

This thinksheet is a meditation on a man whose views I usually shared, and with whom I stood on numerous occasions--and whom I last remember as daily passing NYTS, with a warm nod when we passed--whether also of recognition, or only of warmth for all humanity, which indeed he had. What has stirred me into writing this is (1) that in a current course of mine [on the OT and the prejudicial isms: classism, nation[al]ism, racism, sexism] we're dealing with the biblical prophets daily/weekly, and (2) that a biography of NT has just come out: W. A. Swanberg, NORMAN THOMAS [Scrib/76].

1. NT was like the biblical prophets in that, in retrospect, he was impractical and great. From the political realism standpoint, his stands were normally abnormal, appallingly "irrelevant," projected by the wily if not wise as disasters if converted into policy. [A wan fact of historical retrospect, and one that mellows survivors' attitudes, is that whatever it was that became policy was also usually disastrous--but that is another matter.]
2. The prophets and NT were not apolitical, however. Indeed, we remember them as the extreme opposite, as if they were political compulsives! While they didn't actually often have good ideas about what to do, they had two advantages over most of the politicians: they knew how God felt and what the devil was up to. At least we Jews and Christians say that Israel's prophets had a good fix on the nature and ultimate will of God, and were in deep trouble--along with everybody else--when it came to proximates, to policy-program-tactical decision-making. Isaiah of Jerusalem [First Is.] bestrode both sides of the power/prophecy debate, but most prophets--like NT--were "outsiders" to power, never being elected so much as dogcatcher--though in NT's case, as much as for any man in American history, it was not for want of trying.
3. How much has quality/quantity of voice to do with being "a prophet"? Look what little Jimmy Carter has to scratch along on, and how he succeeds; and what a magnificent instrument NT had, even more important in the pre-PA days, and how he failed--no argument against voice training for preachers, please....Would Jesus have been crucified if he hadn't had a commanding voice? or had he? Anyway, the medium should be worthy of the message, and it was triumphantly so in NT's case....Or was he self-seduced, by that built-in organ, into imaging that (1) what he said in a loud, resonant voice was therefore true, and (2) what he said was sufficient political deed, *ex opera operadum* self-fulfilling, "going forth to accomplish that whereunto I sent it"?
4. Like so many of his generation and the three generations before him, he translated religious into ethical motivation. Others went atheist; he, doing his UTS fieldwork in Hell's Kitchen among the desperate immigrant masses just before World War I, agnostic. A Moses of Olympian, instead of Sinaitic, integrity--so like his contemporary I knew best, my father. Principle triumphed not only over expediency but also over piety. [Both came close, occupationally, to the pulpit--turning forum in NC's case, court in my father's, into pulpit.]
5. Ironically, he was a self-canceler: FDR and others coopted his central ideas and used them for counterrevolutionary activity, to fend off NT's socialism as well as communism. Ah, the ambiguities of history and hope!