# Alistair Cooke

# THE AMERICANS

## Fifty talks on our life and times

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## FIFTY TALKS ON OUR LIFE AND TIMES

## ALISTAIR COOKE

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# A NOTE TO THE READER

THE word "reader" ought to be in strong italics. For these are talks meant to be listened to. And the job of writing—and then performing—a radio talk has been for me, down forty-odd years, by far the most challenging and satisfying craft of any I have attempted in a lifetime of journalism.

The challenge is not to write for your friends, or the intelligentsia, or your newspaper editor, but for an audience that spans the human gamut in very many countries. For these weekly thirteen-and-a-half-minute talks were broadcast first in the Home Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation and then aired, through the overseas services of the BBC, on every continent. (They can be heard in the United States only on the short wave.) It is a great privilege to have the ear, at least the opportunity to entice the ear, of ordinary people and extraordinary people in countries as far apart as Scotland and Malaysia. I stress the unique satisfactions of the medium because nothing could be more rewarding than the sort of letter which acknowledges that a German grocer has been touched by an obituary piece on Dean Acheson, or a Lord Chief Justice moved by the story of an illiterate black girl who swiped a baby from the incubator of a New York hospital.

Radio is literature for, so to speak, the blind. For one friend sitting in a room, not for any large collective audience that might be assembled in Madison Square Garden. And because the "one friend in a room" may be of any color, any station in life, any sort of education, the radio talker must try to write in an idiom acceptable to almost everybody who normally speaks the language. There are vocabularies, such as you would write for your newspaper or for a serious periodical, which are taboo as talk. Ideally, one ought to be Daniel Defoe, or John Bunyan, or Pepys, or Mark Twain, or the Jacobean translators of the Book of Genesis. This is, of course, an almost impossible challenge, and it is rarely met and conquered. Consequently, in going over these talks for publication I have made the most of the privilege of print to straighten out the syntax (which one doesn't do in conversation) and to introduce occasionally literary words that are more exact and that will not throw the much smaller race of book readers.

During the Second World War, I gave a weekly broadcast from America that concentrated, understandably, on the progress of the war effort and on its human exasperations. Once the war was over, I was invited by the BBC to forget our preoccupation with Armageddon and talk about anything and everything that occurred to me about life in America. The series, called *Letter from America*, started in March, 1946, for a preliminary tryout of thirteen weeks. I hope it will not sound vain if I say that nothing I have done in journalism or, in the past few years, in television has given me more pride than the fact that the series still goes on and is now in its thirty-fourth year.

The talks were done once a week when I was busy with other things. For twenty-five years I was writing a daily report for *The* (Manchester) *Guardian* as its chief correspondent in the United States. For more than two years, between 1969 and 1972, I was trekking across and around the United States writing and filming the television series *America*. The talks were, and are, never prepared. They offer the relief and the exhilaration of sitting down once a week and writing what comes to mind about the American scene usually no more than a couple of hours before they are taped and flown to London to be broadcast. More often than not, I have little idea, as I sit down at the typewriter, what I am going to talk about. This, I believe, is the proper psychological condition for composing a talk: we do not go out to dinner with a little agenda in our pockets of what the evening's conversation is to be about.

Like the talks in two previous collections (*One Man's America* and *Talk About America*), these appear in chronological order, with three exceptions. The first talk printed here (which combines two talks)

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seemed to be a proper introduction to the whole book. The second "Letter from Long Island" assumed you knew things elaborated on in the first. And it seemed sensible to put the so-called "Epilogue" to Watergate immediately after the last talk on the whole episode rather than in its historical place, three years later.

Otherwise, there is only one other thing to say, which I can't say better than I did in the preface to a previous collection: "Most Americans, in spite of the evangelism of bloodshot politicians, live their lives without any feeling of 'national destiny' and without seeing their country as the big, brutal world power of the nasty cartoons. My aim is still what it was when these talks began: to run up and down the human scale that unites a Lancashireman to a Texan and a German to a Siamese."

