

CHAPTER XI

Isolationism

WHEN WORLD WAR I broke out in 1914, the *Chicago Tribune* announced with considerable pride that it was sending a parcel of reporters to Europe to "cover" the battles and the capitals of the warring nations. This was something new in American journalism. What had constituted foreign news previously were reports of what royal families were doing, affairs in which peeresses were involved, or a "passion" murder. Most of these stories were taken bodily from the European press. In fact, my wife, before she was married, was engaged in getting up a European "letter" for a news agency with the aid of a pair of scissors and a paste pot. *The New York Times*, with some pretensions to internationalism even in those days, ran on an inside page a column entitled "Transatlantic Cable Dispatches to The New York Times"; it usually occupied about a half page and consisted of stories that could well have been lifted from European papers.

The American press did not go to the expense of sending correspondents to Europe because there was little public interest in European affairs, and as for Africa, Asia and even Latin America, these were places one learned about in school geography. The country was isolationist. The people,

judging from the front pages of the city newspapers, were interested in what went on with the neighbors, in local politics, in crop conditions and the weather. When Congress was in session, which was for a few months in the year, some of the debates were accorded prominence, but not too much; type for a three-column headline had not yet been invented.

The war, when we were finally drawn into it, was something of an adventure for most Americans. Three generations of Americans had come and gone since the country had experienced a full-fledged war; the Indian wars and a couple of "punitive" expeditions into Mexico and Central America were of interest only to the professional army, and the contest with Spain was in the nature of an opera bouffe. The war in Europe was the real thing, brought into every home by means of the draft and involving a new instrument of war, the bond. Woodrow Wilson had glamorized the undertaking by dubbing it the "war to end all wars" and the "war to make the world safe for democracy"; this last phrase had all the earmarks of "manifest destiny," of the duty of imposing our brand of democracy on the benighted peoples of Europe, and thus appealed to our missionary zeal. Yet, the general feeling was that once we had licked the Kaiser we could return to our wonted ways which, in sum, meant isolationism.

After the war, as usual, disillusionment set in. It was soon realized that the conquest of Germany did not mean the end of wars, but was probably the prelude to yet another one, and that our brand of democracy did not sit well with other peoples. The opposition in the Senate to Wilson's League of Nations reflected the attitude of the people who

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had had enough of involvement in the tangled mess of European diplomacy and wanted out. For twenty years thereafter pacifism was the ruling passion of the country; in novels, on the stage, in magazine articles and in college lecture halls the theme that war was inexcusable was repeated. The spirit of pacifism was reinforced by a resurgence of American isolationism, the feeling that nothing good could come to us from interfering in European internal matters, and that we would be better off minding our own business. It was this inbred isolationism that confronted Franklin D. Roosevelt when he set out to get us into World War II, and from which he was fortuitously delivered by Pearl Harbor.

Since then, isolationism has been turned (by our politicians, our bureaucracy and their henchmen, the professorial idealists) into a bad word.

And yet, isolationism is inherent in the human make-up. It is in the nature of the human being to be interested first, in himself, and secondly, in his neighbors. His primary concern is with his bread-and-butter problems, to begin with, and then in the other things that living implies: his health, his pleasures, the education of his children, wiping out the mortgage on the old homestead and getting along with his neighbors. If he has the time and inclination for it, he takes a hand in local charities and local politics. If something happens in his state capital that arouses his ire or his imagination he may talk to his neighbors about the necessity of reform; that is, if the reform happens to engage his interests. Taxation always interests him. But, events and movements that occur far away from his immediate circumstances or that affect him only tangentially (like infla-

tion or debates in the UN) either pass him by completely or, if he reads about them in the newspapers, concern him only academically. A Minnesotan may take notice of a headline event in Florida, as a conversation piece, but he is vitally interested in what has happened in his community: a fire, a divorce case, or the new road that will pass through. How many people know the name of their congressman or take the slightest interest in how he votes on given issues?

It has become standard procedure for sociologists and politicians to take opinion polls and to deduce behavior patterns from such data. Yet, it is a fact that the subject matters of these polls do not touch on matters in which the questionees are vitally interested, but are topics in which the pollsters have a concern. Putting aside the possibility of so framing the questions as to elicit replies the pollsters want, the fact is that the pride of the questionees can well influence their answers. Thus, a housewife who has been asked for her opinion on South African *apartheid*, for instance, will feel flattered that she has been singled out for the honor and will feel impelled to give some answer, usually a predigested opinion taken from a newspaper editorial; she will not say honestly that she knows nothing about *apartheid* and cares less. On the other hand, if she were asked about the baking of an apple pie she would come up with an intelligent answer; but the sociologists are not interested in knowing how to bake an apple pie.

