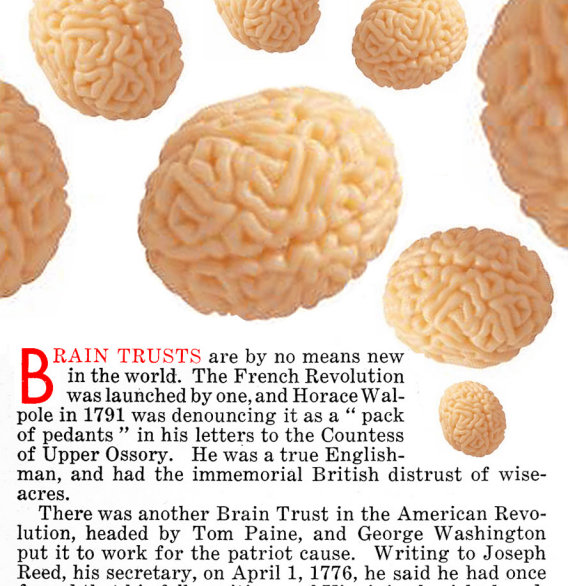
The BRAIN TRUST

By H. L. MENCKEN



BRAIN TRUSTS are by no means new in the world. The French Revolution was launched by one, and Horace Walpole in 1791 was denouncing it as a "pack of pedants" in his letters to the Countess of Upper Ossory. He was a true Englishman, and had the immemorial British distrust of wiseacres.

There was another Brain Trust in the American Revolution, headed by Tom Paine, and George Washington put it to work for the patriot cause. Writing to Joseph Reed, his secretary, on April 1, 1776, he said he had once feared that his fellow citizens of Virginia cherished such a "steady attachment to royalty" that they would "come only reluctantly to the idea of independence," but that Paine's pamphlet, Common Sense, was "working a powerful change there in the minds of many men." This change went so far that the Virginians were presently flocking to Washington's standard, and five years later, as every schoolboy knows, they helped him finish Cornwallis on their own soil.

That the Russian Revolution was preceded by a Brain Trust is remembered by all, for one of its principal luminaries, Trotsky, is still alive and occasionally making the first pages, and another, Lenin, though dead, is handsomely embalmed in Moscow and on public exhibition. The Egyptians, who also embalmed their heroes, had a one-man Brain Trust about 1400 B. C. in the person of a pharaoh named Amenhotep IV, father-in-law of the celebrated Tutankhamen. Amenhotep undertook to reform not only the Egyptian economic system but also the Egyptian religion, which was much more than the professors at Washington have attempted so far. He had successors and imitators in Periclean Athens and in both republican and imperial Rome, as you will discover by examining the books.

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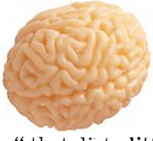
It might even be said that the Jewish Law, as we have it in Deuteronomy, was the product of a Brain Trust, for it was not formulated by the ordinary Jewish lawmakers but by a committee of obscure intellectuals, whose names remain uncertain to this day. All we know is that King Josiah had great confidence in them, and that when they brought him the text of the Law he released it at once and issued orders that the Jews obey it forevermore.

The fate of Brain Trusts is usually sad and often tragic. The French brethren, once their revolution was under way, had to flee from the politicians who had lifted their ideas, and not a few of them were captured and had their heads cut off. Tom Paine, who had gone to France in 1792 to lend them a hand, narrowly escaped their own fate, and indeed served ten months in a French jail and was twice conditioned for the guillotine. On his return to America in 1802 he found that his services to the American Revolution were already forgotten, and he spent the last seven years of his life mostly on a wretched little place in New York State, borrowing money here and there, nursing a jug of moonshine, and howling against the ingratitude of republics. Washington had been his friend, but the other leaders of the time refused to have anything to do with him, and a century later he was denounced by Theodore Roosevelt as "that dirty little atheist."



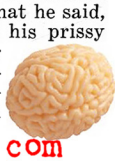
So with nearly all the rest. Amenhotep got into such difficulties that he nearly lost his throne, and his son-in-law Tutankhamen repudiated all his fine schemes after his death, and set up a Tory government which lasted in Egypt for a thousand years. The members of the Greek and Roman Brain Trusts, when they were not put to death, as Socrates was, were commonly sent to Asia Minor, a rough and unhealthy region in those days as in these.

Lenin seems to have been an exception to the general rule, but that is probably only because he died early, before the honeymoon of his Brain Trust was over. If he were alive today he would no doubt be in exile, as his partner Trotsky is, or reduced to editing a magazine for a living, as Dr. Raymond Moley is, or to lecturing against Darwinism, as William Jennings Bryan was, or to some other such lowly and ignominious avocation. Very few members of Brain Trusts have ever died, so to speak, with their brains on.