*A. C.*
*Nassau Point, Long Island*
*Summer, 1979*

# CONTENTS

A Note to the Reader vii

Telling One Country About Another (*March 2nd, 1969*) 3

Making a Home of a House (*January 26th, 1969*) 11

Pegler (*June 29th, 1969*) 16

Liable to Get Your Head Broke (*September 7th, 1969*) 22

"Eternal Vigilance"—by Whom? (*October 19th, 1969*) 28

Massacre: An Act of War (*November 30th, 1969*) 33

La Fayette Sí, Pompidou No! (*March 1st, 1970*) 38

Now Here Is the Nightly News (*June 7th, 1970*) 43

Final Health Warning (*January 9th, 1971*) 49

Judgment Day's A-Comin' (*February 13th, 1971*) 54

The Last of the Romanoffs (*September 11th, 1971*) 59

The Acheson Plan (*October 16th, 1971*) 64

A "Frontal Attack" on Cancer (*February 10th, 1972*) 69

The Charm of China (*February 26th, 1972*) 74

Angela Davis v. the Establishment (*April 1st, 1972*) 78

Watergate: Act One (*September 16th, 1972*) 84

Justice Holmes and the Doffed Bikini (*October 7th, 1972*) 89

Give Thanks for What? (*November 25th, 1972*) 94

A Reactionary at Six P.M. (*February 10th, 1973*) 99

Watergate: Act Two (*May 12th, 1973*) 104

Intermission: The Agnew Wake (*October 19th, 1973*) 113

Watergate: Act Three (*November 9th, 1973*) 118
The Duke (*May 31st, 1974*) 123
Earl Warren (*July 12th, 1974*) 129
Watergate: Act Four (*August 7th, 1974*) 135
Workers, Arise! Shout "Fore!" (*December 27th, 1974*) 143
The Benefits of Clergy (*April 4th, 1975*) 148
The End of the Affair (*April 11th, 1975*) 153
The President Goes Up to the Mountain (*August 13th, 1975*) 157
Pacific Overtures (*January 16th, 1976*) 162
Haight-Ashbury Drying Out (*April 16th, 1976*) 167
I'm All Right, Jack (*May 21st, 1976*) 171
No Cabinet Officers Need Apply (*December 24th, 1976*) 176
Christmas in Vermont (*December 31st, 1976*) 181
The Obscenity Business (*February 18th, 1977*) 186
The No-Food Plan for Longevity (*May 20th, 1977*) 191
The Money Game (*July 1st, 1977*) 196
Mr. Olmsted's Park (*July 8th, 1977*) 202
The Retiring Kind (*September 9th, 1977*) 208
Two for the Road (*December 23rd, 1977*) 214
A Picture on the Wall (*January 13th, 1978*) 219
The Spy That Came Down in the Cold (*February 10th, 1978*) 224
A "Proper" Wedding (*May 5th, 1978*) 229
Please Die Before Noon (*May 19th, 1978*) 235
The Hawk and the Gorilla (*June 2nd, 1978*) 240
A Letter from Long Island (*August 18th, 1978*) 247
*The* Letter from Long Island (*August 4th, 1970*) 252
The Presidential Ear (*December 8th, 1978*) 258
A Piece of Paper (*April 20th, 1979*) 263
In the Meantime (*May 6th, 1979*) 268

# THE AMERICANS

# TELLING ONE COUNTRY ABOUT ANOTHER

### MARCH 2ND, 1969

*A YEAR* or two ago I had an invitation to go and talk to the cadets at West Point, which is the Sandhurst or St. Cyr of the United States. The letter was signed by a general. It was the first time a general had invited me to anything, though more years ago than I care to say I did get a letter from the President of the United States which began: "Greeting!"—with a cordial exclamation mark, too.

The general even sent a car to drive me up the Hudson. If I'd been going to talk to the Arts Club, or whatever, of Long Beach, California, I'd have put on a pair of golfing slacks and a blazer. But I was not going to be found guilty, at West Point, of what my headmaster called "the supreme act of rudeness: casualness" and I decked myself out in a suit and a tie bearing the three cocks and weeping crowns of Jesus College, Cambridge. This badge offered the only possibility open to me of pulling rank. I also practiced saying "Yes, sir," "No, sir," and "Not at all, sir."

