

# Some Soils and Seeds of Isolationism

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THE recent nation-wide survey conducted by the magazine *Fortune* reports that 56.6% of those questioned would like to see the United States take an active part in a postwar international organization, with a court and police force. The Gallup Poll has also recently sampled public opinion on the question, "Should the countries fighting the Axis set up an international police force after the war is over to try to keep peace throughout the world?" and found 74% responding in the affirmative, 14% negative, and 12% expressing no opinion.

On the strength of heartening straws like these as to the direction in which the wind of American opinion is at the moment blowing, we have been repeatedly assured of late by various editorial writers and columnists that isolationism in America is dead—or at least henceforth politically negligible. With equal plausibility might a city man conclude, when he sees the weeds and thistles cut down by the farmer's scythe, that they have been permanently disposed of; but the seeds of next year's thistles and weeds may meanwhile be blowing about that same hay-field. With similar wishful thinking might the friends of a sufferer from hay fever hope that a shift of wind or an early frost had brought him lasting relief: but the

victim himself knows only too well that the next day or the next season will bring back the pollen to which he is allergic, to plague him once more.

Writing in the *New York Times* on C. J. Hambro's "How to Win the Peace," Allan Nevins shrewdly remarked: "Isolationism lurks just under the surface in America and other countries." It is a just recognition of the fact that while the isolationist state of mind is powerfully reinforced and influential in the United States, it is an elementary characteristic of human nature everywhere. The instinct to protect one's home and neighborhood first, and to feel a lessening responsibility as the circle around that natural center widens, is by no means limited to Americans. Some of us will hardly forget the newspaper poster that we read all over London in the fateful days just before August 1, 1914. In the capital that then was more sensitive than any other to world events, and among a people more conscious than any other modern nation of their worldwide relationships, who have once and again proved their readiness to meet their international responsibilities at any cost to themselves, there appeared on every street-corner the persistent slogan of provinciality and irresponsibility—"To Hell with Serbia." It was

a British public man who pointed out that the very phrase "splendid isolation" is a bequest to our generation, not from the American but from the British political history of the nineteenth century.

This very human propensity to the near and the self-centered view has been reinforced among us Americans by a complex of factors that are deep-rooted in our history, our geography, and the most painful experiences of our own generation. It is the purpose of this article to locate some of these factors that have made American life a fertile soil for isolationism and international irresponsibility; and to identify some of the seeds, blown far and wide upon the winds of this present storm, that threaten to reproduce once more a bitter harvest from that soil. What seeds of a better future may also be sown with good hope and courage in that same soil, and what more fruitful harvest for our children after us may yet be produced by the labor of man and the blessing of God, it lies beyond the limits and the province of this article to consider.

#### *Our Historical Roots*

It must never be forgotten that through more than 300 years, America has been settled and developed by successive generations of newcomers from overseas, who dared the stormy North Atlantic because they had good reasons to leave Europe behind, and were determined to make a new start in a different land. Some of them came to escape oppression; more, to find racial and religious freedom in a new country; most, to "seek their fortune" in a land of larger and more accessible economic opportunity. It was inevitable under these conditions that they should bequeath to their descendants, not only the nostalgia for the land of their birth that is so evident in the journals of the Pilgrim Fathers, but also some sense of discontinuity and emancipation from the Old World.

Many of these newcomers had reasons aplenty for distrust and ill will toward their European homelands. The Irish immigrants, who through their multiplying descendants have had so powerful an influence upon American political activities and attitudes, spread through our cities and laboring groups a distrust and bitterness toward England that infect our relations with Great Britain to this day; and they have found willing listeners among every generation of Americans who have not altogether forgotten about 1776 and 1812—or who know a little about India today. The children of the Germans who came over after the ill-fated revolution of 1848, had reasons to try to forget as well as to remember the Fatherland. Americans of Jewish descent have set their faces toward a New World of lessened prejudice and increased opportunity—and their backs toward lands of unhappy memories in Eastern Europe.

The refugees from Nazi oppression who have come to us during the last ten years are an accentuated contemporary recapitulation of motives and attitudes that have been at work through three centuries of immigration to America. In this psychological sense, the historical orientation of the mind of the New World toward the Old is a continuing tension between kinship and alienation; and it will take something more than spasms of argument or appeal, to swing the balance decisively toward understanding and cooperation.