The reason for all this is not far to seek. The common people are all Englishmen in their distrust of those who claim to be wise. The moment a man lets it be known that he has more in his head than the general they begin to scrutinize him with sharp and bilious eyes, and if the chance ever offers—and it usually does, for he almost always does something foolish soon or late—they fall upon him with loud hallelujahs, and, in the vulgar phrase, tie a can to him.

That is precisely what happened to Socrates, unquestionably one of the most learned men who ever lived. There was nothing wrong, at bottom, with his scheme to lift up the Greeks; in fact, it is praised by many to this day. But he couldn't resist the temptation to add some mere smartness to it, and this smartness alarmed his customers and gave his enemies their chance, and he was soon calling for his last plate of ham and eggs in the death house at Athens. Tom Paine made the same mistake. Not content with knocking off King George, he undertook to knock off Christianity, and in an instant the mob was on him, yelling, like the lady boozer who rushed out of a London pub to assault an agnostic soapboxer, "This is the blighter that's tryin' to rob us of our bloody religion!"

Trotsky's error, though it differed somewhat from Socrates's and Paine's, was analogous. It issued out of the fact that he fancied himself as a philosopher, and liked to talk in hard words. For a while the Russian masses applauded him dutifully, no matter what he said, but in the course of time they got tired of his prissy jargon, and began to long for simpler, easier stuff. It was supplied by the professional politicians, who could holler like wildcats without putting any burden on the higher cerebral

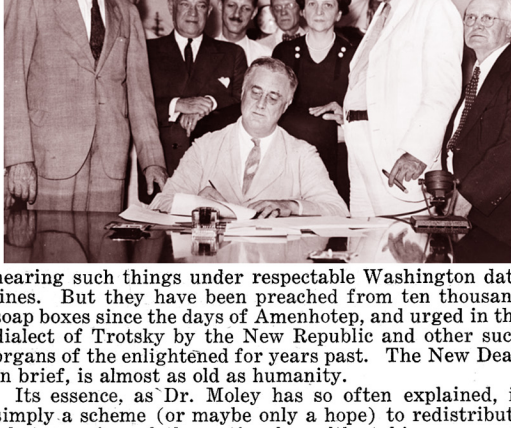


centers, either their own or their hearers'. In so far as these professionals talked sense at all they borrowed it from Trotsky, but they left out his disquieting gabble about syllogisms, dialectics, and other such unintelligible and unpleasant things, and so they got the crowds. When Trotsky complained that they were distorting his ideas they replied that his ideas were insane and dangerous, and pretty soon the majority of Russians agreed with them, and Trotsky began his exile. He has been writing books and articles ever since, all of them recommended highly by the American intellectuals, but none of them read by the Russian common people.

THUS the outlook is poor for the Brain Trust now under full steam at Washington, and I say so as one who wishes it well and has derived pleasure if not profit from its ministrations. That it will escape the actual guillotine is happily probable, for it has avoided the common error, so fatal to some of the Brain Trusts of the past, of setting up a guillotine for its critics. But that it will gradually accumulate unpopularity seems to be very likely —in fact, it has already accumulated more than a sufficiency to undo it in the long run. The Tories hate it because it has tried to upset their apple cart, and the radicals because it has stolen their thunder.

As for the politicians, they hate it as a matter of policy, for they want to collar its most popular ideas for themselves, and hating it violently and publicly is a good way to cover up the theft. Its only true friends seem to be the Washington correspondents of the newspapers, and even they begin to snap at it.

In all this, as I have said, there is nothing new. History is full of precedents. Nor is there much novelty in what the current Brain Trust specifically advocates. If it seems novel it is only because we are not accustomed to



hearing such things under respectable Washington date lines. But they have been preached from ten thousand soap boxes since the days of Amenhotep, and urged in the dialect of Trotsky by the New Republic and other such organs of the enlightened for years past. The New Deal, in brief, is almost as old as humanity.

Its essence, as Dr. Moley has so often explained, is simply a scheme (or maybe only a hope) to redistribute what remains of the national wealth, taking so much away from A and B, and spreading it out among C, D, E, F, and G. It is the theory that A and B, while the going was good, got rather more than their shares, and that C, D, E, F, and G got rather less. Whether this is true or not I do not pretend to say; it is enough to report what is charged and believed. The point is that the same shaking up of haves and have-nots has been undertaken over and over again in the history of the world by all sorts of

reformers and according to the plans and specifications of an endless series of Brain Trusts.

The notion that the scheme was invented by the Russian Bolsheviki is as absurd as the notion that they invented the scheme of abolishing religion. Both have been common to revolutions since the dawn of history, and not only to revolutions by force but also to those by graph and dithyramb. Here in the United States we have gone through the process no less than four times in 134 years—first under Jefferson, then under Jackson, then under the Greenbackers of the '70s and early '80s, and then under Bryan.

The present attempt is thus the fifth, and there is precious little in it that was missing from its predecessors. In fact, it is a great deal more cautious and conservative than most of them, and is for that reason the first to get any considerable support from men of money. In the past these men of money always fought the current Brain Trust violently, and tried to get rid of it by assault, but this time not a few are content to bore from within.

