

Could Altered Constitution Permit Future Dictator to Seize Power?

WASHINGTON—Will the American Constitution—now being arbitrarily transformed by Congress and the Supreme Court without regard to the customary amending process—be utilized some day by a future president to build a dictatorship within a centralized government in Washington?

All the provisions of the Constitution could be subordinated and rendered obsolete by a series of statutes passed by a majority of both houses of Congress and signed by the president. Only three provisions of the Constitution, for instance, really need to be invoked allegedly to justify an assumption of power by the federal government which could diminish, if not altogether wipe out, virtually all the rights of the states. The three devices which are to a large extent in use already are as follows:

● The phrase "to regulate commerce among the several states," as written in the Constitution, has been used by Congress to pass legislation controlling the business and economic affairs of the nation, irrespective of state lines, as well as the social life of the people. This power is not only being asserted in housing, in education and in employment practices, but is being enforced through the granting or withholding of federal funds to particular localities.

● The phrase "equal protection of the law" in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution has already been cited as authority for intervening in any state where a local statute happens to be disliked by any pressure group which, through demonstrations or threats of violence, is able to gain the support of a majority in Congress.

● The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which declares that the right of citizens to vote "shall not be denied or abridged" by any state "on account of race or color," now is being construed as giving to Congress the power to control the whole election process by passing a few laws. This could mean the removal of all qualifications for voting except those which happen to suit the party in power.

These epochal changes are being put into effect in certain respects already, in disregard of the amending process prescribed in the Constitution. But the argument made is that the methods are in keeping with "the spirit of the times" and that "the end justifies the means" because the objective is a worthy one.



Lawrence

The present Supreme Court, composed of a majority with no previous judicial experience, has in recent years been approving this process of changing the Constitution. The big question is: When will public opinion insist on the use of the method prescribed in the Constitution itself for amending that document?

After the downfall of Hitler, this correspondent happened to be talking with a prominent professor of a German university who had lived in Germany throughout the whole period of the dictatorship. When asked why he and his fellow citizens allowed Hitler to come into office and extend his power by opportunistic interpretation of the constitution, the professor replied:

"We were indifferent, and didn't sense what was coming. We were too much concerned with our own affairs. We in the educational world were preoccupied with our own pursuits. We took it for granted that everything being done was for a worthy objective. We didn't realize what we were getting into until it was too late."

Today it would be relatively easy for an autocracy to emerge in America. The power of the chief executive permits him at his discretion to allocate large sums of the taxpayers' money to states which are cooperative and to refuse those sums to states which do not go along with the will of the chief executive.

Members of Congress are submissive because their own elections are controlled by pressure groups whose power is bound to be increased as all voting restrictions are about to be removed. President Johnson has already suggested that anybody over 18 years of age should be permitted to vote, irrespective of whether he or she can read and write.

Never in American history has so much power been concentrated in the federal government, which is nowadays virtually directed by the one man who occupies the highest office in the land. He can insure his own re-election by bestowing favors on the political bosses of the large cities, especially now that electoral votes of most states can be controlled by a few persons with powerful organizations behind them. This has been made easier by the decisions of the Supreme Court compelling a reapportionment of the states, so that power will be lodged hereafter in the big cities and their bosses. It takes only a few such cities to control a majority of the electoral votes of the country.