

Continental Condescension
toward us Is Unjustified.

On Judging America

By CHARLES PERGLER

MUCH WATER has flowed under the bridge since Lowell wrote his famous essay *On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners*, but occasionally it can be seen that this condescension has not entirely disappeared. At times it is encouraged by a certain type of American who still thinks that culturally the United States remains a European colony.

Those critical of America, usually without any adequate knowledge of the country, frequently talk of the alleged provincialism of the average American. If, for instance, an American does not happen to know what is the capital of some relatively small European country, or the names of its functionaries, the fact has been pointed out as a sign of unpardonable ignorance. Without claiming that all Americans know what is desirable to be known, I have often wondered whether occasionally the shoe should not be placed on the other foot, whether it is not a legitimate question to ask, What do other peoples know of America? One would expect them to be interested, for America is admittedly the greatest and most powerful State of the present-day world.

One of the striking things frequently found in the European press, and not only in the totalitarian countries, is a complete misunderstanding of the position of

the President under the Constitution and his duties as a political leader. Following the election of 1936, with the overwhelming victory of President Roosevelt, a question was raised whether the results were not an indication that there is arising in the United States what may be called the Führer principle. This thought finds expression even now despite the reverses of 1938 and despite the continued popularity of the President. In other words, Europeans apply to the United States their own measuring rod. They fail to distinguish between democratic leaders and authoritarian dictators. The American people, when in their opinion times require it, have demanded constructive leadership, and the great Presidents have been leaders. They have been, however, elected leaders, and it is a far cry from democratically chosen leaders to European dictators, not one of whom would dare submit himself to the choice of the nation exercising secret and free suffrage.

This failure properly to understand America has already resulted in considerable damage to the cause of international good will. Every now and then one hears reproaches that America repudiated the treaties negotiated at the Peace Conference in 1919. Without going into the merits of the League of Nations controversy, the statesmen in Paris were told that no treaty exists or can exist for the United States unless approved by two-thirds of the Senate. To complain of repudiation because the Senate exercised its constitutional function, entrusted to it by the American people, is a confession of ignorance. It does not lie in the mouth of any actual or alleged statesman to plead ignorance of the public law of the country with whose representatives he is negotiating, and certainly not that branch of public law dealing with the treaty-making power.

The question of so-called war debts to the United States just now is dormant, and here again I do not intend to deal with the merits of the problem, *i.e.*, whether it is desirable that they be cancelled or not. It has always been clear to me, however, that politically and diplomatically Europe's approach to the problem left much to be desired. Only too many of those concerned seemed to proceed on the theory that all America is Wall Street, as it is sometimes popularly visualized. The great body of American tax payers was never thought of. Certainly no adequate attempt was made to convince the American people that cancellation would be beneficial to them as creditors in the long run. That Americans, like all other nations, are mostly hard working people does not seem to have occurred to many a gentleman allegedly expert in international matters. This led to unwise, even offensive, attacks in the press, which contributed to international friction.

In the long run, and sometimes in a run not so very long, public opinion determines American political policies, domestic as well as external, as it must do in any democracy. The diplomat, politician or statesman is lost who does not bear in mind, and act upon the realization, that dinner table talk in Washington seldom, if ever, conveys a true picture of the state of the American collective mind. I have always admired the action of a former South American Ambassador who for a season went on the Chautauqua platform in order to learn at first-hand the attitude of the American masses. Again, such Ambassadors as Bryce and Jusserand have rendered great service not only to their countries, but to the United States as well, because they made a thorough study of conditions here. Of course, foreign offices do not always like that, and occasionally they have resented being told that prob-

lems concerning America cannot be handled solely by diplomatic negotiations. In at least one case a foreign office charged its diplomat with having become too "Americanized" because he warned against a certain procedure.

