

The Attitude of America to the War

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(This article, written primarily for the information of the British public, is intensely interesting on this side as giving the considered opinion of a shrewd and unprejudiced observer – Ed.)

I.

The Press and the Public

When the sun-beetle first began to roll up this ball, he never guessed that one day there would be on its surface a political unity so disunited, at least to the superficial observer, as the United States of America. Russia and England possess territories of superior size, but the power is concentrated in the same place as the wealth and intellect. The Englishman in India after fifty years still speaks of home, meaning firstly a certain ancient hall surrounded by a park, with a village whose church has a lychgate, and, secondly, the parish of St. James. The Russian or Tobolsk or Ekaterinoslaw concentrates loyalty and affection on the Czar. But in America there is no center. New York is not even the capitol of its own state. Washington is a city apart, utterly out of touch with the feeling in any one district. It is difficult to give the English mind any idea of the feeling involved, but is if rather as if the King resided, and Parliament met at Bishopstoke. Independent and historical as are England's greatest institutions, they all tend toward London. The metropolis has a string on them. Eton and Harrow must play cricket at Lord's; Cambridge and Oxford must row the Putney-Mortlake course, and no other. The detachment of the archbishops of Canterbury and York from the capital has been

the essential weakness of the Church of England. With these exceptions of the clerical and medical, which has a very vital center at Edinburgh, all other professions must go to London, and the successful man manages to stay there. The others radiate thence. Even such centers as Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Glasgow and Edinburgh draw life from London. It is the financial center of the world. Washington is aloof, a colony in just the same way as Reno, Nevada. The inhabitants are on short lease, like consuls. Nobody really lives there in the same sense as he might live almost anywhere else, and this detachment from the real life of the country has insulated it. This circumstance, more than any other, heaps the responsibility for the utter indifference of the average American citizen to politics, and for the corruption of the latter.

France is a democracy, but the same centralization as in England is apparent on all the more important sides of life. The railway systems all converge on Paris. The Bourse, the university, the government, the art center, the social center, all are in Paris. Consequently when Paris speaks, France acquiesces. Probably France does not care very much what Paris says, but at least there is no independent and opposing current of thought.

It follows that in America the observer is placed at a great disadvantage. In London the expenditure of six pence would make him acquainted with the whole thought of the country. In America the press does not represent the people, or even any section of the people. It exercises no influence at all upon thought. People buy newspapers for amusement; but yellow journalism has achieved its great and glorious task of discrediting itself.

To take a recent example. The efforts of the New York daily press, with one definitely German paper as an exception, have been directed to secure sympathy for the allies. They have earned for them the sobriquet all-

lies. They have stopped at nothing in the campaign of mendacity. They have given prominence to the most ridiculous inventions; they have suppressed the most potent facts. They have falsified truth with shamelessness unequalled in history, and they have even discredited their own war correspondents. And the result has been a steady flow of the tide of public opinion towards Germany.

I must single out the *New York Times* as having published the most infamous leader ever written. It advocates the complete suppression of the right of free speech; any one who disagrees with the *Times* should be in jail. And this is neutrality! This is the land of the free! "My country, 'tis of thee!"

The editor is so blinded by rage that he does not even see that he is sawing off the branch he is sitting on. A newspaper against free speech! It is treason to its own first principle. If the government suppresses the *Fatherland* as suggested, why should not some other government suppress the *Times*?

I was on the platform at the meeting of the "Friends of Peace" at Madison Square Garden. There were many German societies officially represented, but the feeling was not particularly pro-German. But when a speaker wanted to rouse the hundred thousand people present to an absolute fury, he had only to gasp "New York press," and they rose and roared. Such loathing and contempt I have never seen expressed so fiercely. And it must be remembered that these people were the public to whom the press appeals for pennies. The situation is intolerably rotten. I am first of all the friend of Ireland in this war, and after that the friend of France; but the method of her sympathizers makes me vomit. I should like America to insist on the integrity of France – but these English flunkeys are an abomination unto the Lord.

II.

