left the bridge of the sinking ship and went into the darkness. Eight men came back to tell what happened there. The ninth, whatever happened, will not answer now because he has already answered for his accountability.

It is cruel this accountability of good and well-intentioned men. But the choice is that or an end to responsibility and finally, as the cruel sea has taught, an end to the confidence and trust in the men who lead, for men will not long trust leaders who feel themselves beyond accountability for what they do.

And when men lose confidence and trust in those who lead, order disintegrates into chaos and purposeful ships into floating derelicts.

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