Occasionally mistakes made by statesmen even in public print are so ludicrous as to justify finding a place for them in the comic journals. Not so long ago one of them, of a fairly wide propaganda-made reputation, chided an American President with the awful crime of reading detective novels for relaxation, and held himself up as an example by saying that when he seeks relaxation he reads historical novels, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, said he to the American interviewer, "is a history of your South before the Civil War." Another official of equal, if also artificially created prominence, in an article of January 1, 1931, discussed the gains for world peace and rejoiced in the establishment of the Pan-American Union at the Congress of Havana — in 1928. This gentleman, an alleged international expert, was blissfully ignorant of the history of the Pan-American movement and of the founding of the Pan-American Union long before 1928. Again, a European text-book on international law insists that Great Britain "extended her sway over Canada despite the Monroe Doctrine," the learned professor being completely unaware of the Treaty of Paris of 1763 and of the period which called forth the Monroe Doctrine.

WHAT ABOUT our own knowledge of the world? I am ready to assert without fear of successful contradiction that international affairs are studied in the United States more extensively and intensively than anywhere else. In most countries foreign affairs are left to specialists. Here

there is hardly a college worthy of the name that does not offer courses in international relations. Clubs and various other organizations devote much time to international affairs. There are several excellent publications dealing with foreign problems. The foreign services of the American press are much more ample than what we see on the Continent, and immensely more impartial. The Continental press, on the whole, reported the Spanish occurrences in accordance with the party allegiance of the respective papers, the result being that the American public was much better informed, because there are limits to one-sided reporting beyond which no American publisher would dare to go.

That brings us to another charge frequently made against America, namely, the sensationalism of the press. During my last stay in Europe one of the most interesting phenomena to be observed was the growth, even in Central Europe, of what is known as the "boulevard press," which to an extent is an imitation of a certain type of American newspaper, particularly with regard to typographical make-up and brevity of news. Is not imitation the sincerest form of flattery? The difference is, however, that not even the most sensational American newspaper would print the sort of stuff that appears at times in a number of European publications, matter that may be necessarily at times disclosed in a court room, but which, decency requires, in print should be described with some delicacy. That is not hypocrisy, but simply observing certain amenities of civilized life.

On the political side the difference between the Continental and the American press, with a few exceptions, is this: America has newspapers, Continental Europe party organs. Even the most vigorous partisan paper in the United States does not dare to suppress completely a

pronouncement of an important government official belonging to another political faith. Across the Atlantic that is a frequent occurrence, and when such things are mentioned, it is usually done by way of an attack. The editorial functions of the paper and its purely news mission are confused and commingled — anything is grist to the partisan mill. I do not mean to say that everything is ideal here. Distortions and suppressions occur, and some publishers have axes to grind. I do say, however, that in its reporting function the American press performs better and with something approximating fairness at least in intent.

No one would for a moment judge the French of his day exclusively on the basis of the works of Émile Zola. At best, or at worst, they portrayed only one phase of French life, especially, of course, Parisian life. Yet Europe judges America largely by the works of certain writers of the realistic school, perhaps correct enough in picturing the types they delineate, but picturing *only those types* and not American life in all its phases. In talking to some of my European friends, I have wondered more than once whether they do not think that life here is one continuous “American Tragedy,” that all American business men are Babbitts — though Babbitt was a good fellow at that — and that all American clergymen are Elmer Gantrys. The picture they thus form is a distortion. The novelist is not to be blamed, certainly not entirely, for no book can encompass American life in all its manifestations, but an intelligent reader should realize that there is being placed before him only a section, and a small one at that, of the life of a great nation.

Crime news from America is always featured; the word “gangster” has passed into a number of continental languages. The normal is not news, of course; neverthe-

less, excessive emphasis is placed by the European press upon American crime. There are no adequate comparative data, but I do not believe there is more crime in America than on the European Continent. It is true that the great open spaces of this continent are not and cannot be thoroughly policed. For that matter, even the cities are not thoroughly policed. Crime here is perhaps more spectacular and more organized. But that there is more of it I seriously doubt.

Now consider corruption in public life. The late Finley Peter Dunne (Mr. Dooley) once said that here the press drags things into the open, bringing about, after all, a remedy, while in Europe the press sweeps things under the sofa. There is in that statement more truth than the license of a humorist. When, during my various ventures and misadventures in European public life, I encountered public men suddenly wealthy, although some of them before the War were poor — and at least one of them asked his friends not to write to him to Paris because he could not reply, not having the money to buy even postage stamps — I wondered what would happen if some competent tribunal invoked the rule applied by President, then Governor, Roosevelt, in the famous tin box case which resulted in the removal of a sheriff because he could not explain how he came into possession of \$40,000.