When I got up there, I was the one who was called sir. The commanding general, it happened, was about five years younger than I and on the verge of retirement. He wondered if there was anything he might do to make me comfortable. This alarming deference made me think back to an afternoon, in 1962, aboard the U.S.S. *Kitty Hawk*, a super aircraft carrier. I was along with the White House press corps at a demonstration of missile-firing being put on for President Kennedy.

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When it was all over and the twilight was dropping over the Pacific, I was nearly knocked down by a hefty slap on the back. It came from the Admiral of the Pacific Fleet. "Hi, there," he said, "you old bastard!" I had known him twenty years before as a humble lieutenant and we had had one or two memorable raucous evenings together.

There seem, indeed, to be fewer men around than there used to be to whom I feel I ought to defer. By the same token, there are more and more men, going from gray to white at that, who come to me and seek advice. It is a mixed compliment. I now get calls from incoming foreign correspondents who wonder how to go about acquainting themselves with the Presidency, the Congress, investigating committees, and the rest of it. The other day one of them asked me to tell him the main differences between reporting the America of today and the America of thirty years ago. It is worth a passing thought or two.

To begin with, I could say, and truly, that the job is always the same: to say, or write, what you see and hear and relate it to what you know of the country's traditional behavior. "Traditional behavior" may sound a little clumsy. But I'm trying to avoid the trap of what is called "national character." Whenever you are really baffled, it is always safe to put it all down to national character. I have come to think that a strong belief in national character is the first refuge of the anxious. For the moment, we'll let that pass.

A foreign correspondent, then, is both an interpreter and a victim of his subject matter. He must be aware of his own changing view of the country he's assigned to. And the danger here is that of assuming that the longer you stay in a country, the truer will be your perspective. As the Pope said to the earnest visitor who wondered how long he ought to stay in Rome to know it well: "Two days, very good. Two weeks, better. Two years, not long enough."

More important still, the reporter must always have in mind the settled view that his readers or listeners hold of the country he's writing about. The home reader, whether a simpleton or an intellectual, a Socialist or a Tory, wants—like a tourist—to find what he's looking for. He doesn't want to be startled out of his preconceptions. It is the correspondent's job to startle preconceptions. And, I must admit, sometimes to say that they're right.

There was, twenty-odd years ago, the instructive case of a Hungarian refugee from his Communist country. He had been a Communist himself, till he saw Communism in action. Then he escaped to

Britain. He was a journalist, a brilliant intellectual, and a Jew. When, after the Second World War, the British Labor government had to try and establish a policy for Palestine, a British editor decided that this man was the ideal outsider to report on the anarchy and ill-will that had set in between the British and the Jews. The editor gently suggested that it would be a fine thing if he could incidentally expose "the lies" that the Palestinian Jews were spreading abroad. The "lies" included the notion that Mr. Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, in trying to hold on to Palestine, and the support of the Arabs, and the goodwill of the Jews, was attempting an impossibility that was involving him in ruthless treatment of the Jews. The Hungarian was told to spend a few weeks feeling his way into the situation and then to begin filing his series of articles. He stayed a month, five weeks, six weeks, and nothing was heard from him. When the editor cabled, "What happened? Where is the series?", he cabled back, "Sorry, no series, all the lies are true."

Luckily, no such bad blood has soured the relations between Britain and the United States in the past thirty years, except during the first three or four years of the 1950s, when the British view of the late Senator Joseph McCarthy blew up the only blizzard of disgusted mail I have ever received. But, more recently, there have been delicate problems involved in reporting a first-rate power that was once a second-rate power to a second-rate power that was once first-rate. For many years after the Second World War, Britons refused to acknowledge their fading influence. And for a blazing month or two the most unpopular American in Britain was Dean Acheson, simply for having expressed his glimpse of the obvious: "Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role."

