

# AMERICA CRITICISED

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AMERICA as a subject for discussion, acrimonious and otherwise, bulks large in Europe and at home; in books, as in the magazines and newspapers. She is the subject of intense introspective consideration by her own writers, and of objective study by those outside. America is being defined and redefined; described and redescribed; studied and restudied. There are almost as many conclusions reached and stated as there are authors and students. As President James Rowland Angell of Yale declared in his baccalaureate address last June,

The critics of our age are wont to inveigh against its blatant vulgarity, its crass materialism, its spiritual poverty, its ignominious acceptance of moral compromise, its fatuous self-complacency and its soul-destroying absorption in soft creature comforts, in luxury and lures of economic prosperity. There may be more than a thread of truth in such indictments. Certainly physical comfort and freedom from acute anxiety, such as our nation so largely enjoys, act as potent sedatives upon the spiritual sensibilities of most people and sap their enthusiasm for moral crusading. Nor can one vigorously gainsay the charge of vulgarity. It flaunts itself in every public place. Any metropolitan newsstand will give food for humiliating reflection on our national taste in letters.

This is a stunning indictment, but coming from one of our leading educators it does not seem to have aroused much, if any, resentment. In what essential respect does it differ from these of Dickens, Harriet Martineau and Mrs. Trollope fulminated in the middle years of the 19th century, except perhaps in the matter of taste? As the editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature* said recently,

Our manners were generally bad; we did hustle and bustle after land and money; we were boasters; there was dirt, chicanery, drunkenness, barbarism on the frontier. Only with the realization that the pioneers who now are so glorified were the chief subject of satire, does one begin to comprehend the puzzled rage which made our countrymen so incoherent in their replies. They felt that chills and fever, and raw whiskey, and tobacco spitting, and land stealing, were only the diseases of a great age of migration, but they chose to defend by denying the facts. Sandburg's rich life of the young Lincoln is the final answer to the charges of degeneracy and utter barbarism which were commonly laid

against the West. All that Dickens wrote of with scorn he describes with unsparing realism, knowing that the generation which produced a Lincoln and the vast development of the Mississippi Valley cannot be despised.

Sinclair Lewis has been still more unsparing, and in a way unbalanced, in his implied criticism in his *Main Street* and *Babbitt*. Yet a product of Main Street, perhaps of the original Main Street, has achieved the greatest national and international success of the age. Charles A. Lindbergh was the son of a Congressman who represented the very section from which Sinclair Lewis himself came, and what is generally considered as the very heart of Main Street. Could any one, under such extraordinary circumstances as have surrounded Lindbergh since the time of his marvellous flight, have carried himself with more poise, self possession, dignity, nay with more real distinction? Albert Edward, the popular Prince of Wales, trained from infancy for just this sort of public attention and acclaim, could not have improved on Lindbergh's bearing through a series of events unparalleled in recent history. One trouble with much of the criticism of America (and this is no doubt true of the criticism of others) is that it is unbalanced. Perhaps unintentionally so, but nevertheless without taking into consideration that America is a large country, covering a wide area and including many people of many antecedents. There is really great need for seeing it whole.

In their book, *The American Mind in Action*, Messrs. O'Higgins and Reede sought to tell us *why* Americans are "the most idealistic and yet the most practical people in the world"; *why* they are "the most prosperous and the most discontented"; *why* they "so often use American bluff". Incidentally, I might remark that they do not tell us *why*—in the words of William Bennett Munro—"despite our monumental power and prosperity, despite our exalted opinions of ourselves politically, not one of the new governments in Europe has seen fit to adopt a single governmental device or method drawn from the practice of the United States."

American bluff is "keeping up a front" as a secure and successful man. What it covers, we are told, is shown by the fact that his *bete noire* is "the yellow streak." He is afraid of his fears—not knowing that fear is universal—and he confuses fear with cowardice. His great social defect, we also hear, is self-consciousness, which is just an instinctive fear founded on the belief that someone else is the better man, and out of this, no doubt, comes the sensitiveness to foreign criticism. Does this explain, however, the reason for the sensitiveness of other nations to criticism? For instance,

the sensitiveness of the French? The English are the only people who do not seem to mind adverse criticism, and rather enjoy being thought to be "duffers" and "muddlers." I am not at all sure, however, that the Englishman is as indifferent as he pretends to be. It has often occurred to me that his attitude in this respect is of the same genus as the so-called American bluff.

Your typical American, these authors assert, may not be able to achieve the larger curiosities of scientific speculation, but he is a famous adept in applying the discoveries of others to practical ends. It was Edison who said, "I have made it a practice never to work on any line not purely practical and useful."