The Hyphenated American

Of these there are three principal kinds: the Irish-American, the German-American, and the Anglo-American. Many other races are, of course, represented, but they have not come to the front in the same way, or kept their nationality. The shrewdness and the courage of the Irishman have won him an unique position in politics and laws; the thrift, foresight and industry of the German have made him supreme in commerce and manufacture. The Anglo-American is not a genuine case of surviving nationality, for the real old English blood is not hyphenated at all. That is the old style American, whether in Boston or Richmond, and he hates England more than the Irish themselves (for the Irishman finds it hard to bear malice). But the real American is brought up on the Declaration of Independence. Few Englishmen have read that remarkable document. It is a standing insult to the ability of Burke, for it is the strongest possible indictment of a whole people! There are twenty nine paragraphs, differing but slightly in the degree of their damnation. The rest of the Declaration of Independence is but exordium to and corollary of this rehearsal of British abominations. And, as with a branding iron, all this is literally burnt into the blood of every American of old stock.

However, in the smartest generally, especially in New York, there is a violence of Anglophobia based on the stinging shame of the fact that English visitors do not consider them gentlefolk. So the schools and colleges do all in their power to turn out "English gentlemen" from such recalcitrant material as is furnished by admixtures of various bloods, principally Portuguese. The result is very satisfactory. It is these good people who are more English than the English, and their comparative success is due to their extravagance of snobbery. Unfortunately, as a class, they are wealthy and

idle, and the British aristocracy – as mirrored by the gutter press – is their constant model in all things. The plain Yankee is a damned good sort, of simple Republican manners, and one can respect and like him, for all his contempt of “effete Europe.” The Southern gentleman is just a gentleman of as distinct yet recognizable a breed as the Indian, Chinese, or Montenegrin gentleman. He is himself, and is not trying to be anybody else. But the Anglo-American is always anxious to wear the same neckties as Lord Flip, and drink the same brands of champagne as the Earl of Flop. He wears evening dress whenever he can, and supports the Broadway chicken upon the Broadway lobster. It is the most vicious and corrupt class in the country, and it thinks itself the salt of the earth in its moments of intoxication. When sober, it climbs desperately after the estate which is the birthright of the poorest country gentleman in England. It is from this class that the noise proceeds, and the passport thereof is that it is bad form to be pro-German.

III. WHAT AMERICA THINKS

The attitude of the real American is very concise. He has a gift of epigram, often expressed in the most pungent slang ever invented in any country in the world. And this is the placard which hangs in thousands of business offices all over America:

“If you want to fight, go to Europe.
If you want to talk war, go to hell.
This place is neutral.”

There was never so clear and so emphatic a definition of a mental attitude. The more you think it over the more you are annoyed at its perfect literary form. It says everything, and not a word is wasted.

IV. WHAT AMERICA FEELS

Since, however, all men must have some sympathy, however remote, with all actualities, there is undoubtedly a certain feeling even among the great silent masses of the people. Taciturn and self-centered, going on their own way with bitter earnestness, they are yet not without great human qualities. These are principally shrewd common sense and a love of fair play. There is a certain hysterical class which reads the papers and is (at least subconsciously) influenced by them; but the members of this class are not in position of responsibility. Men who have won their way in the world have done so by energy and courage, no doubt, but they have also, nearly always, possessed a great sense of actuality. Poverty, or struggle, has taught them to look at facts. Such men were never for an instant deceived by the lies of the press. Every one of them knew of his own knowledge what Germans were like; he did business with twenty of them every day. He saw them steady, sober, thrifty, honest, reliable, and industrious, incapable of aggression, and progressing by dint of attention to business. The attempt to represent them as drunken fiends, lawless, savage, and cowardly, was consequently ludicrous. When the Lusitania sank, he saw the German side of the case instantly. He couldn't see why the hell the durned fools couldn't keep out of the war zone. And the hysterical shrieks of papers notorious for lying headlines, and the most infamous traffic in indecent advertisements, only moved him to scorn. Go to war? Not he. He might sell munitions to the allies; that was business. The Germans might sink the ship; all the better; it meant a repeat order. Hard as nails, you bet your life!

This sentiment was so universal that Bryan, having carefully canvassed opinion all over the West and South, took a chance to resign on a "peace program." And the

story goes that Wilson then checkmated him by beating the sword into a ploughshare, and soaring as gently as any sucking dove in that famous second note to Berlin. We read it with amazement; why on earth had Bryan resigned? It was as war-like as an invitation to dinner! (Well, we shall read the sequel of that story in 1916.) I personally have no doubt that Wilson knows the temper of the country as well as Bryan does, and has deliberately created delay upon delay, and encouraged Berlin in a similar course, in order to allow the few noisy folk who were screaming for revenge for the Lusitania to cool off. No; there is nothing to it.

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