

# A FOREIGNER LOOKS AT THE UNITED STATES

AN ESSAY BY

DR. CHARLES MALIK

The following is an essay written by Dr. Charles Malik that was originally published in The Journal of General Education, Vol. 5, No. 4 in July 1951 by Penn State University Press.

# A Foreigner Looks at the United States

CHARLES MALIK

Three general feelings must overtake a sympathetic foreigner as he broods upon the American scene. There is first a profound sense of awe at America's tremendous material success. American industry and inventiveness have simply produced wonders. Is there a human material need or wish or even whim that has not called forth a gadget to satisfy it? In terms both of comforts available to ordinary men and of industrial capacity to produce in abundance the instruments necessary for the defense of peace and the prosecution of war, this country is the most astounding country, not only in the world, but throughout history.

The foreigner is likely to be struck in the second place by the fact that America resembles a huge giant who is just beginning to wake up to the fact that he is not alone nor can be left alone in the world, that he must try to get along with others who have been there all the time and who in fact are now pressing on him, and that in this necessary and sudden association something, perhaps something big, is expected of him. He is just beginning to rub his eyes and wake up to these expectations. In the daze of the moment, he half-believes what his eyes are just beginning to see, half-wishes it were not true, half-hopes things will so work out that all will go back to normal, namely, to a state of affairs where he is again left alone, without bother, without headache, without responsibility, without danger. At any rate he is still debating the issue. Despite America's phenomenal capacity to rejoice in and adjust to the novel and untried, despite the unrelenting tacit insistence of the world upon America to come out and lead, and despite the real progress that has been made during the last few years under the wise guidance of diverse American leaders, there is still a basic wistful nostalgia in the American soul for the good old days of isolation and self-sufficiency. The foot is not sure, the heart is not whole; the giant is still in process of awakening.

The third feeling is one of wonder. When the giant has awakened and opened his eyes, when he has taken heart and joyfully accepted his allotted task, what will he do? How will he lead? What word will he utter? What will the world look like with America really, seriously, irretrievably in it? President Truman has recently said: "I have the feeling that God has created us and brought us to our present position of power and strength for some great purpose. It is not given to us now to know fully what this purpose is." that the day when that purpose will be revealed is coming there can be no doubt whatsoever. It has already dawned, but its fulness is still a matter of the future Whether it takes one year, or five years, or fifty years, America will one day gather up herself in order to utter her word. All that is happening today, all that has happened for years, is sheer preparation. That is why the moment is one of absolute expectancy. One therefore wonders, when the hour comes, what will the authentic American utterance be?

If these, then, are the three general feelings of the sympathetic foreigner, he is led at once to formulate three general hopes. America's tremendous industrial and inventive capacity is today one of the main pillars of peace. There would be war tomorrow, there would have been war long ago, were it not for the devastating potential of this capacity. May it long continue therefore as the shield of justice, freedom, and peace.

American science and technology are among the greatest achievements of history. For the mind to penetrate and understand the secrets of nature, and to realize such superb mastery over her forces, is indeed one of the glories of man. This understanding and mastery is good in itself and can never, in and by itself, lead to any evil result. In it man realizes one of his greatest possibilities. To dream in moments of fatigue of an idyllic Rousseauesque return to a simpler state of nature where science and technology do not dominate the scene is absolutely idle. Science and technology will never leave us: the only point is how to humanize and spiritualize them.

To advert to the domain of medicine alone, American science has already proved itself one of the greatest benefactors of mankind. It seems now that the science of medicine will one day conquer everything, except of course death itself, the ultimate limitation of man.

Thus the negative, preventive, defensive function of technology is only an incident in the many good uses to which America's science and industry may be put. It is of the utmost importance that the energies of American science be not all diverted today to the service of defense, but that pure research in every field be carried on for its own sake and in the interests of human welfare and of the arts of peace.