This book is designed as an answer to the questions which the thoughtful American is asking about the phenomena in and around his life. Using their own methods of a certain sort of elementary psycho-analysis, the authors analyze a long series of Americans from Mark Twain to Anthony Comstock, including on the way Margaret Fuller, Emerson, Lincoln, Carnegie, Mark Hanna, P. T. Barnum (who is considered in the same chapter with Comstock). "Freudian portraits", they call them. That may be a correct designation, but they are far more interesting and truly delightful than that which usually passes for Freudianism, and suggest new points from which to view America and Americans.

Another effort to get at the meaning of our country is to be found in Horace M. Kallen's *Culture and American Democracy in the United States*. Raising the questions "What is culture? What is democracy? What effect has alien immigration upon both?" and other pregnant queries, Dr. Kallen comes to original conclusions which undoubtedly are fruitful. He rejects the idea that there is or can be an American race. He holds it undesirable, even were it possible, and denies that there has been, is, or can be an American culture. He joins the clamour of others, as Ernest Gruening—the editor of that clever volume *These United States*—has pointed out, whose bias diametrically opposes him against the "melting pot." This, moreover, he considers exists in the United States "no more or less than in any other country in the world." He views America's population as a medley of many races and cultures, little fused, and all the worse for attempts at "Americanization."

Dr. Kallen's thesis is scarcely borne out by the facts. America is only partly a melting pot, although prior to the recent Johnson Immigration law it was in a fair way to become one. It is predominantly Anglo-Saxon in composition, history, law, literature, and above all, language. As J. D. Whelpley points out in his *British-American Relations*, the records show that about 9,000,000 people

emigrated from England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales direct to the United States in the one hundred years between 1820 and 1919. The records of the early years of that century are necessarily defective, and are an under-statement. Neither do these figures include the people of British nationality who came from the United Kingdom by way of Canada and other British possessions. It is known that over 2,000,000 immigrants have entered the United States from Canada alone, and that all but a very small percentage of these were British. It is not difficult to believe that 12,000,000 or 13,000,000 British citizens left their homes with the intention of making a permanent residence here in the one hundred years ending 1920. A few of these returned to their native land, to remain there. Many of them revisited their old homes, but the vast majority of them took root in the New World and put forth their branches in a purely American environment.

The population of the United States in 1790 was about 4,000,000 and while no figures are available, it would probably be a fair statement that one half of this population was of British origin. The circumstances of the original settlement of the country, the fact that it was a British colony until 1776, and the preponderance of travel between the United States and the United Kingdom would probably warrant an even larger estimate as to the percentage of British in the whole population. In 1920 over twenty-five per cent of the foreign-born whites in the country were from British territory, and it is estimated by competent statisticians that of the present population of the United States more than fifty-five per cent are of British blood.

Under the Johnson Immigration Law of May 19, 1921, the number of aliens admissible in a year is limited to three per cent of the number of the particular nationality in each case resident in the United States as shown by the census of 1910. Under this law the annual quota allowed the British is about 78,000. This is the largest quota allowed to any nationality, and indicates that, according to the census of 1910, there were resident about 2,600,000 aliens still retaining a British nationality, which was necessarily a larger number than that of any other alien citizenship.

Since the Johnson law came into force, emigration from Great Britain, which had fallen off by reason of the war and several other causes since 1914, has increased rapidly, until in 1922 the quota of British allowed to go to the United States was filled in the first ten months of the American fiscal year. The movement of 1923 (the latest date for which I have figures at hand) shows that competition is keen among those emigrating from Great Britain to get

to the United States before the quota for each month is filled, and the pressure upon the gates is such as to indicate a possible annual movement of nearer 200,000 from Great Britain, except for the fact that the limit fixed by law is considerably less than half that number. This increased movement is due to lack of employment in Great Britain, a marked restlessness resulting from war strain, reports of high wages and unlimited employment in the United States, and it has come about in the face of increased restrictions upon travel, both political and economical. Under the Johnson law the British quotas will be relatively larger because they are based on the census of 1890, when the numbers coming in from Great Britain were far larger than those coming from Italy and south-eastern Europe.

Dr. Kallen would seem to recognize these general facts, for he says: "The English stock which settled the country brought with it and preserved unchanged and caused to prosper the spirit of 'English liberty'. It is by virtue of this spirit and its supremacy in America that the miscellany of Europe could become the solidarity of the United States, Americans all, regardless of origin or trend. Its manifestation is free co-operation, based on free individuality. It requires plasticity and a willingness to consult, to compromise, to decide by majority vote. It cannot prevail where minorities are unable loyally to acquiesce in the decision of the majority." Certainly, to adopt again the conclusion of Gruening, the United States is a nation conceived in and reared in an Anglo-Saxon tradition. Environment, circumstances, accretions, early and late, have modified it. This is unalterably history; this our heritage. If, as Dr. Kallen points out, it cannot continue "where minorities are unable loyally to acquiesce", should we then accept as a solution the enthronement of all the dissident minorities, and let the heritage go to ruin? Not justice, not common sense, nor evolutionary or scientific progress would appear to lie that way. Much may ail America, but the regenerative processes must arise from within the national and cultural spirit and conscience of our own country.