When I arrived in Washington in the late thirties, I was one of only four British correspondents. Today there must be forty or fifty, if you count reporters on particular assignment and the enlarged radio and television staffs of the BBC and the British commercial television companies. This trek followed a simple law of politics: the best reporters, like the best chefs, gravitate toward the centers of power. (The Australians today complain, as Americans did fifty years ago, that the foreign press corps in their country is unreasonably small.) When Britain really ruled the waves, in good King George V's glorious reign, London was the capital of foreign correspondence. The Foreign Office briefings were attended by a pack of correspondents from nations big and small. And the Foreign Office, being the repository of all wise and relevant information, felt no call to bandy debating points with the press. The Foreign Office distributed handouts, no questions asked. It did not justify its policies. It announced them. And I remember how American correspondents newly arrived in London used to fume in their impotence when they found it was not possible to have a private word with a Cabinet minister. To have invited him to lunch would have thrown him into a coronary.

A young Texan, a journalist, who is now a distinguished American magazine editor, stayed with me in London when I was back there in the early, dark spring of 1938. He was an inquisitive and typically courteous Texan, and one night he had a message from his New York office asking him to look into a rumor, a correct rumor as it turned out, that the Nazis were about to invade Austria. It sounded pretty melodramatic to me, but in those days we were not yet accustomed to the idea that gangsterism was a working technique of international politics. My friend mulled over the cable from New York, and his instincts as an Associated Press stringer got the better of him. He asked to use my telephone and he rang up the Foreign Office, an impulse which to me was as bizarre as phoning Buckingham Palace. When the FO answered he asked to talk to Lord Halifax, who had just then become the Foreign Secretary. I was agog with admiration. I was at the time a political innocent, a film critic, but I knew my Hitchcock movies well enough to know that that was exactly how Joel McCrea in a raincoat went about his business.

It was soon obvious that my friend was having a rough time with the other end of the wire. "Yes, sir," he kept saying in courteous variations, "I know it's very late in the evening, but this is not the sort of rumor the Associated Press can just forget." Somehow he managed to get Lord Halifax's home number, a remarkable feat in itself. He redialed and there was a crackle and a pause and a respectful fluting sound from the other end. It was the butler, who had a strangulated moment or two while, I imagine, he was being revived by the rest of the household staff. At last he pronounced the definitive sentence: "I'm sorry, sir, His Lordship is in his bath."

This is still not an approach I'd be inclined to take, though in failing to be so brash I no longer feel merely courteous: I feel I'm neglecting my duty. Because I now take for granted the ease of access to people in government in America. Americans had, and have, a quite different feeling about the press. In many countries, and Britain used to be one of them, a reporter is a potential enemy. The Americans, however, feel it is better to have a friend in print than an enemy. And this, too, is a great danger, for nothing castrates a reporter so easily as flattery. But the main thing is, the politicians tend to look on you as a camp-follower through the maze of politics, and if they can help you find your way out, without trading the Pentagon secret file, they will do it. Nowadays, of course, even dictators have to pretend to welcome cozy conversations with television interviewers.

America, from the beginning of my time, was an open book to a reporter. The people were there to mix with, and the landscape and its troubles and pleasures, and a reporter with the most modest credentials could get to talk to everybody from the Governor, the local Congressman, the Chamber of Commerce, the saloonkeepers, the local madams. Huey Long stretched out on a bed barefoot in the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans and picked his toes while he enlarged on the glorious future he had in mind for Everyman and Everywoman in Louisiana. I once asked the late Governor Talmadge of Georgia how the (since abolished) "county unit" system worked in his state. He sucked his teeth and ordered up a car, oddly—it seemed to me then—a humble jalopy. We jumped in and he drove me into the corners of three counties that fringed Atlanta. In each of them he dropped in on a couple of farmers on the pretense of needing to relieve himself. When we were back in the city, he said: "I got myself six unit votes right there, and them students and doctors and Commies in Atlanta can shout themselves hoarse—it's more votes than they have." Once I was driving across Nevada and noticed from the map that I was close by Hawthorne, and that it was the site of the U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot. I asked to look in on it, and I did. I am a little awestruck now to reflect that a Japanese reporter could probably have done the same right up to the eve of Pearl Harbor.

