

America's Bicentennial Spirit - Going Back to What?

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With the approaching bicentennial of their independence, Americans must be deeply concerned about the present difficulties facing their nation and the effect of these upon their destiny in the next hundred years. The July 4th celebration will undoubtedly involve complex emotions: a mingling of joy, gratitude and pride on the one hand and disappointment, doubt and humiliation on the other.

I do not mean to say that Americans have become pessimistic. By nature Americans are optimistic, positive and active. They cannot be pessimistic even if they want. However, they are less confident in their power, their influence in the world and their own destiny. Although they are still courageous and creative, they are more sober and prudent than they were. It is natural that Americans are rethinking and re-evaluating the spirit of their founding fathers and especially the thoughts and ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence. Without doubt, it is a wonderful document, a masterpiece of highest intelligence, representative not only of the American colonies but of the entire Western civilization; it became the fountain of energy for the American people. With a spirit of faith and zeal for liberty, the United States was able to form a great nation out of heterogeneous races, cultures and religions. With this spirit and faith the Americans were able to expand in the world spiritually and materially. Because of this spirit and faith in liberty Americans have been loved and respected in the free world. Therefore it is more than understandable that Americans, faced with many difficulties at present, are called upon to return to the spirit of their founding fathers. The question is whether going back to the ideals of the founding fathers would truly revitalize the American spirit and strengthen the nation. Before we give an answer to this question we must first reconsider and re-evaluate the importance of the United States in the world, with special attention to her relationship to Japan.

Nominally the United States is one of more than one hundred sovereign states in the world and legally her position is exactly equal to all other nations large or small. In reality, the United States is not only the leader but the defender of the free world. However, she no longer holds the monopolistic power in the world that was hers in the period following World War II. She does not even have dominant power. In international politics she must co-operate with other nations; otherwise her position in the world will be isolated and her prestige will be jeopardized. In spite of these changes, the United States is still the number one world leader and, more significantly, the defender of the free world. If the United States collapses the entire free world will collapse.

In view of this, we can see that Japan is virtually defenseless. The power and prestige of the United States in the world is an absolute condition of Japan's existence. Unfortunately, Japanese people are very slow to accept this reality. However, the American retreat from the Indo-Chinese peninsula unintentionally brought our people face to face with this cold reality; even the socialists who had advocated the immediate abolition of the Security Treaty with the United States have begun to moderate their policy. In other words Japan has gradually come to realize that she is heavily dependent upon the United States. The destiny of the United States is her destiny also. If she falls Japan will fall.

It is ironical that Japan, once the most stubborn enemy of the United States, who fought her even after

Germany had been defeated, is now so heavily dependent upon the United States. The explanation for this development can be found in the change that occurred in the political structure of the middle size powers. England has become a secondary power, and so have France, West Germany and Italy. All of them, great powers before the War, have fallen into second place. On the other hand, the Soviet Union, the United States of America and China, all of which possess vast territory and large populations, have become super-states. However, Western Europe, still divided and constituted of sovereign states, does have a common cultural heritage and is now organized as the EEC. It is not an accident or a temporary incident. This area was once called "Christendom," and this title is much older and more important than the title "Europe." Therefore, there is a great likelihood that the area which is now organized as the EEC will gradually be consolidated as a political union; then it will become a force comparable to the United States, the Soviet Union and China. The other area, the so-called Third World, is still undeveloped and unstable. Although it can disturb peace, it is not yet in a position to contribute to world peace.

Japan is the only developed country which is not a super-state and which is unlikely to be a part of super-states. There are only two alternatives for Japan, one of which is to be absorbed by either of the Communist powers, the Soviet Union or China. It is unlikely that the Japanese are willing to subject themselves to Communism; they prefer to belong to the free world, continuing to take an active part in it. However, Japan is militarily weak, and if either one of the big Communist countries is determined to invade Japan she can do so without much difficulty. Perhaps both China and the Soviet Union are unwilling to undertake such a venture, first because it is expensive and second because it may disappoint the people who still think the Communists are peace loving people. They prefer a "peaceful revolution" in Japan, and they are confident that it is possible if they wait.

What is it that they are awaiting? They are awaiting the day that the United States totally withdraws from Asia. They are realists. They know how Japanese psychology would react if the United States withdraws. Perhaps they know us better than we know ourselves. We are strong if we are supported by some authority, but weak and almost helpless if we are left without the support of any authority. We fought courageously against Americans when we were acting under the authority of the Emperor. When the Emperor told us to surrender we obediently surrendered, and wholeheartedly co-operated with a new authority -- the occupation forces. We adopted an American made constitution and democracy. We admired it and we are still admiring it. Once the Emperor was "sacred and inviolable;" now the constitution and democracy are "sacred and inviolable." Most Japanese people are quite unconscious of their own psychology and perhaps the majority of them think the constitution and democracy made in America will be as everlasting as they thought our semi-theocratic government under the Emperor would be. We need a revolutionary change in our psychology.

