North American: 1—Composition of Place

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The English visitor, returning from America, seems rarely to have found much to praise. Dickens, Trollope, Kipling—to mention only the Victorian big guns—cast a dyspeptic glance on the continent and found it wanting. 'Hell with the lid off', was Dickens' judgment on Pittsburgh, and Kipling found little sign of gracious living in New York.

Travellers, it is true, can always find some evidence to confirm their own prejudices, and the Americans—in this, as in all else, a generous people—are liberal in providing it. Thus, innumerable films have prepared one for the usual Mid West town, but it is still a surprise to see it articulated, to realize that the image is not a Hollywood set inspired by a reading of Sinclair Lewis. A sort of Slough extending to infinity: it can underline the story of the man arriving at an American airport late at night, who, having booked in at the universal convention hotel, had to telephone room service in the morning to discover where he was. But generalizations of this sort are singularly unfaithful to the essential American fact. The Main Street snapshot, with its drive-in cinema and its ten-cent store, is as misleading as the British Tourist Board's advertisements suggesting that England is all cottages with roses round the door.

To begin with, the geography is stupendous, and a certain uniformity in hideousness where towns have grown up in a hurry is only a smudge on a map that is as marvellous as it is vast. You are never really prepared for this infinitude of shape and texture—the tropical or the glacial, the bleak white-boarded New England villages in autumn or the silent adobe pueblos in the perennial New Mexican sun, the swamps of Louisiana or the ultimate loneliness of the high Sierras. The outline of a map that unites these different lands and latitudes and names them all 'United States' is as real—and also as limited—as the political unity that transcends an infinite variety of origins and local loyalties.

This is an elementary truth, no doubt, but one which only experience

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1962.tb06171.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

can properly convey. What unites is an idea, and often that idea is very inarticulately expressed; what divides, or rather what differentiates, is a history. For America is a union of States whose sovereignty, surrendered on issues that are of national concern, remain entrenched at the important levels which touch the daily life of the American people. It is, for instance, exasperating, but salutary, to learn how arbitrary can be the operation of daylight saving—varying not only from State to State, but sometimes from county to county, with the railways stubbornly adhering to standard time, the airlines using local time, with the visitor left humbled, if not left behind. 'What is your policy, Mr Senator?', a reporter asked a candidate in a Mid West election campaign. 'Hands off McCoskie Boulevard', was the answer. It is a faithful reflection of the realities of much American political life. The outraged English liberal who asks why 'Government' doesn't do this or that in an American community has much to learn.

Perhaps the best clue to understanding is still the local newspaper, and America has no other sort. Even the writ of the *New York Times* runs only a very short way west. And, whether it be Boston or Las Vegas, Pittsburgh or Mobile, the headlines for the most part remain sturdily local. You will read of an impending probe into the police; the school board will have resigned and doubts are being cast on the elections—whether for mayor or judge or jailor. This is not to say that national issues don't matter or that American responsibilities to the world are ignored. Nowhere, one supposes, are the great issues of our time presented in so direct and personal a way. The rush to build air-raid shelters, the daily stories of radiation rates and hazards are in a sense the reduction to an intelligible level of the issues that divide the world. But the frenzied interest in local politics, the resistance to federal claims in areas traditionally sacrosanct to the States or to private initiative, must be seen as an affirmation of what is essential to the American idea. The super-market and the coast-to-coast television show may seem to have destroyed the world of Will Rogers and the regional jokes. But the television news will begin with what is happening down the road, and calamities elsewhere must await their turn. The differences, say, between Wisconsin and Alabama are at least as real and as impelling as those between nations who have inherited a common sense of the law and the institutions it exists to defend. No useful discussion of racial segregation, for instance, can even begin unless this is realized.

