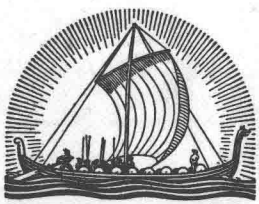
America's Place in the World

NATHANIEL PEFFER



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CHINA: THE COLLAPSE OF A CIVILIZATION

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Climax of the Age of Imperialism

FOREWORD

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: America Comes Full Circle

As one looks back over the history of the United States four dates stand out as milestones along its course: 1776, 1787, 1861, 1941. In 1776 the colonies made their break with England. In 1787 the compact for "a more perfect union" of the colonies that had won their independence was framed. In 1861 it was put to the test whether that union was indissoverable. In 1941 a war began that was to compel the nation, now a mature society and a powerful state, to re-examine its place in the world as it had not had occasion or need to do since its founding. Another milestone in the course of American history had been passed. The first order of business for the American people after winning the war was to set a new course for the future.

What has happened? Twice in a generation the United States has been drawn into a war in Europe with which it had no direct concern, in the origin of which it had no part or voice and the causes of which lay wholly outside this continent. At the same time it has been drawn into a war in Asia arising from disputed mastery over China, a country six thousand miles from the western shore of this continent. Into the first European war the United States was drawn almost unconsciously; in August 1914, the suggestion even to a politically informed American that an American army would eventually be fighting on the battlefields just opened in Eu-

rope would have seemed fantasy. Into the second European war the United States was drawn against its will, against its conscious and avowed resolve, and despite deliberate efforts in advance to keep out. As for the war in Asia, its original issues touched places and people of which few Americans have been more than dimly conscious or which have been, at most, names on a map, scarcely visualized or visualizable as realities.

The point of significance is the conscious effort to keep out of war and the failure of the effort. From the first European war only a hypothesis could be set up. Americans were not really aware between 1914 and 1917 in what direction they were drifting. Nor did they, nor could they, grasp in 1917 what intervention in Europe would carry with it for the future of the country. Intervention was conceived as a single self-contained act. It would constitute an episode, with a definite beginning and a definite end, an interlude in the country's history. Germany was a menace; the menace would be laid; then we could resume as we were before. What was to follow could not be foreseen. Nor could it be foreseen that the peace would raise as grave problems as the war itself. There was no precedent by which to judge or from which to take warning.

From the second European war, however, conclusions can hardly be escaped. The disillusionment with the first experience crystallized into a determination never to repeat it. The Treaty of Versailles was rejected and the League of Nations spurned. Soon after the Nazis came to power and another war seemed to be in the making, the first of the Neutrality Acts so-called was passed, with the clear support of public opinion. These acts were badly named, since they were designed not so much to preserve neutrality as to ensure nonparticipation in war. And as tension in Europe mounted, the provisions of the neutrality legislation were tightened for added assurance,

always with the support of majority opinion. Then the European war came, and first the Neutrality Law was modified and then ignored; then the steps "short of war" were taken, and then America was at war—again, each step having the support of majority opinion. Now a conclusion could be drawn: if there was war in Europe on a large enough scale and it lasted long enough, America could not keep out, no matter what its people thought or felt before and no matter what precautions they took in advance. And if that conclusion could be established, something had ended for America and something else begun. America could never again be the same.

Yet it might be more accurate to say only that the United States in its relations with other nations has reverted to its beginnings, that American history has come full circle, and the American people, now in their might and majesty, are no longer a sovereign nation. For they have lost their independence, their autonomy even, in that which matters most in the life of a nation—peace or war. After one hundred and seventy years of existence as a nation, and at the pinnacle of world power, they find themselves, as before 1776, at war because Europe is at war on grounds of Europe's own making. Before 1776 they were automatically at war because the English Crown was at war; now they have the forms of arriving at their own decision, but the forces are such as to operate irresistibly, if not automatically. Something outside themselves and more powerful than themselves makes decisions for them or constrains them to a certain decision.

It must not be forgotten that automatic and involuntary entanglement in European wars contributed to the discontent that culminated in the Revolution. Four times in the century preceding the Revolution the colonies had had to fight in such wars because England was involved in them and because

both England and France, having colonies on this continent, established a sector of war on this continent, with their colonies as stakes of victory. Because rival dynastic houses fell out over such questions as the succession to the Spanish throne at the end of the seventeenth century and the succession to the Austrian throne in the middle of the eighteenth century, English colonists on this continent were called to arms and lost heavily in men and wealth. For forty years out of the ninety preceding 1776 they were engaged in such warfare. They were not consulted. The causes were remote and sometimes even unknown to them. They bore the sacrifice. This appeared to be their lot for all time, since war appeared to be the natural state of Europe; and against this lot, too, they were rebelling; taxation without representation was not the only grievance. Immunity from that lot was one of the perquisites of independence that appealed to them.