America's relation to other countries is bound up with the question of America's character. Her actions have been guided by her character, and her reactions have been controlled by the same influences. These are discussed in both of the books just mentioned, and are considered at length by that stimulating publicist Herbert Adams Gibbons in his *America's Place in the World*, in which he takes up and discusses the cardinal points of the foreign policy of the United States, including European alliances, the Monroe Doctrine, the "Open Door", arbitration and the limitation

of armaments, and examines the possible effect upon these policies of our entry into the League of Nations and our proposed participation in the World Court. He is much more interested in setting forth and discussing fundamental principles of foreign policy than in building up a brief either for or against the League of Nations or the proposal of American intervention in Europe in general. Dr. Gibbons has emphasized the community of problems and therefore of interests of all countries of the two American continents. He believes that the United States needs to exercise great caution to avoid the assumption of moral superiority; and he urges that we should cultivate Latin-America and Canada, with due regard to the natural pride of these countries in their own cultural and political achievements and their jealous care for maintaining their own sovereignty. Among the many books written by Dr. Gibbons on world politics this volume is the first in which he has treated international affairs definitely, exclusively, exhaustively from the point of view of the interests, the opportunities and the obligations of his own country.

He is strongly, yes aggressively, for a strong pro-American policy, against the League of Nations and all foreign entanglements. Our interest, he emphatically declares, is not in any Old World country, nor in Jerusalem. He cannot conceive of a good American citizen with a divided allegiance, cultural or political. No man can serve two masters. It is preposterous,—that is the only word to describe it—for leaders of alien groups in the United States, who intend that those groups shall remain alien, to cry from the housetops that restricting immigration is un-American.

Cavilling at America in this day and generation is not going to help in international relationships. Books like Joad's *The Babbitt Warren* are of no substantial help to a better understanding, and may prove to be a positive detriment at home where people are not aware that satire was intended and are unable to verify the facts. No man, no people, is to be defined in the terms of a single trait. That there is vulgarity in the United States, goes without saying; but is England so free from it that Mr. Joad can represent it as an essential characteristic of America alone? Vulgarity inheres in certain classes wherever found; there's a bit of vulgarity in the most of us, and there must be a considerable streak of it in a man who sees as much of it as does Mr. Joad.

A far more helpful and useful book is André Siegfried's *Les Etats-Unis d'aujourd'hui*, just published in this country by Harcourt Brace & Co., under the title *America Comes of Age*. Siegfried knows his America almost as well as Bryce, who knew it

so well that his criticisms were accepted as those of one of ourselves. He has been in the United States half a dozen times. On his last visit in 1925, he toured nearly every State in the Union on behalf of the *Musee Social* at whose request his book was written. In addition to his academic connection he has, since the armistice, been attached to the French Foreign Office as an economic expert. In this capacity he has taken part in various meetings of the League of Nations and Interallied conferences at Brussels, Barcelona and Genoa.

So well has Siegfried performed his task that Ernest Boyd ranks his work with de Tocqueville's. His experienced and friendly eyes see a grown up America; with an increasing divergence between city and country; still parochial and Puritanical in spirit and legislation, and committed to the worship of prosperity, the high priestess of which may be said to be mass production.

Criticism, honest and frank, designed to help and improve, is highly to be desired. Merely to make fun, or money for the writer, it is to be deprecated. Siegfried, like Bryce, is tremendously interested in mankind, and especially in mankind as found in America. They approached their studies with friendliness and kindness, and so offer striking contrasts to the Dickens of a former generation and the Joads of this. So we find the criticisms of the latter resented and those of the former welcomed and studied.

By far the most illuminating study of America that has recently appeared from the pens of American scholars is the monumental work of the Beards. In *The Rise of American Civilization* we have a truly comprehensive effort to judge just what has been accomplished here in America. They point out in their final chapter how the "machine age", as they call it, has been particularly rich in criticisms, appraisals and prophecies, with constant repetition of the enquiry whether American civilization had not reached its zenith and "made the downward turn toward an order hopelessly mechanical in spirit, devoid of intrinsic capacity for the appreciation of the fine arts, poverty-stricken in creative genius, rough in manner and overbearing in conceit." . . . "Henry Adams saw on the scroll of destiny four frightful choices; the pessimism of Europe's dying civilization, the tyranny of capital, a reaction to mysticism and clerical dominion, or the ceaseless reiteration of the old processes under new guises at a monotonous level."

The Beards answer all this with their concluding words, which can also be made the concluding words of this article:

It is dawn, not the dusk, of the gods.