There is, then, a necessary effort of the imagination to be made, and

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that is often uncongenial to the English enquirer who can be ludicrously *impervious to the normative effect of history on a people's attitudes.* Whether it be college football or city elections, newspapers or gambling laws, he is inclined to be exasperated—and too often he has scarcely heard of President Andrew Jackson. For Jacksonian democracy is based, as Professors Nevins and Commager explain in their *Pocket History of the United States*, on 'the Western faith that the common man is capable of uncommon achievement . . . that an upstanding man who could command a militia company, run a plantation, and make a good stump speech was fitted for almost any office'. And the corruption, which, if the newspapers and local jokes are to be trusted, seems endemic in the administration of many communities, is perhaps the price that has still to be paid for this lively sense of the worth of the local man, who is too often the product of political manoeuvre that in origin was concerned to defend the rights of the citizens, who, knowing a man might name him as their representative for any office at all.

The widespread opposition to any extension of federal control, especially in the field of the social services—backed by the formidable resources and ruthless propaganda of such bodies as the American Medical Association—has its roots in this almost instinctive suspicion of Washington's intentions. Better, one is often told, to tolerate a measure of graft or manipulation here or there than to surrender to the octopus hold of 'socialization'. And here, as so often, American rhetoric enters to confuse the issue. 'Freedom', 'the truths we hold', 'democracy' itself: they are passionately defended but not always well defined. In talking to some of the organizers of the Peace Corps one suggested that a crucial difficulty might be that these young and dedicated Americans should find themselves confronted in Cambodia or Ecuador by the informed anti-American, armed with plentiful details of injustice and discrimination not only tolerated but defended by important elements of American opinion. The hard fact is—and American intervention, with such generosity, on behalf of undeveloped countries, brings it into sharp focus—that justice is indivisible and it, too, must begin at home. The passionate concern for a community's right to determine its own ways can't much longer be an excuse for perpetuating abuses.

For a change is certainly coming, and, despite some initial setbacks, the Kennedy administration may be expected to extend the areas of federal subsidy and control in the interest of the common good. The plan for federal medical aid for the aged implies more than a remedy

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for a glaring social hardship. And this its opponents well realize. The issue of federal aid to education is an even more striking illustration of the strains in allegiance that even an enlightened proposal of this sort can create. The Catholic bishops, for the most part, had traditionally opposed any form of federal aid for education—indeed, some had publicly stated that they would refuse it if it were offered—on the grounds that this would mean Government control in an area which should be free of it.[1] As Bishop Wright of Pittsburgh has pointed out, the controversy is not a religious one at all: it is, in the strict sense of the word, political and reflects strands of opinion on a recurring theme in American life, namely the limits proper to federal intervention.

That, too, is why the distrust of 'socialization', which for many Americans is identified with at least the beginnings of Communism, is not merely the expected reaction of Conservative opinion. It does reflect a genuine fear that the basis of American democracy is being threatened. And the fact that such organizations as the John Birch Society exploit this fear for their own purposes must not distract one from the reality of a division of functions within the American community—a conception which is of course quite central to the whole meaning of the American Constitution. But evolution is certainly the mark of human societies, and it is ironical that the revolutionary roots of American history—and the constitution that embodies them—should be regarded by so many Americans as having little bearing on the much greater revolution that our own times have brought about. Jefferson would certainly not have welcomed the vast growth of central government and the bureaucracy it inevitably creates. But one may suppose that he would have welcomed even less an attitude of fossilized indifference to the demands of a complex modern society, the sophisticated sort of Know-nothingness that opposes measures of social justice by calling them socialism and so to be condemned.

The hopeful thing is that Americans are increasingly aware of the need to combat the weaknesses in their own society. Nowhere indeed is self-searching so constant and so sincere. The report of President Eisenhower's committee on 'national goals', endorsed by the present

[1]The subsequent claim that, if aid were given to public schools, it should in equity be available to parochial schools as well, by no means represents the unanimous opinion of the American bishops. One Mid West bishop remarked to me that it would be 'a moral disaster' if his people did not have to go on making real sacrifices to keep open their schools. 'It has made them what they are, the most generous body of laymen in the Catholic world, who appreciate what they have because they have earned it by their own efforts'.