These newcomers in a strange land speedily found their hands and hearts very much occupied with the settling and development of the richest part of a new continent. Successive generations of their children, still moving westward, found that "the world was all before them where to choose"; and while personal and family ties carried their letters and often their surplus earnings back across the Atlantic, the urge both of ambition and opportunity kept their attention chiefly in the other direction. Problems aplenty began to develop with the opening up of a new continent rich in natural resources, and with the inevitable competition of ambitious groups and individuals to "get ahead" where the prizes were so large. But if the pioneering American mind has been slow to realize the social issues involved in its westward push across the continent, it has been even slower to turn and face its own inexorable involvement in the unsolved problems of "the pit whence it was digged."

Hence, in part at least, the paradoxical combination of the pioneer's initiative and self-confidence toward the issues and tasks of the moving frontier, with an adolescent inexperience and self-distrust in relation to the complexities of the Old World. The cartoons in "The World's Greatest Newspaper" which steadily represent Uncle Sam to Middle Westerners as resourceful enough when he faces west toward the making of his own future, but as an "Innocent Abroad" whenever he sits down to play the game of diplomacy with the sharks and sharpers of Europe, both express and impress a state of mind which has been moulded by the preoccupations of American history. It is not without significance that both before and since Pearl Harbor, American public opinion has been more positive, resolute, and unanimous about its relations around the Pacific, than about its policy toward Europe. We went into this war more united than about any war in our history, partly because we got in by way of the Pacific rather than the Atlantic. Along the latter route, it is at least possible that the "interventionists" might still be arguing with the "isolationists."

These predispositions of our earlier history have been reinforced by the results of our first large-scale involvements overseas. Our intervention in Cuba

and the Philippines at the turn of the century troubled the consciences of the "anti-imperialists," who sensed some of the temptations and dangers that would be involved. Now the Islands that we undertook to defend until the time of their promised independence, have been temporarily wrested from our hands by the invader. Our final involvement in the First World War provoked a far deeper and stronger reaction after the victory of 1918. In a recent article on "The Heritage of Wilson," Walter Lippmann has analyzed both the extent and the vehemence of what he calls a "great revulsion of feeling." "It was a revulsion against the war, against all that Wilson had stood for, against our Allies, against armaments, alliances and strategic defenses—against every element of a sound national policy."

#### *"Philanthropic Crusade"*

This revulsion was due primarily, Lippmann thinks, to Wilson's failure to make clear to his fellow-countrymen why they were involved in that conflict. He presented it to them as a "philanthropic crusade," rather than as a defense of the vital securities of the Western Hemisphere. When Wilson brought home from Paris "the bad treaty and the good league," trusting in the virtues of the latter to revise the vices of the former, he found the country less and less disposed to join the league which was to enforce such a treaty. With that swift swing of the pendulum to which the volatile American temperament is particularly susceptible, the mood of the nation swung over from crusading idealism to suspicious irresponsibility. Disappointment over the results of our national adventure combined with an uneasy conscience over our own run-out on the problems of the peace to turn what had been pride in our share in a great victory into disillusionment and cynicism over the results of all alliances and all wars. We became hyper-critical of our recent allies, at the very moment when we went blind both to our immediate responsibilities and to our long-time interests. Partisan and personal enmities reinforced these reactions to motivate one of the least creditable periods in American history. As Mazzini put it, "The morn of victory" once more proved "more dangerous than its eve." The Great Depression, following ten years after the Armistice as the economic aftermath of so much destruction and overstrain, found the American people with no intellectual or moral convictions about the meaning or necessity of the conflict to enable them to bear its heavy costs without resentment or despair.

The period between the two World Wars has been confused and obscure for most of us who have lived through it, and we begin to realize that historians will need decades and perhaps generations of perspective before they can order and appraise the cross-

currents that have complicated it. It is already evident, however, that one marked characteristic of the American mind has during this period made it a fertile soil for isolationist irresponsibility: our susceptibility to over-simplifications. Armament-makers and propaganda campaigns have indeed bedeviled international relations through this critical period, and economic rivalries doubtless even more: but none of these is so exclusive and self-sufficient a cause for wars as many Americans have supposed. The choice between war and peace, or for that matter between "isolationism" and "interventionism," as Drucker has pointed out in his important book, *The Future of Industrial Man*, has as a matter of fact not lain so largely in our own hands to decide, as we had assumed: for we were already inextricably involved in the processes and fate of what has already become "One World" whether we knew it or not. But meanwhile most of us had become fluent partisans of our own pet over-simplification, taking refuge from the grim realities of the complicated situation that confused and puzzled us, in some ivory tower of abstractions. For many of us, isolationism rationalized into irresponsibility, our own inner uncertainties about a situation with which we did not know how to deal.

