

Hotel Alvis
Monroe, La.
April 4, 1951

Dear Frank,

I am all agog over our former mayor's being summoned before the Senate tribunal. I do not read the papers and learned of this only a couple of days ago. Do you recall (This is an "I told you so") that once Eugene, you and I were walking, and we observed places where the street signs had fallen out of their frames, and I added that fact to others, for example, that Mayor LaGuardia's metal waste-paper baskets had disappeared, and that a hundred yards of the sea-wall had collapsed, and the metal fence that topped it was being allowed to corrode for lack of timely paint? And do you recall I borrowed a famous phrase, "By their signs ye shall know them" and declared, several years ago, that where one finds in the state physical carelessness, one will presently find political corruption? I am proud to have made this prediction, yet not pleased that it is fulfilled. When we observe on the person of a friend, customarily fastidious, marks of abandon, such as trailing garters, dirty eye-glasses, and impure linen, we know that some inner travail is occupying him; his motives are split and his personality tends to follow them. And precisely is it so with the political body. When ~~ix~~ I see a public waste-container choked and dripping, I know at once the state has hic-cups. A good administrator, like a cultivated person, is good in every direction: he is polite toward the mangiest petitioner, as toward guests of note; he is as precise in the geometrical pattern of his desk implements, as in the laying-out of plans for civic beautification. The reason for this is, he is not stingy of energy, does not ask how much to be spent here, how ~~how~~ much affability does George deserve, is this worth finishing - am I not slighting something else? No, there is merely overflow of his soul in his work, and all is perfect.

I have sympathy for O'Dwyer. Some very great men have been venal politicians: Alcibiades and Agesilaus among the Greeks, practically every famous Roman who drew breath (and pay), and Sir Francis Bacon. Venality in politics is equal to lust in personal ethics - both sins of weakness; to my mind, pride in the latter, and ruthlessness in the former, are more culpable. But they are more easily cloaked in the terminology of justice. Besides, people who blast men in politics are ~~xxx~~ like paper-theoricians who, after a military campaign is a fait-accomplis, hound its general to a court-martial. It is so clear on paper: they forget their general was tied up in a skein of events unmanipulatable, not of words that can be redisposed. That his mind was disorganized by lack of sleep and forced marches, that his ~~xxxx~~ critical decisions were split-second, that messages were coming to him momentarily, each demanding an order, yet bringing facts that rendered the order he had issued to the last message unsuitable, that equipment breaks down and communications cease. So with politicians, it is not the easy question shall I or shall I

not take bribes? The question is, my voters clamor for this hospital, but only by X's crooked support will I raise funds to build it. The question is, I know X personally, and corrupt as he is, X is a gentleman and my friend. The question is, if I defy X, I'm out of office, and Z, a worse man than I, will take over. The question is, how little power we have over our own motions, and how little power the titular head of a state, ~~have~~, except that of verbal confirmation of the results this billion-gear'd machinery on which I sit, arrives at by its own toiling.

I dislike these trials too. I dislike, to begin with, all trials. I don't think a perfectly just decision has ever been rendered in a court, because the pre-classification of plaintiff and defendant sets up a dichotomy in which justice is tripped. Those who fancy that justice is voiced by courts are modern children of those ancient ones who divided all phenomena into good and bad before seeing them as pink or blue. Thrusting this aside, I dislike the confusion of function now current in federal procedures; the executive became legislative under Roosevelt, and today the legislative is becoming judicial. I have a feeling that under cover of it more and more of our individual prerogatives are in purloin. Lay the way open for rich men to enter the Senate, and with that body's increased functions you have an oligarchy. Lay the way open for one more aggressive man like Roosevelt, and batten him on war - there you have, with increased executive functions, a tyranny. And day by day our populace grows more supine, listless, and prone to dale. The cast is assembled, the lines are written - let the play go on!

Poor O'Dwyer! A man is his own judge. I have another prediction, that this man will escape his enemies by death, presently. He has heart trouble, but that alone would never kill him, had he motive for life. But as cold damp weather infallibly brings on my asthma, not as a cause but as a catalyst, an excuse because the real cause is too deep to uproot; so heart trouble will infallibly kill Mayor O'Dwyer, because his honor is gone.

Look what I have subjected you to. Well, my mind was on that subject. Regarding your love - affection - infatuation (three differences of degree, not kind), thank you for being confidential with me. I shall not dishonor it by any more gaity on this topic - for a while. When you fan these embers into flame, warm me, so I can put on my asbestos jacket. Of course we shall go adventuring this summer, to New Hampshire perhaps, or where you will. Let us plan for it, and do not vacillate. Would you care to strike out for Hudson Bay? Yes, I am serious. My love to the babies. Increase and multiply was a phrase not wasted on your family.

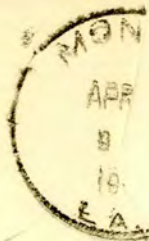
Very truly yours,

~~John~~



Washington-Youree Hotel

SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA



Mr. Frank Shields
c/o Benson
19 Clovelly St.
Lynn, Mass.