What induces them to adopt that strategy, I suppose, is their conviction that in the long run they will be able to arrest the movement, and so preserve at least a substantial part of their money, and with it most of their old power and prestige. The idea that all men of money are incurably stupid has been overworked of late; in truth, some of them are just as capable of learning as any other class of men, and one of the things they have picked up since the war is a better understanding than they used to have of the natural history of revolution. Those among them who are really intelligent now see, as a plain fact of history, that the attempt to bring down the haves to the level of the have-nots (or to lift up the have-nots to the level of the haves) has always failed in the long run, though often it started off with what seemed to be brilliant chances of succeeding, and they are banking on the high probability that it will fail once more.

IF you point to its continuance in Russia in a very radical form for fifteen long years, they point to its quick collapse everywhere else, and argue with plenty of reason that it is not likely to do any better here than it has done in Italy, Germany, France, and England.

Indeed, they might also argue that there is no evidence before the house that it will last much longer in Russia. It got a good start there because the haves were few in number and almost incredibly witless—a single regiment of infantry might have rounded up all of them. Moreover, they had, taken together, very little mobile wealth, and seizing it was thus no difficult matter.

But as the country gradually becomes self-sustaining and accumulates a larger and larger surplus, it will become increasingly difficult to keep enterprising fellows from coveting and cabbaging it, and once they get their hooks into it, shaking them off will become an extremely arduous job.

I do not question the good faith of the present bosses of the country, but despite that good faith it must be obvious that they are getting a great deal more of the national income, in values if not in money, than the common run of the people. All that is needed is for some of these altruists (or their heirs and assigns) to become converted, whether openly or confidentially, to enlightened self-interest. The moment that happens Russia will be a capitalist country again, no matter what it may call itself, and there will be just as sharp a division between the haves and the have-nots as there ever was in the United States.

The process of redistributing wealth is going on all the time and in all countries. What is more, it is constantly helped by the government, whatever its ostensible form, for one of the chief functions of government is to protect the have-nots from the too brutal exploitation of the haves. If it had not been for that interference, Jay Gould would have stolen not only the Erie but all the other railroads of the United States, and all the sound and conscientious bankers would have been run out of business in 1928 and 1929 by the Mitchells and Wiggins.

But though government may very easily put some curb upon the more hoggish and daring haves, it can never really abolish the inequality of wealth, for the moment

it hobbles one gang of grabbers it gives an advantage to some other gang.

SOMETHING of the sort is now going on among us. The Brain Trust has devised a number of schemes for getting money away from the fellows who accumulated it during the Golden Age of Coolidge, and some of those schemes are working. Any man who hoarded gold has now been relieved of it, any man who piled up a bank deposit sees it reduced 40 per cent in value, and any man who laid in stocks or bonds or real estate is worth a great deal less than he was four years ago. But most of this wealth is not actually destroyed; it is simply scattered, and in a little while the business of collaring it will be in full blast again.

I don't know what the trick will be next time, but that a trick will be invented you may rest assured. Once the landlords had all the advantage, and then the merchants and manufacturers, and then the bankers; the next turn, for all I know, may be that of the bureaucracy, the college professors, the literati, or the police.

But there will be a turn. Some class or group of men, kept among the have-nots by the Old Deal, will be moved among the haves by the New.

Only one thing seems to me to be certain—that, whoever they are, they will not be thrifty saving persons of the sort who got on so well during the past couple of centuries. These emulators of Benjamin Franklin seldom made any large killings, but they got pretty good shares of whatever kind of prosperity was stirring, and they were generally praised. When I was a boy the schoolbooks spoke of thrift in the same tones they employed in speaking of honesty, and every child was encouraged to save money.

But all that is now changed. The Brain Trust teaches that the man who put a part of his earnings into what used to be called investments, and so prepared for old age and a rainy day, was really an antisocial fellow, comparable to a Wall Street gambler or a gunman, and that it is sound economics and good morals to take his money away from him today and give it to his neighbors who blew in everything they earned and then went into debt.

I have some doubt that this doctrine is really true, but that it is popular is plain enough. The human race, in fact, detests thrift, as it detests intelligence. The man who accumulates more than he needs and saves the surplus is disliked by all who either can't or won't follow his example, and that means by the great majority of his fellow men.

His program shames them, and they resent it. Thus he is an easy mark for theorists and politicians alike, and, as I have said, human history is largely a record of successive attempts to empty him—always carried on, of course, to the tune of moral outcries.

It is argued that the way to make everybody prosperous and happy is to get rid of him. But so far the process of getting rid of him has proved to be extremely difficult, if not downright impossible, and I see no reason to believe that it will work much better hereafter. His name and identity may be changed, but the man himself will remain. He has outlived a thousand Brain Trusts, and in all probability he will outlive a few more.

Liberty
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