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Calendar Reform*

or

THE EVILS OF ANTICIPATION

BY HERBERT C. FREEMAN

I am not standing here as a vice-president of The North American Company. I simply feel that I have come back home to my old friends in the accounting profession. I believe there are very few of you who realize how much it means to me to be welcomed back in this way and not to have been taken out and shot as a deserter in the cold, gray dawn of some January morning in 1921. Those of you who remember how cold and gray the dawns were in 1921 will think perhaps I might have been spared a good deal of anguish if I had been shot.

My consternation when I was assured that I was really seriously selected for this honor tonight was considerable, because I realize that accountants are the greatest after-dinner speakers in the world, of this age or of any other. Pay attention some evening down-town at the hour for dinner to one of the little groups of accountants and listen to the after-dinner speech of the speaker of the evening. "Well, let's get back to the office. I promised my wife I would try to catch the nine fifty-five tonight." Thus conscience doth make liars of us all! He knows perfectly well it will be the ten-thirty or the eleven-forty.

Then take the man who makes a point of getting home to dinner. Catch him a day or two after the honeymoon; he is apt to phrase his after-dinner speech in more ingenious terms then. "Has loveykins any nice little thing she would like to do all alone this evening without any nasty man to bother her?" Unspeakable wretch! His meaning is precisely the same as that of pater-familias, when that expectant pause comes after coffee. "I have some papers that I think I will have to spend a few minutes on this evening, my dear." And "my dear," with the knowledge born of long experience says, "Very well, I will go up to bed at ten o'clock. Turn off the sprinkler in the garden, please, and see that the library window is closed before you come up."

* A speech delivered at the banquet following the annual meeting of the American Institute of Accountants, Colorado Springs, September, 1930.

If it is permissible to digress before one really has reached one's topic, I should like to draw the attention of the ladies present to a passage that occurs early in the first act of *Hamlet*. It is perfectly clear that Shakespeare had some pre-vision of the conditions which would exist in accounting circles in this country in any year up to the fifteenth of March, and in most years during the remaining nine months of the year. It is true that in the play nothing more serious than a war is impending, but how appropriate are the lines alike to accountants and shipwrights:

“Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task
Does not divide the Sunday from the week;
What might be toward, that this sweaty haste
Doth make the night joint-laborer with the day;
Who is't that can inform me?”

In accounting, as in war, it is evidently customary to conceal one's real purpose, hence the development of the accountant as an after-dinner speaker of the quality I have indicated.

So when I came to choose a topic for this evening I decided that before such a body of consummate artists it would be advisable to use phrases that need not be taken too literally. I, therefore, propose to speak upon the topic of “Calendar Reform, or the Evils of Anticipation.”

I do not want for one moment to appear to align myself with that courageous and, I hope, ineffectual group of men who have recently discovered that four goes into fifty-two thirteen times, and who have missed entirely the point in the Divine humor in making the year just a shade under $365\frac{1}{4}$ days long. I realize too well how inadvisable it would be to introduce anything of a controversial character into a talk of this kind. Let me hasten to add, therefore, that the kind of calendar reform which I advocate is merely the total and complete abolition of the calendar as a measuring stick with regard to human activities.

Dates, of course, are useful as a means of recording past events. My quarrel is with the future date and more particularly with the use of divisions of the calendar as a fence along the path of life—a number of small posts and every now and then at regular intervals a larger one, and every little while, but always with regularity, a great big post. I should like to sweep the whole fence of pickets and posts away so that the road might broaden out into the fields of today's happiness.

It is a lamentable fact, but our modern civilization is so bound by the divisions of the calendar, those basting stitches on the hem of life, that we actually train people to wish away their lives. When this condition first developed, it is hard to say. First nature, then the apprentice system, then the wage system, each in turn had something to do with it. It is safe to say, however, that it did not really crystallize until the pernicious practice of accounting developed into something like its present form. I mention the apprentice system solely on the authority of the old song of the apprentice, in which he says, "And, oh, had I but served the time that takes so long to flee-o!" But we must remember that he was in love and wanting to marry. In that condition I am told that even the short interval before the fledgling accountant expects to become a broad-pinioned senior appears long, to say nothing of the seven years that a man had to serve to become a good member of the saddle-makers' guild.