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administration, is in that respect remarkable. Here, without any sort of bombast, is a programme that is almost touchingly idealistic. It is surrounded by a good deal of professorial rhetoric, of course, but no other country, one imagines, could have officially sponsored so critical a survey of a nation's true responsibilities. It is by bringing the weight of informed opinion to bear on levels that can be immediately affected—and there is plenty to be done for housing, schools, the social services within the existing local structure—that progress will come. The substitution of a universal bureaucracy for the autonomy of the States could certainly create fresh problems, and grave ones at that.

It may be too soon, for instance, to speak of the end of Tammany Hall, but at least an increasing minority is no longer willing to allow a great city to be ruled as though it were a frontier-town, at the mercy of political hucksters and the patronage they command. And, however green the memory of Honey Fitz or Mayor Curley may be among the Boston Irish—and however ready a nostalgic tolerance may be to excuse the moral schizophrenia of their politics—there are plenty of signs, of which the operations of the Urban Renewal Authority in Boston is but one (with a priest, Mgr Francis Lally, as its chairman to set a notable—and universally acknowledged—example of service to the community), that the old days of good-natured graft are ending. This does not mean that local loyalties are growing less: but it does mean that the newer generation is weary of the old fixing and fun.

This is evident everywhere, from Chicago—where Mayor Daley is beginning (with the help of a fearless Commissioner) the herculean task of cleaning up a notoriously corrupt police force—to Atlanta, and the ease with which the racial integration of the schools was accomplished thanks to a careful plan which deliberately invoked the responsible help of the best elements in the community. These are but beginnings, but they are important indications of the genius of the American people for learning the lessons provided by their own history.

And it is specially necessary for Europeans to realize that such 'domestic' issues as these are vital for the health of American life and are organically related to American responsibilities abroad. In the old isolationist days, of course, such issues dominated all else, and they are very important still. But now that America has emerged on the stage of world affairs, and has accepted with such amazing generosity the burdens such a position involves, it is easy to forget the *fact* of Maine or Nevada and easy to ignore the essential role that the States still have in determining the America that now champions the survival of the West.

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What happens at the local level has profound implications for what happens in the world at large. A truly democratic scrutiny and control of local government, a determination to remove the abuses which the forthright tradition of the frontier and state rights has allowed, a wider realization of the social responsibility of the community in a rapidly changing society—all this is highly relevant to the impact of America on the world. When an African U.N. representative is turned out of a Howard Johnston restaurant in the South, a 'diplomatic incident' is created and apologies are forthcoming. But is justice being done? At a Trappist monastery in the South I met a negro who had been an officer in the Air Force and had ended his service with the highest possible qualifications, both of character and of technical skill as a pilot. He had since tried to get employment as a pilot in twenty civil airlines and had everywhere failed. He had travelled to the monastery on a Greyhound bus and wore a simple placard round his neck. It said 'I am not a Freedom Rider. But am I free?' Such an incident, and there are hundreds of them, will soon be known in Ghana or in Guinea. Even the beginnings of a change in the South means much more than the ending of a social problem there. It is in a real sense the test of the sincerity of American aims everywhere.

It cannot come at once, but come it must, and in the meantime a quite special weight of responsibility falls on those who are concerned with shaping opinion. Here the impact of the Catholic Church, however ambivalent in the past on some social issues, is everywhere emerging as courageous and consistent. One is told, of course, that the John Birch Society has a majority of Catholic members; and the Brooklyn *Tablet* certainly continues as before. But such journals as *Commonweal* and *America*, and such diocesan weeklies as the Boston *Pilot* and the *Pittsburgh Catholic*, have an influence out of all proportion to their circulations—which, by English standards in any case are remarkable. A later article will attempt to estimate the Church's position in contemporary America: here it is enough to say that the weight of Catholic social teaching is at last being felt on such serious issues as labour relations, racial justice and social welfare instead of being dissipated, as so often before, on trivialities of local grievance or the crude witch-hunting associated with the late Senator MacCarthy.

In the meantime, for one traveller at least, as the impressions of seven months of travel through much of the United States recede into the selective categories of memory, America means so much more than the sum of its parts—though that itself, of course, is a formidable piece of addition.

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