MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT

OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

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WRITINGS ON THE EMPIRES IN WORLD HISTORY, X

Arnold Joseph Toynbee, *The Misjudgment of America*, in «Maclean's Magazine», LXXIII, 23 (November 5th, 1960), pp. 25, 64-66.

NOTE

The complete headlines read «America has earned the gratitude of the free world, and is being repaid by dislike. From Britain one of the great historians of the English language looks at the reasons, and says the tide will turn if the world – and the United States itself – will come to a realization of America's true strength» (ivi, p. 25), and «We can't afford to see her beaten in her contest with Russia» (ivi, p. 64).

THE MISJUDGMENT OF AMERICA

by Arnold J. Toynbee

Any Westerner who thinks at all about world affairs must be conscious today of what the West owes to America in our time. Suppose that America had not become a belligerent in each of the two world wars. If she had not, the whole of the Old World, and perhaps even the American hemisphere too, might be under Germany's heel today – and this would have been a calamity for the Germans as well as the rest of us. Again, if America had withdrawn into isolation again after World War II, Russia, by this time, would probably have won the world empire that was not won by Germany because America twice came into the field against her. So the Western peoples owe it to America that they have not, so far, lost their political independence.

No doubt, they are not completely independent in their present relations with America. Willy-nilly, they have to follow America's lead; and this means that they have to take the consequences of America's policy, whether they like her policy or dislike it. However, under America's leadership they do at least have much more freedom than they would have today if the victor in the two world wars had been not America but Germany. And they would certainly have much less freedom if, tomorrow, America were to be worsted by Russia in the cold war.

It is true that, in the age to which the world has now moved on, national freedom may no longer be a blessing. The sovereignty of local states is, after all, the great obstacle to making an atomically armed world safe for human life; and, if we do nevertheless achieve that, national sovereignty may then prove to be the great obstacle to coping with the world's population problem. However, up till now, national independence has been commonly held

to be the political *summum bonum*, and, if it truly is that, then our debt to America is obviously very great, since it is America that has preserved our present substantial measure of independence.

But America has not just preserved the Western peoples' national independence; it has done so at the price of imposing on them the relatively light yoke of the American empire. This really is an empire, though Americans wince at the word. But they can take pride in having inaugurated a new kind of imperialism, which compares favorably with the old. America has been the first imperial power to pay, and pay generously, for her empire, instead of exacting tribute from it. The British used to pride themselves on not taking tribute from their empire; but it used also to be one of the principles of British imperial finance that each part of the British Empire must pay its own way. None of them must be a charge on the budget of the United Kingdom. Today Britain, and France too, is paying through the nose for the privilege of still having the remnant of an empire, and we shall be paying more and more heavily till the last of our dependencies has become fully self-governing. The peoples still under colonial rule owe this change in their favor to America. It was America's example that forced Britain and France to follow suit. And the West European peoples cannot complain; for where should we be now, but for the Marshall Plan? At the end of World War II. America found an empire on her hands. She had not wanted it; she had not gone to war to acquire it; but there it was. And how did America signalize her acquisition of this unwelcome foundling? She behaved like the Good Samaritan. If the American taxpayers had not salvaged postwar Western Europe's economy at very great expense to themselves, the war would certainly have been followed in Western Europe by a complete economic collapse, and Western Europe would then most likely have gone Communist and thus have fallen into Russia's mouth. America's provident generosity saved Western Europe from that.

The West's debt to America in our time is thus obviously enormous. It is equally obvious that the future of all Western countries is bound up with America's future. Whether or not we like America, or like our postwar relation with her, all we other Westerners are bound, in our own interests, to wish America well. We cannot afford, any more than America herself

can, to see her suffer defeat in her present competition with Russia. Her struggle is ours too. But. just for this reason, we are also bound to feel anxious about America's prospects. What are her strong points and what are her weak points? The answers to these questions are of immediate concern to us all. At the present moment, both the Americans and their allies are uneasily aware that things are not going very well for America in the international arena. She has been losing ground to Russia, and it looks as if she may be going to lose more. She has been losing partly because she has been becoming increasingly unpopular in her own camp. This is the disturbing point, and at first sight it is also a surprising one. America has been deserving gratitude and she has been incurring odium. Can we put our finger on the reasons for this? And is there anything that America can do to make the current of feeling flow in her favor?