#### *A Race Between Education and Catastrophe*

Here then, in old habits and preoccupations of thought, in more recent disappointing experiences and over-simplified explanations of them, are some of the factors that have made the American mind, especially in those sections of the country where going relations with Europe and Asia are least frequent and immediate, a fertile soil for isolationism. This does not mean that no other seeds will grow fruitfully in that same soil. The appearance of Mr. Willkie's *One World*, and still more the extent to which it is being bought, read, and discussed, are heartening evidences to the contrary. But it does mean that these same influences will continue to be strong among us, in the future as in the past; that the "cultural lag" of which we have heard so much, is liable to be the more marked when world-shaking events are moving so fast; and that here again the unknown future looks like "a race between education and catastrophe." Those of us who remember only too well the unforeseen and perhaps unpredictable somersaults of the American mind and mood after 1918, will be the more chary of overconfident predictions as to what our fellow-countrymen, and we ourselves, will do and think and feel after that "morn of victory" which our own generation's experience has already shown us to be "more dangerous than its eve."

Meanwhile however certain seeds are being widely sown in this same soil, which we do well to watch if we are concerned with future harvests. Some of

these are being scattered far and wide, often from unknown origins, by the strong winds of wartime: but others are being deliberately and methodically sown in the interest of a calculated crop.

### *Political Instability*

Typical of the latter are the political calculations which already begin to look, not only to 1944, but far beyond. The strong political enmities of our time, which all of us discover not far below the surface even of our wartime unanimities, are only partly personal in their motivation—though that part seems to some of us more bitter than any we can remember in our life-time. They are at least as much group-social, produced by the far-reaching changes taking place in our social order, and reflected quite as much in the obvious “class-consciousness” of the metropolitan suburb, as in any working-class neighborhood. These political tensions make strange bed-fellows: as witness the pre-war partnership between pacifists whose religious convictions impelled them to political activity against any risk of war, and isolationists seeking support against the policies of the Administration. The recent poll conducted by *Fortune*, already referred to, plainly indicates that we are heading into a period of marked political instability. 64.8% of those questioned favor the President’s re-election for a fourth term, provided the war is still on; but 59.2% will oppose his re-election if the war is over. Such a turnover of 24% would indicate that in one of the most critical periods not only of American but of world history, the political loyalties of nearly a quarter of our electorate (a proportion much larger than that which determines most elections), will be decided sheerly by the duration of the war.

In such a period of probable unbalance and instability, the temptation upon party leaders to gamble for political control will be very great. Disingenuous arguments, designed to befuddle the minds of confused voters while their moods are being channeled to reinforce or support quite other and unacknowledged designs, may win high prizes in such a time—as the recent political history of Chicago and the present political omens in the Middle West plainly indicate. The recent preposterous suggestion of the *Chicago Tribune* that the Dominions and other constituent parts of the British Commonwealth come into the United States on the same footing as any of our 48 states, was not simply one more illustration of its favorite sport of slapping at the British face, which it enjoys even more than pulling the Russian beard, and almost as much as its daily chipping down of the stature and competence of our present American leadership. It sounds very much like the proposal of a spurious internationalism intended to flatter American patriotic pride, and to

clear the way by its very impracticability for a return either to thorough-going isolationism, or if possible to a high-powered postwar American imperialism—which will not even be *Anglo-American* if the *Tribune* can help it!

### *Imperialism Is Disastrous to Peace*

At this point Christians who are working and praying for “a just and durable peace” carry a grave responsibility to see that the present central position of our own country in the winning of the war, does not become a cover for an attempt to dictate the peace in the interest of any imperialism—including our own. That way lies disaster once more for all our human hopes. Many who have not always agreed with the editorial policy of the *Christian Century*, will recognize the timeliness of its warning in its editorial of March 17 on “The New Isolationism”:

“Any honest concern to keep the United States from going isolationist after the war needs to start with the question, What is the nature of the isolationism which actually threatens to control this country’s postwar policies? . . . *It is the isolation of a new imperialism.* It is a belief that the United States can guarantee itself against again becoming involved in other people’s wars only by building its armed forces to unchallengable strength, and taking over the rule of the world. It is the isolation of a nation which, in what it would regard as a measure of self-defense, could dream of putting the rest of the world in its p’ace and keeping it there.”