The absolutely prior needs of defense are today overshadowing America's ability to help Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Africans, and Latin Americans exploit their own natural resources for the liberation and elevation of their estate. It is therefore further hoped that in the

desperate emergency of the moment this positive, long-range possibility of American capital and technique be not submerged. An infinite good for the undeveloped peoples, for the cause of peace, and indeed for America herself, is waiting just around the corner to be recognized and taken hold of. Only four things are needful: real imaginative vision in the conception; much greater boldness in the execution; real willingness to share not only the machine but the theoretical and technical secret which is creative of the machine, as well as the cultural-scientific presuppositions of this secret; and a realization that after you have conquered poverty, misery, disease, and starvation, whether in Asia, Europe, or America, men may still hate and fight one another even more ferociously than before, and the lower may still rise up and revolt against the higher in sheer spite and nihilism, so that unless you have a mighty moral and spiritual message, side by side with your technological gospel, a message that will penetrate the heart and modulate the will because it is based on the truth of man in his relationship to himself, to his fellow-men, and to God, the end of your technologically developed world, in which there is no poverty, no disease, and no starvation, may be far worse than its beginning.

The second hope of the child of the second general feeling. The giant is dazed and uncertain. He is still rubbing his eyes. What he immediately sees is perhaps too much for him. He has not only not taken it all in: he has not yet sufficiently realized what a tremendous giant he is; he has not yet felt all his powers. Therefore, there is a fear—humanly and naturally speaking—that when he does see all his possibilities, when he does feel his powers, the thing may go to his head; he may then think that nothing can stop him. My deepest hope is that such a calamity never befall our giant. For all his infinite powers, surely truth, righteousness, love, and our ordinary humanity can stop him. If friends from within and from without, who are moved by the deepest concern for all that is holy and true, never cease to remind our giant, not indeed by the brandishing of force—for who can use force with a giant?—but by patient persuasion and suffering love, that it is written, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts,” then surely the giant will listen and respond. For the hopeful aspect of this hope is that, whatever other giants have done or are doing, America has not rebelled against the holy tradition which teaches that only the meek shall inherit the earth.

The third hope of course pertains to the contents of the American word. In elaborating a message, in articulating the word, there are two radically different methods of approach. There is first the method of the least common denominator. Here one endeavors to strike a balance that will please everybody and therefore challenge nobody. According to this method, the American message is that which is common to every shade of opinion throughout the land, that which makes everybody feel perfectly at home. The majority of

writers today who concern themselves with this question follow this alluring path. They are most careful to formulate a proposition that will please and include everybody: that will not at least leave the writer himself out. That is how people come by the so-called doctrine of democracy as America's message: namely, the ultimacy of freedom, the respect for the individual and his rights, equality of opportunity, and representative government.

Now surely the American democratic ideal whereby everybody is somehow included is a great thing. There is in it a certain essential fairness which is one of the fundamental glories of the American spirit. The individual human person, merely by possessing the natural spark of freedom whereby his mind can discriminate between truth and error, and his conscience between right and wrong, is viewed as worthy of respect in his own right; and every time I read the American Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, and especially the Bill of Rights, I marvel the sureness and simplicity of grasp with which the fathers of this great Republic conceived and expressed those great truths.

But surely all this is but a framework within which freedom is meant to flower; and therefore one hopes that when America shall utter her word it shall be a word, not only of happy political arrangements, but of life and truth. The American political ideal cannot be an end in itself; people cannot go on simply enjoying freedom of speech, freedom of enterprise, equality of opportunity, and this is necessary; but its worth ultimately is measured by the depth and truth and quality of that which it produces. Political systems vary, but the need of man for truth and salvation will never cease. One therefore must press beyond politics, beyond the sheer framework of freedom, beyond the least common denominator which makes everybody feel comfortable and happy; one, I say, must press beyond these things into the domain of qualitative excellence, where, far from pleasing everybody, one may find one's self standing absolutely alone.