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of the amazing change in America's outlook and policy within the lifetime of people still alive (for instance, myself). Suppose that, in 1914, someone had foretold what America's position and policy were going to be in 1960. He would not have been listened to; he would have been dismissed as a lunatic. It would have seemed at least as fantastic if the same forecast had been made no longer ago than 1939. In 1914 America was still swearing by George Washington's policy of avoiding foreign entanglements. In 1919 she swung back eagerly to that traditional policy of hers after having been forced out of it by German aggressiveness. As World War II loomed up, she took drastic measures for making sure that she should not be drawn into belligerency for the second time. It needed Pearl Harbor to make America a belligerent in 1941; and it might have been expected that in 1946 she would recoil into isolationism with still greater vigor than in 1919. But, as we know, she did just the opposite. This time, instead of trying once again to wade out of the international morass, she deliberately waded deeper in.

What Germany had failed to do to America was done to her by Stalin. Germany had managed to bring America into a world war twice over, and that was a considerable feat. But the experience of Germany's aggressiveness in World War I had not deterred America from trying to cut loose again from foreign entanglements almost as soon as World War I was

over. The very real danger of world domination by Germany seems never to have impressed itself on America's imagination. If America had not been hounded into belligerency, we may guess that she would have allowed Germany and her allies to make themselves supreme in the Old World. If she had not had her hand forced twice over, she would not, as far as one can see, have been roused to action unless and until the Germans had begun to trespass on the American hemisphere. But the prospect of world domination by Russia got under America's skin in 1946. It has stayed there up to date, and it has brought about a complete reversal of the policy that America had been following ever since the beginning of her career as an independent country.

Since 1946 America, so far from trying to avoid foreign entanglements, has been competing with Russia to incur as many of them as she can. America and Russia have been trying to draw all the rest of the world into their respective camps. During the years 1916 to 1946, America's co-belligerents and associates were perpetually on tenterhooks for fear that America would shear off from them if they got into trouble, and their fears were justified by what actually did happen in 1939. But since 1946 the roles have been dramatically reversed. Since then, America's allies have been chafing at their entanglement with America, and have been wondering, ever more anxiously, whether this may not be going to get them into a scrape. It is America, now, who is eager to preserve her links with her allies and is afraid that these allies may shear off from her.

We have already become so used to this reversal of roles that by now we take it for granted. All the same, it is extraordinary. What is more, it happened suddenly and without previous psychological preparation. And here we come to one of America's present-day troubles, one that goes far toward explaining her present unpopularity with her allies and her present ill-success in trying to cope with Russia. America's mind has become interventionist, but this change of mind has been too quick for her heart yet to follow suit. At heart America is still isolationist. Americans still want, as much as ever, to keep themselves to themselves and to live their lives in their own American way. Of course, all human beings always do feel like that in some degree, but the American degree is an extreme one, and this

is a very grave handicap to America in the pursuit of the new policy of interventionism on which she has deliberately embarked.

No doubt, America has other handicaps that are inevitable. For instance, America is enormously powerful, and powerful people are usually unpopular. As an Englishman. I speak from experience, I am old enough to remember my own country's unpopularity in the days of her power, and I am young enough to feel that being better liked – as we British are, I believe, today – is a considerable consolation for the decline in Britain's material power since 1914. When the powerful man is also a benefactor to whom his neighbors are conscious of being in debt, his unpopularity soars. This is, of course, to his beneficiaries' discredit, not to his own. Resentment at finding oneself under an obligation is an unamiable, though familiar, trait of human nature.

For America this experience of black ingratitude is a new one, and she is still taking it very hard. «They have bitten the hand that fed them» – that has been America's emotional reaction to the ingratitude of her former protegés: China, for instance, since 1948, and now Cuba this year. To act on one's feelings in the dangerous game of international politics is a luxury that even America cannot afford. By giving rein to her resentment she has thrown first China and then Cuba into Russia's arms, and, in doing that, she has played into Russia's hands. But, no doubt. America will learn to take her beneficiaries' ingratitude philosophically. If her natural but impolitic demand for gratitude were the only cause for offense that America was giving, it could be left to time to bring the cure. Unfortunately, the trouble goes deeper.