THE JUDICIARY of the United States has of late frequently been under fire. Such cases as those of Mooney and Sacco and Vanzetti have become objects of international interest. I am among those who regret a number of incidents connected with those cases, and yet I am convinced they are far from being fair illustrations of American judicial processes. On the whole, American judges, especially

Federal judges, conduct themselves very well and with appropriate dignity. I stand on this statement despite the just revealed Manton case in New York. Certainly no such farces, violating all accepted canons of legal procedure, as the Russian trials of Trotsky's alleged adherents, would be possible anywhere in the United States. An American judge would never dare to advise the executive, in a case which was bound to come before his tribunal, how to change rules of procedure, and make them retroactive, in order to be rid of a personage whose political views the Chief Executive did not like. Yet such cases in Europe have come to my knowledge and were accepted as matters of course.

This brief essay would not be even remotely complete if I did not note the condescension continentals sometimes show towards American educational institutions. A screamingly humorous sample of this occurred some years ago when a Prague review of Leftist tendencies, the *Pritomnost*, published an article on the low estate to which American doctors' degrees have fallen and as an illustration cited the alleged fact that in the United States doctors are called — dogs. What, of course, happened was that the perspicacious writer in his defective knowledge of American pronunciation, confused the familiar abbreviation "doc" with dog.

The American educational system has its defects, and I am not sure that it has not gone rather wild in regard to so-called credits and requirements, but speaking generally, in more ways than one, it is more exacting than what we find on the Continent. For the degree of doctor of philosophy all respectable American institutions demand an undergraduate college degree, a reading knowledge of two foreign languages, and evidence of capacity to undertake research work usually shown by what is known

as a dissertation. In Central Europe graduation from a *gymnasium*, about equal to the American junior college, entitles one to admission to a university and candidacy for a doctor's degree, and ability to undertake original research work comes into question only when one possessing a doctor's degree seeks to prepare himself for a university career. The European degree of doctor of laws (J. U. D.) is in fact about equal to the American Bachelor of Laws degree, and the examinations and attendance requirements are much less rigid.

An example may best show what I have in mind. A clergyman, a teacher of literature in a small Middle Western college, came to me one day in a Central European city, the locale of an ancient and by no means inferior seat of learning, and told me he thought it would be useful if he possessed a European Ph.D. His field being literature, he investigated the courses offered, and the result he condensed in a statement, "Do you know, they do not offer more, if as much, as our little college does?" Whereupon, without regard to dignity of language, it is to be admitted, I remarked, "You're telling me?" Yet the gentleman went ahead, obtained his degree, is now parading it in the United States, and there are people who think he has something better than America offers.

It is true that in America much remains to be remedied and improved, and no American will deny this. Much, however, is being accomplished and has been accomplished. No American need believe for a moment that there is any justification for any "condescension in foreigners."

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Peace *in* Brno

ERSKINE CALDWELL

THERE WAS no other beauty in Czechoslovakia like the round green hills of Brno in the first light of the summer morning sun. That was when the light began to glisten on the dew, making each leaf and stem of grass sparkle in purple and violet. The low rambling mountains of Moravia came down to the city from all directions, in wave after wave, looking as though they were tiers of grass-covered terraces. Finally, at the foot of them all, the soft hills lay.

As the morning became brighter, the southward-running rivers of Moravia could be seen winding in and out among the hills of the city, leaving streamers of silver behind. Then, huge and red, the sun itself appeared on the top of the mountains. A thousand windows became warm with life. Out of the gleaming mass of city below, and towering above the hills themselves, cathedral spires sprang into the air like the fingers of giants pointing to heaven.

The streets and avenues were tree-lined and wide, and they were neither straight nor crooked, but ran in long symmetrical curves around the hills and along the streams. When one street crossed another, which was not often, the intersection looked unreal, like a thing that could not possibly have taken place.