

Robert Benchley: My Five- (or Maybe Six-)Year Plan

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IF I HEAR ANY MORE about this five-year-plan business I am going to start one myself. Russia has been working on hers for a couple of years now, and England is thinking of starting one, and what Russia and England can do, I can do. All that is necessary is for me to find out just what a five-year-plan is.

As I understand it, you take five years to start all over again. You throw out all your old systems, clean out the rubbers in the hall closet, give to the Salvation Army all those old bundles of the *National Geographic* you have been saving, and tell your creditors to wait for five years and that they will be surprised to see how well you pay. It sounds like a good plan to me. I haven't asked my butcher about it yet.

When a nation goes in for a five-year plan it reorganizes everything, eliminates competition, buys everything on a large scale, sells everything in amalgamations, and, in general, acts up big. I can't do that, because I shall be working alone and on my own, but I *can* reorganize, and I figure that it will take me about five years to do the thing right. Let's say six and be on the safe side.

In the first place, my whole financial system has got to be gone over. It is in such bad shape now that it can hardly be called a system. In fact, I don't think that it can even be called financial. It is more of a carnival. I shall have to go through all those old checkbook stubs and throw them out, for, under my present method of keeping books, there was no need of saving them, anyway. You see, it has been quite some time since I subtracted the amounts of checks drawn from what I smilingly call the "balance." In fact, there are often great stretches of time when I don't even enter the amounts at all. This latter irregularity is due to a habit of making out checks on blank forms supplied by hotels and restaurants, on which even the name of the bank has to be filled in, to say nothing of the number of the check and its amount. I like to make these out, because I print rather well and it is a great satisfaction to letter in the name of my bank in neat capitals exactly in the middle of the space provided for that purpose. I have sometimes made out a blank check just for the satisfaction of seeing "BANKERS' TRUST CO., 57th St. Branch" come out in such typographical perfection from the point of my pen. I am sure that it is a satisfaction to the bank, too. They often speak of it. What they object to is the amount which I fill in

below. It seems too bad, they say, to have such a neat-looking check so unnegotiable. All of this will be changed under my five-year plan, for I intend not only to give up making out blank checks, but to enter and subtract those which I do make out. I cannot guarantee to subtract them correctly, for I am not a superman and can do only one thing at a time, but I will at least get the figures down on paper. The bank can handle the rest, and I am sure that they will. That is what they pay men to do, and they have never failed me yet.

Which brings us to the second part of my new economic reorganization -- production. Some way has got to be found to turn out more work. One solution would be, I suppose, to do more work, but that seems a little drastic. If Russia and England can combine all their forces to speed up production, I ought to be able to combine with somebody to speed up mine without making a slave of myself as well. If I could get a dozen or so fellows who are in the same line of business, we could work up some division of labor whereby one of them could think up the ideas, another could arrange them in notes, another could lose the notes, and yet another could hunt for them. This would take a lot of work off my hands and yet save time for the combination.

By then we would be ready for a fifth member of the pool to walk up and down the room dictating the story from such of the notes as can be found, while a sixth took it down in shorthand. We could all then get together and try to figure out the shorthand, with a special typing member ready to put the story down on paper in its final form. All that would now remain would be to put the stories in envelopes and address them, and it is here that I would fit in. That neat printing that I have been doing on blank checks all my life could be turned to good account here. It makes a great difference with an editor whether or not the contribution is neat, and it might turn out that I was the most important member of the pool. I don't think there is any doubt that the stories would be better.

So much for production. With my financial system reorganized and my production speeded up, the problem would be my world market. Here is where the fun would come in. You can't get a world market without personal contact. You couldn't very well write letters to people in Germany and Spain and say: "I am a little boy forty years old and how would you like to buy a piece that I have written?"

You would have to go to Germany and to Spain and see the people personally. This is why I feel that my five-year plan may take possibly six years to carry out. I shall have to do so much traveling to establish a world market. And I won't want any of my associates in the pool along with me, either. They will have plenty to do with thinking up ideas at home -- and writing them.

Now, I may have this five-year plan all wrong. I haven't read much about Russia's, except to look at pictures showing Lenin's tomb. But I do know that the principle of the thing is that five years are supposed to elapse before anyone can really judge of its success. In five years Russia expects to have increased its production of wheat to 3,000,000,000,000 bushels (or is it 3,000,000,000?) and before that time everyone has got to take Russia's word for it. This is what appeals to me about the idea. I want to be given a little rest from all this nagging and eyebrow-lifting and "What about that article you promised?" and "Your account shows a slight overdraft." I want to have something definite to hold out to these people, like: "In five years' time I will have my whole system reorganized, with a yearly production of 3,000,000 articles and monthly deposits of \$500,000. Can't you have a little faith? Can't you see that a great economic experiment is being carried on here?" (This, I think, ought to do the trick, unless they have no interest in progressive movements at all. And, from what I hear about them, they haven't.)