One cause of America's unpopularity has been mentioned already. America is now interventionist, but Americans are still isolationists – above all, when they are posted abroad. The American abroad is the most homesick creature in the world. This hit one in the eye in wartime England. The refugee European soldiers – Norwegians, Dutch, and the rest – managed to make themselves more or less at home in their English billets. They recovered their spirits, though they had temporarily lost their countries. The American soldier, on the

other hand, seemed to be incurably forlorn, though there was no language barrier to remind him that he was marooned in a strange land.

This homesickness seems surprising in people whose ancestors once upon a time plucked up their roots in Europe and started life again on the other side of the Atlantic. Perhaps present-day Americans have inherited a horror of this ancestral experience, and a subconscious shrinking from being put through it in their turn. Anyway, whatever the cause, the homesickness is a fact, and it is an important, and adverse, factor in America's fighting form for the cold war. Today, hundreds of thousands of Americans are serving their country abroad as soldiers and civilians. They are posted in allied and uncommitted countries all over the world to help these countries and to win good will for America as a valuable byproduct of their American good works. The expatriated Americans duly perform the good works. They perform them with characteristic American energy and efficiency. But, instead of generating the hoped-for good will, their presence in allied countries is unfortunately apt to produce the opposite result; and their homesickness is one cause of this. The majority of them intensely dislike having to live and work abroad. Rather few of them make any attempt to conceal this. And, indeed, however hard they tried, they would probably fail. Their discomfort is too acute not to be obvious.

For Americans, their experience at home has not been a good preparation for the novel enterprise of foreign service. For nearly a hundred years ending in World War I, emigrants from all Europe poured into the United States; and it was the immigrant's business to come onto the Americans' ground, not the Americans' business to go even halfway to meet the immigrant. It was up to the immigrant to learn English and to adapt his way of life to the American way; and, in consequence, every foreigner now is, for an American, a potential immigrant, even when the American is meeting the foreigner in the foreigner's own country, as is happening on a vast scale today. Abroad, as at home, the American still expects to have English spoken to him and to have American living conditions laid on for him. He cannot face learning the language, or eating the food, of the country in which he is stationed. This

may sound trivial, but it is not. It is a crucial point in the cold war – the more so because the Russians seem to be showing themselves much more adaptable.

Americans on service abroad huddle together, as the nineteenth-century British "colonies" in Italy used to do. They tend to live in a kind of self-imposed apartheid, and their lifeline is the PX: a store run, in a foreign country, by the United States government in which American citizens, and they alone, can buy goods, imported from America, that are purchasable only with United States dollars. Homesick Americans posted abroad will buzz round the nearest PX like bees round a honeypot, and, like bees, they will come from miles away to sip. I have known an American mother in Germany drive her children 120 miles to buy shoes for them in the largest of the PXs there, instead of walking round the block to buy them in the nearest German shoe store. I have known the wife of an American professor, seconded to an Asian university to create good will, buy all her food, bread included, at a PX 110 miles away. I have known the wife of an American tenant of my house in London buy all the food for her family in the PX there, instead of walking round the corner to buy the things in the local shops whose addresses my wife had given her.

This American habit of living abroad in a state of siege is, of course, not deliberately intended to give offense. It is an instinctive and unconscious defensive reaction to the painful ordeal of expatriation. But inevitably it does give offense to the natives. It gives them the impression that Americans consider their goods to be unfit for American use, and their food to be downright poison.

This is bad enough, but the trouble does not end there. For Americans, American consumer goods are not just necessities of life. They are also symbols of American superiority, and they are rewards of free enterprise which guarantee both the reality of American freedom and its excellence. In advertising American freedom in these crude material terms, Americans do themselves and their way of life much less than justice. What is excellent about the American way of life is something non-material. It is American warmheartedness, generosity, drive, and initiative. As for freedom, it is spiritual, not economic, freedom that is instantly recognized and honored by all men, and here America

is not quite invulnerable. It is more dangerous to air unpopular views in the United States than it is in, say, Scandinavia, Switzerland. Holland, France, or Britain. A West European observer of American freedom might criticize it for being a bit out of balance. There is not quite enough of it, he might judge, in the spiritual field and there is decidedly too much of it in economics.