The scientist immersed in the laboratory will weigh carefully any question put to him regarding the subject matter of his science and will probably not come up with a yes-or-no answer; but, he is positive that the nation ought to recognize the Chinese communist regime, because he heard

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another scientist say so. The baseball fan who knows the batting average of every member of his team, on the other hand, will denounce the recognition of the regime because he has heard that the "reds" are no good. The student whose grades are just about passing will speak out boldly on the UN, reflecting the opinion of his professor on that organization. Everybody has opinions on international subjects, because the newspapers have opinions on them, and the readers like to be "in the swim." That is to say, interventionism is a fad stimulated by the public press and, like a fad, has no real substance behind it. If a poll were to be taken on the subject, should we go to war, the probability is that very few would vote for the proposition; yet, war is the ultimate of interventionism, and the opposition to it is proof enough that we are isolationist in our sympathies. A poll on the subject of isolationism—something like "do you believe we ought to keep out of the politics of other nations and ought to let them work out their problems without our interference?"—might bring out some interesting conclusions; but the politicians and the energumens of interventionism would prefer not to conduct such a poll. Our "foreign aid" program has never been subjected to a plebiscite.

Isolationism is not a political policy, it is a natural attitude of a people. It is adjustment to the prevailing culture within a country, and a feeling of security within that adjustment. The traditions, the political and social institutions and the moral values that obtain seem good, the people do not wish them to be disturbed by peoples with other backgrounds and, what is more, they do not feel any call to impose their own customs and values on strangers.

This does not mean that they will not voluntarily borrow from other cultures nor that they will surround themselves with parochial walls. Long before interventionism became a fixed policy of the government, American students went to Europe to complete their education and immigrants introduced their exotic foods to the American table. But these were voluntary adoptions, even as we welcomed German and Italian operas and applauded the British lecturers who came here to decry our lack of manners. We certainly enjoyed the bananas and coffee imported from Latin American countries, and, while we might deplore their habit of setting up dictatorships, we felt no obligation to inject ourselves into their political affairs; that was their business, not ours.

This was the general attitude of the American people before the experiment in interventionism known as World War I. Before that event, Woodrow Wilson had taken leave of his senses in backing one revolutionary leader against another in Mexico, and had even sent the marines to support his choice; his excuse for opposing Huerta was that that leader had not been "democratically" elected, overlooking the fact that eighty percent of the Mexicans were simply incapable of making a choice, or of caring about it. From that interventionary exploit we garnered a mistrust of American intentions vis-a-vis Mexico which haunts us to this day. But, Wilson's urgency to introduce "democracy" in Mexico was purely a personal idiosyncrasy, shared by his political entourage but not by the American people. We cared little about which brigand, Huerta or Carranza, got to the top, and were stirred up only by the fact that a

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number of American boys were killed in Mr. Wilson's invasion.

When World War II got going in Europe and it became evident that Mr. Roosevelt was intent on getting us into it, a group of Americans organized the America First Committee for the purpose of arousing the native spirit of isolationism to the point of frustrating his intent. They were for keeping the nation neutral. For various reasons (particularly Pearl Harbor) their plan failed, even though at the beginning they gained the adherence of many Americans. One flaw in their program was a tendency toward protectionism; the anti-involvement became identified with "Buy American" slogans and with high tariffs; that is, with economic, rather than political, isolationism. Economic isolationism—tariffs, quotas, embargoes and general governmental interference with international trade—is an irritant that can well lead to war, or political interventionism. To build a trade wall around a country is to invite reprisals, which in turn make for misunderstanding and mistrust. Besides, free trade carries with it an appreciation of the cultures of the trading countries, and a feeling of good will among the peoples engaged. Free trade is natural, protectionism is political.

The America First Committee's opposition to our entry into the war was based on political and economic considerations. It is a well known fact that during a war the State acquires powers which it does not relinquish when hostilities are over. When the enemy is at the city gates, or the illusion that he is coming can be put into people's minds, the tendency is to turn over to the captain all the powers

he deems necessary to keep the enemy away. Liberty is downgraded in favor of protection. But, when the enemy is driven away, the State finds reason enough to hold onto its acquired powers. Thus, conscription, which Mr. Roosevelt re-introduced at the beginning of the war, has become the permanent policy of the government, and militarism, which is the opposite of freedom, has been incorporated in our mores. Whether or not this eventuality was in Mr. Roosevelt's mind is not germane; it is inherent in the character of the State. Taxes imposed ostensibly "for the duration," have become permanent, the bureaucracy built up during the war has not been dismantled, and interventions in the economy necessary for the prosecution of war are now held to be necessary for the welfare of the people. This, plus the fact that we are now engaged in preparing for World War III, was the net result of our entry into World War II. Whichever side won, the American people were the losers.