As long as the United States remains in Japan we feel quite free to say anything, including "Yankee Go Home." However if the United States actually does withdraw and Japan comes to realize that she can no longer enjoy freedom and prosperity under the protection of the United States, she will have to choose one of two directions. It would be a choice of the lesser of two evils. The one evil will be to fight Communism, the other to welcome them before they attack. There is no doubt that the Japanese will choose the second as the lesser of the two evils; that is, unless a spiritual revolution takes place, which is possible but not probable.

I deeply regret the moral decline in Japan, but I think that it is better to admit an unpleasant fact as a fact than to deceive ourselves. I do not think that our situation is hopeless; I think our people have the power to recover. Only we need time. However, this is our affair and not America's. I have chosen to refer specifically to Japan in order to illustrate and emphasize the fact that the destiny of America is of serious concern to the nations of the world. Now coming back to our original question: whether or not a return to the spirit of the founding fathers would revitalize Americans and the American nation. In my opinion, going back to the spirit of the founding fathers as symbolized in the Declaration of Independence would confuse American thinking and tend to weaken the nation. What is meant by the spirit of the founding fathers? I am not too sure whether the Americans themselves are very clear. Some people seem to emphasize the Puritan spirit of the colonial period. Other people assume that the idea of the Declaration of Independence is the spirit of the founding fathers; and the third group, which seems to be in the majority, is rather unsure and just takes it for granted that the Christian spirit and the idea of the Declaration of Independence are identical.

However, the fundamental and traditional concept of the founding fathers is the philosophy behind the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration is a wonderful document and its author is one of the greatest intellects of his age.

A characteristic of the Declaration of Independence is its nonreligious nature. Perhaps the best exponent of the Declaration in connection with the problem of revitalizing America is Frank Goble, director of Thomas Jefferson Research Center. In his paper read at the Fourth International Conference on the Unity of Sciences held in New York during November 27-30, 1975, he first quotes the words of Pope Leo XII I as follows: "When a Society is perishing, the true advice to give to those who would restore it is to recall it to the principles from which it sprung." It is obvious that Goble believes that the medicine to rescue the

United States from perishing is "to recall it to the principles from which it sprung," namely the principles advocated by the founding fathers as symbolized in the Declaration of Independence. After he quotes Pope Leo XIII he points out a worldwide trend toward crime, fraud, violence and disunity. Then he asks if this means that religion is obsolete as a source of values. He answers "no" and states that societies must have viable moral principles to survive and that the problem is that religions tend to become inflexible and lose touch with reality. Then he goes on to state: "The founders of the United States sought to overcome this problem by devising a universal moral philosophy, the 'American Ethic.' It was to be sufficiently universal to comprehend all religions and all aspects of daily life." He continues: "Their Ethic enabled a tiny nation, struggling against almost insurmountable odds, to achieve unparalleled material and technological success. The American Ethic sparked a worldwide trend toward greater freedom and democracy. Natural Law and the concept of a created, orderly, purposeful universe was the central thesis of the American Ethic." Then he refers with approval to Abraham Maslow, who proposed that there are biologically based values that are common to all humans and apparently unchanging, and he says that Maslow's theory is a scientific rediscovering of Natural Law. Then he reached the following conclusion: "Maslow has provided a scientific theory essentially compatible with and supportive of all major religions. Enlightened theologians should recognize third force science as an important new tool to help them understand and clarify the essential moral principles common to all religions."

I do not insist that Goble's idea is the sole expression of American thinking. Perhaps it is not even representative of American thinking. However, we must admit that this way of thinking is typical among Americans and carries great weight. So it is likely, unless it is checked by some other idea, that it will come to dominate the thinking of Americans who are anxious to revitalize the American spirit. It is this fact I fear.

The spirit of the founding fathers, that Goble calls the American Ethic, was the driving force in creating the United States and in developing the nation up to the end of the Second World War. It is based on rationalism and humanism, which are both products of the 17th and 18th centuries. They were useful in destroying medieval superstition and obsolete institutions; they were useful in giving confidence to man.

In this self-confidence men were apart from the divine, to develop science and technology. Man created a wonderful civilization in the 19th century, and it extended itself into the beginning of the 20th century. This is the so called Western civilization. The reason why the United States has been so successful in creating a nation and has expanded as a great power is to be found in the fact that the United States is a very product of rationalism and humanism, and unlike Europe unfettered by old traditions, the essential character of the American civilization is the absence of the Medieval. Although America inherited the European civilization, she repelled the Medieval, and this was America's strength and pride.

With the end of the First World War, Western civilization began to decline. The first manifestation of this decline was the shift of Western civilization from Europe to the American continent. However, the root of the trouble was not in Europe but in Western civilization itself.