This second judgment would be endorsed. from their own recent experience, by at least some Asian peoples. In Pakistan, for instance, the present military government came in as a reaction against the gross abuse of free private economic enterprise by a small minority who found the opportunity to make excessive profits and seized this opportunity at the expense of the rest of their countrymen. Greed is, of course, one of the common failings of human nature, so the Americans' conspicuous consumption of consumer goods does find imitators all over the world (probably not excluding Russia) among the few non-Americans who can afford it. But imitation is not the same thing as approval or admiration. And, from samples of world opinion in Latin America, Asia, and Europe, my impression is that the extravagance of the material apparatus of the American way of life is not admired.

Furthermore, as a gambit for American propaganda, this is a boomerang. Americans abroad are sometimes ill-advised enough to point out the contrast between the abundance of their own command of consumer goods and the relative scarcity of the same kind of goods in Russia. Here the Americans, without realizing it, are actually making first-class propaganda for their Russian competitors. Tell an Asian or African that he has simply to adopt the American way of life and then all will be well with him and his country. You are playing a very bad joke on him. You are telling him to do something that is utterly beyond his power. The most unsophisticated Asian or African realizes that. He is wondering where the next meal for his family is to come from, and beyond that, whether he can put a roof over their heads before the next monsoon; and, as a panacea for his ills, you tell him to have a bathroom in every bedroom suite, a refrigerator and a washing-up machine in his kitchen, and a couple of cars in his garage. You are making brutal fun of his poverty, and he feels outraged.

The American propagandist is, of course, not dreaming of doing that. All the same, in the circumstances, this is bound to be the effect on the mind of the Asian or African propagandee. If he is an educated man, he will then go on to contrast the American way of life with the Russian way, and will come down heavily in the Russian way's favor. The American way, he will conclude, is «each for himself, and the devil take the hindmost». The Russian way is to take care of the community as a whole, and to put first things first. The first needs of an economically backward Asian or African country are elementary capital goods in enormous quantities: concrete rim and lining for the village well, concrete paving for the village lanes, a dirt road to link the village up with the nearest metalled road, and (most dazzling dream of all) a village school. The educated man, thinking on a larger scale and in longer terms, dreams also of trunk roads, irrigation works, high schools, and universities. But all alike feel that the first call on the people's economic energies is to equip the country with the capital goods that it needs. This is the road to national regeneration. It is a glorious enterprise, and, if one is in earnest about it, one will tighten one's belt till the job is done. American-type consumer goods can wait. In other words, the way of life that seems both inspiring and practical to Asians and Africans in their present-day situation is not the American way but the Russian.

Economists (including American economists. if they are frank) will add that America's freedom for extravagant individual consumption is bound to be only temporary. Its price is the rapid using up of irreplaceable materials (e.g. metals and oil), and the world's supply of these will not last long at this rate of consumption, even if America continues to be the only consumer on the American scale. If it were conceivable that the rest of the human race could really increase its consumption up to the present American level, the last reserves would be exhausted in a year or two. Fortunately for the welfare of mankind, there is no possibility of this world-wide Americanization of effective economic demand. Even so, America's present standard of consumption cannot be kept up for very long, even if it continues to be confined to America. So, if this were all that the American way of life really meant, the American way of life would have no future.

I myself believe that the American way of life has a future, because I believe that the essence of it is really something different. It is something, I believe, that existed, and that was the making of America, before she was overtaken by her present obsession with consumer goods. So, when the material standard of American life falls, as it surely must fall eventually, the older spiritual standard need not fall with it. America's present craze for material comfort is a very recent fashion. The West was won without any of the present-day material apparatus of American life. It was won in wagons and log cabins, not in cars and bathroom suites. If the pioneers had been unable to get along without bathrooms, cars, and concrete roads, the American frontier today would still be a mile or two west of Philadelphia.

Today America is engaged in a struggle for winning not just the west of her own continent but the world, and she can win – or, at least, hold her own – if she can recapture the spirit of her pioneers. What she needs today, for staffing her educational and technical missions abroad, is an order of dedicated lay monks who will care enough about their job to embrace a Franciscan poverty for the sake of it. If they will take the plunge of "going native" they will give themselves a chance of winning the natives' hearts. Then, and only then, they will be competing with the Russians on equal terms.