Tom Paine's famous and oft-quoted statement in *Common Sense* in 1776 was not an isolated sentiment. "Any submission to or dependence on, Great Britain," he wrote, "tends directly to involve this continent in European wars and quarrels. . . . As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial connection with any part of it. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions, which she never can do while by her dependence on Britain she is made the makeweight in the scale of British politics."

This was the expression of a sentiment that had been gathering, the crystallization of thought and feeling among the more politically conscious in the colonies. With the Revolution it was to become systematized and openly avowed. In the Continental Congress, in the Constitutional Convention, and in the correspondence among the Founders of the Republic both before and after the adoption of the Constitution,

it was voiced with clarity and conviction, most vigorously and often, perhaps, by John Adams but also by Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison and others. And Washington's Farewell Address, with the even more famous and oft-quoted injunction against permanent alliances, was not so much his testament as Father of the Republic as the recapitulation of the judgment of the leaders of the Republic. There was no philosophy of isolation as such but a principle of national action: out of Europe and therefore out of Europe's wars, since Europe means war. The penalty of association with England had been enforced participation in European wars. Independence had absolved the citizens of the new Republic from that penalty. The advantage was one to be safeguarded. And a generation later the obverse of the principle was stated in the Monroe Doctrine: keep Europe out of this continent and thus avoid the extension of European wars to this continent.

The advantage has now been lost. The immunity gained by the Revolution and reinforced by the Monroe Doctrine has passed. For practical purposes the United States is a dependency again so far as the politics of peace and war is concerned. Again it is called to arms and must make sacrifices because, in Washington's words, Europe "must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns." Now this country is drawn into those controversies, not as a colony of Great Britain but as a kind of satellite to Europe. In the beginning it had no control over its own destiny because it was so weak, now because it is so strong. In the interlude between the Monroe Doctrine and 1914 it was at once too strong to be levied upon by any European Power and not so strong that its own power generated from within exercised a force of attraction toward Europe. The history of the American nation has indeed come full circle,

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and in a sense this is a confession of defeat—paradoxically, just when the nation has come to its highest eminence in wealth, power, and influence.

Where, then, does the United States find itself now? In the beginning it could gain freedom of action by revolution and independence. Can it regain it now? If so, how? If not, what other recourse is there to safeguard the nation's interest? In other words, can America stay out of world politics, or, if not, how can it participate in world politics with the widest margin of safety? In the concrete this means: Can America declare itself out of the world? And if it cannot, if, that is, it must fight in whatever major wars arise, can it prevent wars from arising? And if it cannot prevent them and must enter them, what measures can it take to assure that it will emerge victorious and with the least sacrifice in men and wealth? This has become the first problem for the American people. It is a problem of a depth and magnitude equalled only by that which confronted the men of 1776. And the measures chosen to meet it, measures that must be taken in the immediate future, will affect the generations that follow the close of the Second World War no less profoundly than the decisions taken between 1776 and 1787 affected the one hundred and fifty years that followed.

The choice, it will be seen, is among concretes. America must seek to cut itself off from the world, at least politically; it must enter fully into organized international efforts to prevent war—whatever they may be and however much they encroach on national sovereignty as hitherto conceived; or it must enter into the orthodox system of world politics, of power politics, seeking by aggrandizing its own power, by combination with other states in alliances and by use of all the traditional instruments of diplomacy and force, to make

itself impregnable in defense and victorious in war when war comes. The choice is of one definite course of action or another. But it can be made intelligently only against a background of broader considerations, of generalizations based on the fundamentals governing the nation's history and development.