Aside from this necessary political consequence of our involvement, there was the further fact that our economy would suffer. More important than the direct effect of increased taxation was the indirect effect of inflation resulting from the sale of government bonds. Political duplicity and dishonesty reached the heights when these bonds were advertised as anti-inflationary. The prospective buyers were assured that their purchases would (a) help win the war, (b) make them a profit, and (c) avoid inflation; a strange appeal to their patriotism, their cupidity and their ignorance. It is true that the "savings" bonds, which could not be sold or borrowed upon, would delay their inflationary effect. But, when the government redeemed them, at the will of the holders or at maturity, and was unable to

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re-sell these bonds to "savers," it would have to resort to borrowing from financial institutions, which would of course demand negotiable securities; these become inflationary. This result could have been anticipated by anyone with a grain of sense; but, during the war this grain was missing and the bonds sold. They sold in spite of an article called, "Don't Buy Bonds," which I published at the time. And the fiscal irresponsibility which the Roosevelt administration practiced before we got into the war was accelerated; it hasn't abated yet.

As isolationism is a natural attitude of the people, so interventionism is a conceit of the political leader. There does not seem to be area enough in the world to satiate his desire to exercise his power or, at least, his influence. Just as the mayor of a town hopes to become governor of his state, a congressman or even president, so does the president or king of a country deem it his duty to look beyond the immediate job of running his country. Necessity limits the interventionary inclination of the head of a small country, unless, indeed, he finds a neighboring small country incapable of resisting his advances. But, given a nation opulent enough to maintain a sizeable military establishment and an adequate bureaucracy, his sights are lifted beyond the borders. To be sure, his interest is always the enlightenment or the betterment of the people over whom he seeks to extend his dominion or influence, never to exploit them. Thus, Alexander the Great offered the benefits of Hellenic civilization to the peoples of Asia, the Roman legions carried *Pax Romano* at the tip of their spears, Napoleon imposed French "liberté, fraternité, égalité" on the peoples of Europe, whether they wanted it or not. Hitler tried to extend the

influence of Aryanism and the late British empire was built on the premise that a taste of English civilization would do the natives good.

"Foreign policy" is the euphemism which covers up this inclination toward interventionism. About the only foreign policy consistent with the natural isolationism of a people would be one designed to prevent interference of a foreign power in the internal affairs of the country; that is, protection from invasion. But, that is too limited in scope to satisfy the cravings of the government of a powerful country. Theodore Roosevelt's foreign policy was avowedly designed to spread among other peoples the benefits of American civilization—even at the end of a Big Stick. Without an income tax, he could do very little beyond the display of naval might to execute this purpose, and the job was undertaken by Woodrow Wilson. It is interesting to note that Mr. Wilson was by persuasion an anti-militarist and an isolationist; yet the exigencies of office induced him to lead the country into war and into the missionary purpose of spreading American democracy far and wide. He failed, partly because the peoples of the world were not willing to adopt the American tradition and partly because he could not break down American resistance to interventionism. It remained for Franklin D. Roosevelt, aided and abetted by a great depression and a great war, to do that. And now that a monstrous bureaucracy with a vested interest in interventionism is in control of our "foreign policy," the nation is committed to a program of interference in the affairs of every country in the world.

Something new has been added to the technique of exporting our culture; instead of sending it abroad at the

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point of a bayonet, we (or rather our bureaucrats) are attempting to bribe, the "underdeveloped" peoples into accepting it. But, these peoples, accustomed as they are to their own traditions, their own customs and their own institutions, seem to be unappreciative of our efforts, and the net result of our "foreign aid" program (aside from supporting a free-spending bureaucracy) is to support the politicians of the recipient countries in a manner of living to which they are not accustomed. The current rationalization of this international dispensation of alms is that it is necessary to prevent the spread of communism. But, communism is a way of life imposed on a people by their politicians, and if these, for their own purposes, choose communism, our "aid" simply enables them to make that choice. Meanwhile, the peoples of the world remain impervious to our brand of civilization; their loyalty to their own traditions is unimpaired by our largess; they remain isolationist. Adding insult to injury, they resent our intrusion into their manner of living, call us "imperialists" and impolitely ask our agents to go home.

In short, they ask us to return to that isolationism which for over a hundred years prospered the nation and gained for us the respect and admiration of the world.