On this, as on all issues of the postwar world, the voice of American soldiers and sailors as they return to civil life will be weighty, if not decisive. Our political history after both the Civil War and the Great War has plainly shown that; and the number of men we are putting into uniform to win this war emphasizes it. It is of course too early to tell what these millions of men will be thinking and feeling when they come home again; but some of the straws in the wind from the camps, while heartening to those who fear an armed-to-the-teeth American imperialism policing the world by the right of its own big stick, are sobering to those who fear a sudden relapse once more into irresponsibility.

In the *New York Times* magazine for May 2, Drew Middleton of their European staff contrasts the constant discussions he has found going on among British and French troops in North Africa about the future both of Europe and the world, with a “lack of interest in the present or the future” which he finds widespread among our soldiers.

“Our Army, unexcelled in bravery and ingenuity, . . . is neither politically mature like the British Army nor politically fanatic like the Germans. . . .

“The average American soldier in the European

and African theatres has a single peace aim: To get home to his job and his family and forget about the rest of the world and the war. . . . This burning desire to return home is not limited to Americans by any means. . . . But only among our own people, most of whom have had more formal schooling than their allies or enemies, does this reporter encounter the idea that the war is a tremendous football game, and that, somehow, after it is over and won, the soldiers can forget the war and the conditions which caused it. They want to go back to 'the same kind of world' they knew in 1939. Very few of them realize that it can never be the same kind of world again. . . . No one has told them that although they win the war they can lose the peace by indifference and complacency."

One of my brother-ministers in Chicago, who saw active service himself in the last war, has just returned from two lengthy speaking trips in Middle Western Army camps, under the auspices of the National Conference of Jews and Christians. He told me that he had made a special point of chatting with the men by the hour, individually and in groups. He said he found no real enthusiasm anywhere for the war, in spite of the effort of some chaplains to work up a crusading zeal: it is in the men's own eyes a tough and dirty job that simply has to be done—and the quicker the better. He found many of them tired of it already; and added that they would be feeling much more tired of it before they get home. His report coincided strikingly with the remark of one of my colleagues who has visited many camps as a counsellor; that he was surprised to find how many of the men had very little idea as to what the war is all about.

On this point a chaplain in active service writes:

"The extent of the Service Man's longing to be out of uniform and back into civilian life is largely unrecognized by those not in uniform. . . . For the man in the Army or the Navy, the ultimate ends for which America is fighting recede gradually into the background. The one thing of which he dreams is when it will be over and he can forget the whole sorry interlude. Any idea of building a better world is shortly replaced in the soldier's mind by the idea of getting home and taking up again the life he used to live. The belief that American soldiers or sailors are fighting for the principles outlined in the Atlantic Charter, and that they will return singing its praises and insisting that its terms be carried out in the peace simply isn't true. The vast majority of the

men in uniform will return with but one desire: to get out of uniform and not be bothered further. The influence of that attitude is a factor that will have to be counted upon in the postwar settlement."

#### *Duty of the Christian Church*

These four reports, from widely separated areas and by very different witnesses all at firsthand, agree so largely as to the dominant concerns in the minds and hearts of the men in uniform who must and will win the military victory, that no thoughtful American can miss their relevance to the future of his country and his generation. Calculating politicians are counting on this mood of the returning soldier to sweep them and their party into postwar power: doubtless that is one reason why Westbrook Pegler is so sure that American voters will repudiate the Four Freedoms after the war is over. It is certainly not for any civilian who realizes his debt and that of his children to the men in uniform, and who has not shared in the experiences that so naturally produce this dominant mood, to sit for a single moment in judgment on it or on them.

Plainly it is part of the responsibility of the Christian Church, and of its ministers, both at home and in the armed services, to understand this mood and to keep close contact with the men in whom it registers part of the terrible price of war and cost of victory. Perhaps it is too much to expect that men who win the war with their own hands and hearts and life-blood, shall also win the peace with their minds and wills: perhaps, in any fair division of labor, that is not the least responsibility of the civilian in a democracy during and after a great war. In any case it is part of the task of the Christian Church to interpret them each to the other—the sacrifice of the soldier and the trusteeship of the civilian—and to lead them into closer partnership under the guidance and the providence of God. The soil of the postwar world, and especially its mind and heart, is already being sown thick with seeds of evil. The kind of world our children are to live in, will be determined in large part by those who with foresight and persistence and humility sow seeds of good as deep and far as their hand can reach; and then in hope and faith and prayer, entrust the result to the Lord of the harvest.

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#### **Author in This Issue**

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