It is necessary to ask what are the elements in America's physical environment, social composition, and traditions that determine its actions in relation to the rest of the world. It is necessary to ask whether these determinants are characteristic of this time only or whether they have operated at all times in American history, though differently in different circumstances: in other words, are there constants in America's relations with the rest of the world, imperatives that always have determined its conduct? It is necessary to ask also whether there is anything innately unique in America that makes its foreign policy and its actions vis-à-vis the rest of the world also unique, or whether that which has governed its policy and action in the past, admittedly distinctive, has been only the product of something temporary in its development and has passed with the conditions that produced it. For the decision one comes to on America's relation to the world will vary according to how one answers these questions. It matters vitally whether one thinks that the motives that should impel decision lie in the present only or whether one thinks that the same motives have guided national conduct throughout the nation's history. For in the latter case one must ask what these motives are, what the constants are that underlie American action always, and how best they can be dealt with now. It is not enough to ask whether America should now join a new League of Nations or a Five-Power bloc with Great Britain, Russia, France, and China, or should

contract an alliance with any one of them or should resume the free hand of 1919. It is necessary to re-examine the whole question of America's place in the world and our conception of the national destiny, from the view not only of the Second World War but of the nation's entire history. Any other approach will be as superficial, as sterile, and as short-lived as the one taken after 1919.

CHAPTER TWO

Immunity Lost

I

HAPPY is the nation that has no history, happy, too, the nation that has no foreign affairs. If the United States cannot be said to have been altogether happy in the latter respect, it has been at least less unhappy than other nations. For if it has not been wholly without foreign affairs, they have been, until recent years, distant and tangential and, in general, only episodic. They have not been, as in Europe, first concerns, always pressing, always demanding consideration above all else. It is not only that there has been singular freedom from wars and threat of wars, thus leaving the nation's energy, attention, and wealth free for internal purposes. There has also been, except at transient moments, freedom from the necessity of taking positive positions toward the outer world, freedom from having to think out and execute what are called foreign policies.

In the last few years there has been, indeed, a good deal of mournful writing in this country on the text that America has had no foreign policy. It has an impressive ring but is questionable both in fact and logic. In the first place, this country very definitely has followed certain basic rules of action and laid down for itself certain objects from which it has not allowed itself to be deflected. In the second place, no nation adopts policies—that is, programs of action for itself and injunctions against certain actions by other nations—beyond the

demands of its relation to the other nations of the world. And America's world situation has been such that, aside from certain larger principles that have seldom had to be applied, there has been no imminent combination of circumstances that required it to formulate and prepare to support a specific course of action. It has no foreign policy in the European sense because it has had no foreign affairs that constantly pressed. This is a luxury that other countries might very well envy and that Americans from now on will have to envy too, for it is one that they can no longer enjoy.

By the same token America's exemption from foreign affairs has not been something for which the nation could take credit for itself. It does not denote America's moral superiority, as Americans like to assume; nor, on the other hand, is it a sign of lower moral stature or moral dereliction in Europeans that they have not had the same exemption, as Americans also like to assume. The American weakness for moral preachments to Europeans, for ostentatiously pointing to our own idealism and thanking God that we are not as other men, derives from this contrast. It is of course fallacious as well as pharisaical. Something outside and greater than national character, national attainments, and national achievements accounts for America's good fortune and Europe's ill fortune. Europe has been unable to find immunity from foreign affairs for the same reason that America has been able to enjoy immunity: its situation in the world, historically as well as geographically.

To a certain extent, it is true, America does owe its escape from Europe's unhappy lot to its own efforts: to its foresight from the beginning, to the acumen with which it read the historical forces of its time and the resoluteness with which it has applied the precepts drawn from that reading. To a much

larger extent, however, America's more favorable lot is a bequest from the scheme of things. It could hardly have been avoided. To determine the apportionment between accomplishment and bequest is not just an intellectual exercise. It is necessary to a correct analysis of America's position in our time and the decision to be based thereon. Therefore a brief survey of the historical background of America's position is essential for a perspective on that position.

By accomplishment is meant the early recognition of insulation against Europe as an indispensable condition to national welfare and the adoption in consequence of nonparticipation in European politics as a fixed principle. This principle, erroneously called isolationism, became national doctrine early in the nation's history, almost on the same plane with republicanism and representative government. Tom Paine has already been cited. The historical documents of the period from 1776 onwards abound in similar statements.

John Adams, describing the debates in the Continental Congress on the wisdom of contracting an alliance with France, tells how he spoke in the affirmative but attached a warning: "We ought not to enter into any alliance with her, which should entangle us in any future wars of Europe; we ought to lay it down as a first principle and maxim of conduct never to be forgotten to maintain an entire neutrality in all future European wars." [1]

In 1783, when Adams was in Europe for peace negotiations with Great Britain, he wrote home: "Let us, above all things, avoid as much as possible, entangling ourselves with their wars or politics. Our business with them and theirs with us, is commerce, not politics, much less wars. America has been the sport of Europe's wars and politics long enough." [2]

See footnote references for this chapter on page 227.

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