The basis of this undue haste to skip from one day of the calendar to another is of course mainly economic. We try to impress the operation of the time machine on the immature mind by a device of the Evil One known as pocket money. It is true the amount is fortunately not large enough, as a rule, to draw the mind of the young person from the enjoyment of the pleasures of the moment, even from those pleasures the participation in which involves the forfeiture of the hebdomadal dole. Then we try to fortify the time impression of pocket money by associating with it another institution of the machinery of civilization, the Saturday holiday, the better to sap the five days from Monday to Friday of everything that might inspire the youthful spirit.

That, however, is only a feeble beginning, a first attempt to impress the ruthless rhythm of the calendar upon the young mind. We shall follow that up later with some slight foretaste of real economic pressure, when the middle of the week seems as barren as the desert, and only on pay days does the bay tree of life flourish, to shrivel pitifully over the next day or two. The more intellectual minds, who might be expected to resist this weekly depression, are given jobs that yield their meager remuneration every two weeks, or possibly at intervals of a month. The more they resist, the more shall they be made to suffer.

All this, of course, is totally and basically wrong. We send our young people to high school and college where we permit, aye, expect them to be trained in the development of spending powers

of magnificent proportions. How feeble the parental industry which can yield a monthly allowance so meager that the merest tyro among our college-bred youth can express himself for a single evening to such effect that it vanishes like a barren fig tree that is cut down and cast into the fire! And we, who pride ourselves upon the encouragement of everything that is done on a large and imposing scale, render this high-powered and masterful command of the distribution of wealth sterile for certain arbitrary periods of time which we designate with machine-like regularity upon humanity's time card, the calendar.

I have thought of one remedy, a remedy which is both obvious and simple. Why force our young people to wish away their lives until the next pay day, our older people to count those days lost until the family coffers are replenished? Let every day be pay day. Let the intermittent springs of allowances gush forth when the basin of desire rather than that of supply overflows.

Of course, there is another remedy, and that is to make our happiness, indeed our pleasures, depend upon things which do not involve the outpouring of cash by the jugful. But that is not nearly so simple, and under such a régime I am afraid most of our jazz players would starve to death, so it will never be adopted. It would be much more popular to abolish the calendar.

You may ask what all this has to do with accounting? I plead guilty to some disregard of the clock, if not of the calendar, in coming to my point. It is this: There seemed to be a little higher in the economic scale a class which all things considered, should be more or less immune from these alternations, under the tyranny of the calendar, between periods of low and high pressure. I mean the merchant, the capitalist, the executive class. We can think of them back in the days of the old merchant adventurers when they sent forth their argosies to strange and unknown shores. When one of them came back and its cargo was sold, perhaps an account would be made up. Even in recent years I have come across the planter whose accounts, such as they were, were kept by crop years, which overlapped and faded out, but the books were never closed.

Such primitive simplicity could not, of course, stand before the onrush of organized accounting. These men must be made to feel that there are intervals of life which simply do not count. What more reasonable then to force these men into submission to a division of time known as the fiscal period? At first it was a year.

The blood pressure of the more phlegmatic Briton could apparently stand the strain of waiting for about three months until our brethren over there duly audited and certified his accounts. But over here the tension had to be raised at more frequent intervals. Our captain of industry had to be made to realize that the year consisted for all practical purposes of twelve accounting periods; that all his efforts went for naught except in so far as they were represented by the last figure in a column prepared in deadly parallel form, with last year standing as an accuser of retrogression or a cheerful witness of progress.

But even this was not enough for our fanatical servants of the calendar. There were too many businesses in this country that were making steady progress; too many of our executives who could sneak off and enjoy themselves from one income period to another, confident that the next would not show up so badly after all.

To curb these light-hearted gentry, there had to be devised another formula—a sort of side bet made not with nature or with the seasons or with the ordinary vicissitudes of business, but with a mathematical device as implacable as the multiplication table. I have in mind the budget, which was contrived for the purpose of taking the last bit of joy out of life.

A man might be able to beat last year's results and operate more efficiently than last month, but could he meet the budget? Assuming that he met the budget this month, or perhaps even beat it, the intention was to increase his anxiety as to next month. Of course, when life becomes as rigorous as that the bootlegger always steps in. So we came by the misbegotten budget that was made for the purpose of being beaten. But our infernal revenue and expenditure despots soon dealt with that. They fired first and investigated after, in the approved manner.

