

THE MORON AS A WAR PROBLEM

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The question of the moron, his detection and military utilization, presented itself the moment our country began picking its defenders by a selective draft. The determination of our attitude towards him and of our use of him in the war is of practical importance. Our final decision, bringing acceptance or rejection of him as a defender of his country, will have far reaching economic, eugenic and social aspects.

All morons, as well as all defectives of lower grades of mentality, who were of draft age were registered on the fifth of June. This registration included all those who were under institutional care at that time. As the call has come, those who are in institutions have been almost automatically exempted because of the fact of their being in an institution for feeble-minded. Will all those in the community be similarly exempted when the formal examination of recruits for mental defect begins?

The disposition of all mental defectives can not be settled at one and the same time. The mentally defective person may be anything from an inert mass of flesh which cannot feed itself to a seemingly normal person whose sole difficulty is his inability "to conduct his affairs with ordinary prudence." The former would be picked out at once by any medical examiner. The latter requires every clinical device for his detection, let alone for the determination of his acceptance or rejection as a soldier or sailor.

There is as much difference between these two extremes of mental defect as there is between humdrum normality and the mentality of our greatest leaders, yet the consideration of the moron as a distinct problem is usually handicapped by the public's concept of him as merely one of the group of feeble-minded. To them a feeble-minded person is one who has a shuffling gait, crooked features, poor eyes, ears and teeth. He is a dirty, drooling, repulsive creature, needing constant care. He stares vacantly about. He must be treated just like a baby for his mentality and, consequently, his compre-

hension are those of an infant. Of course he obviously needs institutional care.

This description does not apply to the moron. Technically he has a mind which ranges from that of an eight-year-old child up to that indefinable level which just renders him deficient enough to fall below the level of those who have made good and reached normality. Actually he is different from any child after he has passed the years of his own childhood. His mind, however inferior, has had the extra ten or fifteen years which have brought him to adulthood. In that time he has gathered experience and his mind is that of an eight- or ten- or twelve-year-old *plus* adult length of experience. His reactions are necessarily different from those of a child of the same inherent mentality because of this factor of experience.

This moron group are as healthy and strong of body as the average man or woman we meet on the street. They have good co-ordination. They are athletic and physically capable. They are not often detected and placed in institutions because of physical inferiority but because of either social, moral, economic or educational difficulties. It is from these stand-points therefore that he is most apt to be a problem if he is introduced to army life.

Socially he is not likely to become a problem unless he becomes a prey to more clever men who induce him to voice their discontent or who torment him until he becomes sullen. Usually he is willing, easily interested, affable and eager to be friendly with everybody.

Morally he is apt to be a problem. He tends to be sexually promiscuous. But when we consider the enormous problem which prostitution and venereal disease raise the minute an army gathers, we doubt whether the moron is any worse in this respect than the average man, except that the moron gets caught. The same is true in regard to crime. The moron is not a born criminal. He seldom thinks up the crime for himself. He gets caught more frequently. Nor has it ever been proven that he is more given to lying or that his lying is any more chronic or malicious than that of supposedly normal people.

It is not a bad thing to know a soldier's short-comings, and one surely cannot discard the moron from our armies because of probable social or moral defects in which he is no worse than other recruits. The reason for his use or elimination must consequently be sought in his tendency to be an economic and educational failure. These two aspects of failure are really indications of the same thing. The economic efficiency of the child lies in his being the best sort of a student possible

and so using to the best advantage the opportunities for work which are opened to him. When he is through school his utilization of his chances for earning his living continues the demands made upon him. His success in both situations depends upon his learning and adapting to the situation which confronts him. The question of the moron's making good in the army or navy consequently depends upon whether he can learn what is required of him as a military unit and whether he can adapt to the daily regime.

So far as formal psychological tests go we find that the moron can learn. He is, on the average, slower in learning than the normal person and slower in adapting when the thing to be learned and adapted to is an abstract thing. But put him in a concrete situation, give him a concrete thing to learn, and there is little difference between him and a normal person. In concrete situations the defective does his best. He glories in the actual thing to be done. He can learn to drill and march, to dig, drive teams, and build. He can fetch and carry and he does it with a better will than the normal man who dreams of accomplishing more than a trivial round of chores which is never done.

The moron fits into the cogs of a big system with very little friction. He is content to eat and sleep and dress and work as a part of a machine with machine-like regularity. Such monotony he can understand and appreciate.

He does not adapt rapidly to changes which he must meet without any help from superiors. He does not have mental activity enough to attempt his own personal variation of a task which he has been taught to do in a certain fashion. He is not apt to become insubordinate unless asked to do tasks entirely too difficult for his ability. He does not worry about the future. His lack of ability to foresee and plan for the future makes him less able to imagine vividly the dangers confronting him to-morrow or next week. He is, consequently, less apt to be a prey to fear. He is content with simple amusements. He likes having a little money to spend, a good meal, a few hours off duty. He is satisfied with a minimum amount of comforts. He will do the thing he has been trained to do with stupid persistence in the face of certain death. All of these attributes seem to indicate a possibility of using the moron in the emergency we face to-day.

A present tendency is to eliminate all mental defectives, the moron included, from actual war service. This seems irrational from several standpoints.

We do not know that the mental defective will not make a

good soldier. His very stupidity makes him easily led with the group of which he is a part and there is much work to be done where numbers are as important a factor as any other. The defective probably could never be made a first-line man where the intricacies of modern warfare demand so much and such varied intelligence. He surely would do well in a "shock" regiment, however, and he could do a tremendous amount of drudgery in the camp behind the firing line. For such places as these every moron eliminated means the waste of a normal man.

But there is a far wider significance than this. The normal man goes to war, the man of low intelligence is left at home. The next generation bears the loss of the former plus the burden of the latter *and his children*. Not that defectives should be indiscriminately mixed with other men. They should be known through careful examination and then segregated. Even if not sent abroad as a whole they might be made most effective under governmental direction in this country.

The detection of morons, except perhaps the lowest ten per cent, will be by no means easy. No one criterion justifies a man's elimination unless he be markedly abnormal, and the moron is not markedly inferior in any way. A mental test alone may be theoretically correct as a means of eliminating the unfit, but we so far have no proof that there is a high correlation between ability on mental tests and ability as a man of war.

The final decision as to the use of the moron, whatever it may be, will affect the present far less than it will future generations. All issues in the struggle for the survival of the fittest will have to be fought anew under the handicaps the present war has forged. Whether we can handle the problem of the moron wisely and yet not throw further burdens on future generations remains to be seen.