The origin of Western civilization lies in Hellenism and Hebraism, and these are not identical with rationalism and humanism; European culture and civilization is the combination of these two currents of thought, and rationalism and humanism are its modern products. Since Europe has passed through and experienced the Medieval she is less likely to become completely modern than America. On the other hand America has been able to become a completely modern country because she has not been fettered by the Medieval.

This seeming advantage is now acting as a great handicap to America. By their own experience in the last twenty years Americans are realizing not only that men are not so rational as they thought but also that rationality and total satisfaction are entirely different things. They are also realizing that Man has very definite limitations and that there is a limit of growth not only in regard to matter but also in regard to human capacity. They are facing the reality that progress does not necessarily bring happiness and satisfaction, that it in fact quite often causes great misery to mankind. Europeans are less anxious because they have passed through and experienced the Medieval, and so they are in a position to reconsider the values of the Medieval.

It is very difficult for Americans to find values other than those they have been accustomed to since the creation of the nation, namely "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness." American Christianity is, generally speaking, a secular or social Christianity. It grossly underestimates eschatology and original sin because they are incompatible with American ideas of progress. American Christianity is more ethical than religious.

To be sure, the Declaration of Independence clearly admits the existence of the Creator, providing, many people insist, proof that the Declaration is harmonious with Christianity; but this is an incorrect interpretation. It may be true that the Declaration of Independence refers to the Creator, which of course means God, but that Creator is not the God conceived in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The "Creator" referred to in the Declaration of Independence is an invention of modern rational thinking. The reasoning

is as follows: the Universe is so perfect that there must be some perfect one which created it; that creator is like a perfect watchmaker; he makes a perfect watch and leaves it there, and he does not bother with it anymore. This conception is very far removed from the Christian God, who is a god of love and anger, always concerned with the world. When men disobeyed Him and became miserable He sent His son to save them. Americans believe that they are Christian, and they act as if they were, but in practice what they believe is not a religion but an ethic. In other words, what they believe in is not God but Humanity. So it should be called Humanism rather than Christianity.

The 1970s is the age of the decline of rationalism and Humanism. It is already a matter of common sense that man's rationality is not only not almighty, not even the most important function, but to be placed in a relatively insignificant place in man's functions and in human history. It means that we are much more irrational beings than we regarded ourselves to be during the last few centuries. If this is true, the naive optimism based upon Natural Law, which is the 17th century philosophy advocated by Goble, cannot hold; therefore, going back to the spirit of the founding fathers, whatever sentiment the American may have, will lead the nation to more confusion and consequently to the loss of confidence.

I am not opposed to reflection upon past history. History is a fountain of wisdom. But unlike philosophy or science it is not "pure," and it cannot be interpreted or explained by some simple doctrine; it is complex, the mixtures of all possible elements. But history, if it is rightly told, is the story of reality. Looking back at the past should not be a sentimental undertaking: we should be looking for the truth. I think it is meaningful for Americans to reflect upon their past history, including the period of the Revolutionary War, but the real question is to understand what exact!, is meant by the foundation of the nation.

It is obvious that the United States of America did not come into existence on July 4th, 1776, which was the day when the Declaration of Independence was made public. The War had occurred before, and even when the War ended in 1783 what existed was a loose organization called the Confederation. After the end of the War a very critical period came. The Confederation might have been disrupted and the 13 colonies might have been occupied again, by England or by another European country. At that time there was not yet a spirit of nationalism or patriotism, and the leaders who formed the constitution, though they must have been great men, were not philosophers of "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness." They were more conservative, more inclined to what we now call "law and order." They put the nation on a firm foundation. Abraham Lincoln also should be regarded as one of the founders, not because he abolished slavery but because he saved the Union much more than an idea or ideology.

However, the most important spiritual contribution to American history was made during the colonial period. This period is long, and has no distinguished figures emerging from its background, but a most important principle was established during this time. The spirit or the way of life at that time is sometimes mistakenly called "Puritanism." This is unfortunate; the true Puritans, though they were active, were still in the minority. The spirit, faith or way of life of that time, including the life of the so-called Puritans, is fundamentally rooted in the best tradition of Judeo-Christianity. That is, they trusted God and acted out of faith. Unlike Thomas Jefferson they were ignorant of Natural Law. They were not influenced by that brilliant idea of the "age of reason." They did not trust Humanity. They were unsophisticated. They simply trusted God and courageously acted out of this trust.

I think that this is the true and original American spirit. This may or may not harmonize with the idea of progress. It certainly does not comply with Natural Law; trusting in God sometimes puts us in a position of having to accept the irrational. The fundamental cause of the present crisis in our civilization is too much sophistication. To remedy this we should simplify ourselves. The way to revitalize Americans and strengthen the nation is not by going back to the Declaration of Independence but by returning to a much more simple and unsophisticated colonial spirit.

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