I realize I am practically taking my life in my hands in flinging the charge of these cumulative crimes against the happiness of mankind in the teeth of you gentlemen. It is useless for you, though, to try to lay the blame on the calendar. It is only in economic matters and more particularly in their accounting manifestations that the calendar is allowed to trample so ruthlessly on little mortals engaged in the pursuit of happiness.

Take, for example, the purely sociological side of life. Does the bootlegger sit down and wish his life away waiting for his product to attain the desired maturity? You know he does not. Take

the spheres of pure and applied art. Does the young painter or sculptor wait until he can produce a recognizable image of anything above, on, or beneath the earth before he finds a dealer to launch him on his career? Does the antique dealer bow down and worship the calendar past, present, or future? I pause not for an answer, for none is needed. Even in legislative matters the calendar is set at defiance. All of you who read your *Congressional Record* religiously know that the legislative day of January 30th can well extend over into the calendar day of February 3rd.

The ladies, God bless them, whatever may be said pro and con on the subject of economic freedom, know better than to allow themselves to become slaves to the calendar. Do you make your wife a regular allowance or do you give her money whenever she needs it? You know the time-honored answer is, "both." Have you ever made what you regarded as an appointment with a woman? Fortunate man, for you have had an opportunity to cogitate upon the complete emancipation of mankind from the tyranny of time. The latest pronouncement of Professor Einstein, that time is having its revenge and is consuming space, assumes the aspect of a mere play upon words.

I return, therefore to my point that it is mainly in the accounting manifestations of economics that this undue subservience of mankind to the calendar is observed. So few really sincere attempts seem to have been made to break this domination. There is one more or less authentic case on record of the chancellor of the exchequer of a German principality who made the statement that for the average twelve months' period his revenues and expenditures balanced. Investigation disclosed that the average was arrived at by taking the revenues for fifteen months and the expenditures for nine months. Why disturb the sum total of human happiness by any misguided attempts at anything more exact? Why not try to humanize the art of accounting? Think what human interest there would be, for example, in a report to stockholders which said that the profits were not so good but the president and his wife were enjoying a very pleasant summer in Europe; that sales showed some decrease but the vice-president was low handicap man at the golf club; that collections were rather poor, but the treasurer and his wife were bridge champions of the county; and that, anyhow, results had been excellent as recently as the year 1924, and sometime, when they were least expecting it, might be even better, after the present depression had passed

away. The important thing, of course, is not to encourage the stockholders to look for dividends with any alarming regularity. Otherwise, they too, become servants of the calendar on a quarterly basis.

May I be allowed to digress again on the subject of the budget? There have been some misguided attempts to impress the stereotype of the budget even on personal exchequers. These attempts have, I think, for the most part been as futile as the household-expense book, than which futility goes not further. I am inclined to think that the United States government itself engaged in one noble experiment in this direction. In 1874 the District of Columbia created an issue of bonds, which unfortunately matured in 1924, bearing interest at the rate of 3.65 per cent. Of course the purpose of this is obvious. You reduce your budget to a daily basis. Then, having multiplied by 10,000, you invest that number of dollars, and you can retire to Colorado Springs and live happily, being careful, of course, to arrange to spend the day with Aunt Carrie in Denver every twenty-ninth of February. There is a somewhat fascinating simplicity about this. You invest \$100,000, and you have the upkeep of your automobile and chauffeur; \$10,000, and you have your caddy fees; another \$1,000, shall I say?, and the income provides you with your contribution to the collection plate at church, and so on. I am only waiting, in harmony with the more modern tempo, for some perfectly gilt-edged investments yielding seven and three-tenths or ten and ninety-five one hundredths per cent. to give the method a trial myself.

I feel that I should not close without making one word of explanation. It was impressed upon me that I was not to speak tonight on any technical subject. Now I know from experience that there are only three things that accountants take seriously: religion, golf and technical subjects, in that order in one direction or the other. With two of these subjects practically taboo as a subject for after dinner tonight, and the third a subject for all men, in the sense in which the Psalmist referred to them in a moment of haste if not of cynicism, I was thrown back on resources of a somewhat random character. Of course, I realize that life is serious. I realize, too, that accounting is very, very serious. If I have appeared to be in any way flippant tonight it must be attributed to the altitude. I apologize.