In the thirties you required no confidential sources to straighten you out on the condition of the country. The country was racked by depression. On several trips around the United States, in the South more than anywhere, I was physically nauseated by the people I saw in the country towns and in the workless cities: the absolutely drained look of mothers nourishing babies at shrunken breasts, the general coma of the rural poor with the telltale rash of scurvy or pellagra on the back of their necks. Today there is very little, if any, scurvy or pellagra in the South, because they varied the crops and learned about green vegetables, and the cities turned to textiles. They were no longer doomed to plates of rice and corn and potatoes and hominy grits—a feast, whenever it was a feast, of nothing but starch.

The first year I drove around the whole country, about one family in four was on the breadline or just above it. Yet, while we totted up the grim statistics, we wrote little about these things for foreign consumption. The foreign consumers, too, had their silent factories and marching miners, and they had bemused and stumbling leaders. The great news from America was that the country was galvanized by the new President into a prospect of greener pastures. The story was the exhilaration of the Roosevelt Era: the public works, the dams and new housing, the first national network of concrete highways, the poor boys planting millions of trees. These things excited us more than the conditions they were meant to cure depressed us. If thirty or forty percent of the population was then at some stage of need, today only eleven percent falls below the government's rather generous definition of a subsistence income, of $2200 a year. And though that may sound like small pickings, there has never been a time in this country's history, or perhaps in human history, when more people in one nation were better off, never a smaller percentage of 200 millions who could be called poor. Yet there is less complacency, I believe, than there ever was. As I talk, the cities tremble and the countryside groans over the shame of it.

In case my drift is being misunderstood, let me say that this trembling and groaning is a good thing, too. If God observes the fall of one sparrow, it is right in a prosperous time that we should feel not only that we are our brother's keeper but that our brother is the whole of society. I think it must be the first time in history that the so-called civilized nations have felt this way. Why? Are we more humane, more sensitive than we used to be? I think not. The world's population of the starving and near-starving at the height of the Victorian Age must have been beyond our imagining. But the point is, the Victorians had to imagine it, or read the fine print, or take the progressive magazines, or dig out—from some encyclopedia—the infant-mortality rates. Statistics make few people bleed or weep. Today all of us, in a castle or a cottage, can see every night the warped skeletons of the children of Biafra. Thirty students up at Columbia University paralyzed for a time the education of several thousands, and it looked and sounded, on the evening news, like the siege of Mafeking. A hundred cops go berserk on an August night in Chicago and next day it's the scandal of the world. Television, whatever its faults and banalities, is the new conscience—or nagger—of mankind. I am frankly relieved to reflect that in the early Hitler days we had no television. The news dispatches of brave men had to be read by choice. The television scene of Nazism, as filmed by the devilishly skilled Leni Riefenstahl, could have recruited millions of disciples. It might, of course, have made people stop and listen to Winston Churchill, who went on and on, a croaking old orator, about the threat of a frightful regime he had evidently pictured in his mind.

This, I am sure, is the single greatest change that has come over our society's awareness of what is going on—everywhere. The sight of violence has quite likely upset our sense of proportion just as badly as the assumption of general calm upset it by default. If so, we are upset in the right way.

The effect on the foreign correspondent has been revolutionary. All newspaper reporters, whether they know it or not, are competing with the television news, which has a daily audience bigger than the most famous newspaper correspondent ever dreamed of. The sheer pungency of television, of the thing seen, invokes not meditation but partisanship: that is to say, instant ideology. The newspapers, to stay solvent, try to match this emotional appeal. The result is that—in Britain, for example—the best papers are more and more turning into daily magazines of opinion, and the worst make the crudest, the most blatant, appeal to the seven deadly sins.

Consequently, while the scope of a foreign correspondent has not been narrowed (he's still expected to take all knowledge for his province), the reader's expectations of him are narrower, more ideological. When I began, it was possible to present the awkward complexity of a political story without any side being taken. And then to move on to any number of what were called "color" pieces: on the landscape, the livelihood of a region, sport, odd characters, the history of this custom and that place. Today you write about these things and the partisan oldsters say you are fiddling while Washington or Chicago burns. The young say you've got a hang-up on whimsy.

A year ago I was talking to a forum of Californians about the rape of their beautiful landscape by the developers. The tidal wave of new arrivals. The mania for city ways. The universal obsession with indus-

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