The other method of approach to the American word, the word whereby America can live and overflow with life to the whole world, is to search for that which is deep and challenging, even if the searcher is thereby left completely out. For what shall it advantage him, or America, or the world, if, in order to get himself in, in order to feel that he belongs, all he succeeds in conceiving is a thin, external, formal inclusiveness, which enables him to use the pronoun "we" all right, but which leaves out the deepest, the most distinctive attainments of American existence? It were far better to point to the truth in dreadful loneliness from without than to imagine one's self embracing her when in reality one is all the time hugging pitiable husks of abstraction. For the truth always has compassion on the faithful outsider, and in her own inscrutable way will surely include him.

It is therefore obvious that the American meaning, what America is in herself and what therefore she should not be ashamed of before the whole world, must contain that which is deepest in the American tradition. But it is not an easy matter to search for, discover, and be sure of “the deepest.” By its very nature it is hidden and rare. It is not blazed on every street corner. It will not comfortably include everybody. In finding it, one must be exceedingly discriminating: one must already be in possession of a standard of judgment. How can one be sure that one’s standard of judgment is right? Obviously one cannot be sure in the sense of a mechanical, external demonstration. One’s certainty about these matters is entirely a matter of personal decision for which one takes complete responsibility. In finding the deepest, one reveals what he really most deeply cares for. But when one realizes that he is in good company so far as some of the decisive personalities in history are concerned, including those who made American history, one is not ashamed of revealing his deepest” either.

There is an essential kindness, purity, and trust in the American character. Surely this is part of the American depth. One hopes that this initial childlike innocence, which is one of the most beautiful things in this country, will not be outgrown as America plunges more and more into the world. For the world with which America will have to contend is very old and “experienced”; in its own wisdom it may outwit and outmaneuver America. The fear is that, in order to hold her own, America may then try to catch the ways of the world. But no matter how many attempts may be made ruthlessly to take advantage of you, hope you will never shed off your kindness. I hope no degree of disgust or trial or disappointment or disillusionment will cause you to turn your trust into cynicism and despair. We are all members one of another, and no matter how much we may try one another, surely goodness, patience, and trust—whether or not deserved—will prove exceedingly rewarding in the end.

In reaching out beyond one’s self the problem of interference becomes paramount. How much interference and what sort of interference in the affairs of others must this country allow in the formulation of her message to the rest of the world? Both by experience and by temperament, America is not given to interference. The order of freedom which is of your essence requires that you respect the freedom of others. Consequently, I find a general horror of all interference.

But surely it is not a question of rigid choice between crude interference and complete unconcern. The region between these two extremes, which may be termed the region of active, creative interest, is full of untried possibilities. You cannot, in the name of abstract respect for freedom, remain indifferent to tyranny, injustice, falsehood, the gospel of hatred, and the negation of all your supreme values. Such indifference may mean either that you do not really believe in your values, that you believe that they are relative to you only, or that

you simply do not care. But it can be shown that any of these alternatives is big with the most terrible political and spiritual consequences. Therefore your problem must be to determine the proper modality of interference.

Certainly it belongs to America's tradition to discuss and argue and try to persuade, and therefore certain vigorous climates of challenge and persuasion must be created whereby people can awaken to their shameful plight and do something about it.

But there are certain cases of darkness and closedness where bolder schemes must be attempted. If America really believes in freedom of thought and conscience, in the importance of man, in the supremacy of truth and love, then she cannot leave unrebuked and unchallenged certain situations with which she maintains so-called "friendly relations" but where these things are systematically and perennially denied.

Although when the American word comes to utterance, active, creative persuasion and rebuke must become official, yet today nongovernmental agencies are perhaps peculiarly suited to perform this function. This country is blessed with a most impressive array of such institutions: religious, educational, literary, business, philanthropic, artistic. In their dealings with the outside world, these unofficial ventures have been among the greatest and most valiant emissaries of good will that any country has sent forth; and have in some cases potently stirred and fermented and transformed otherwise perfectly hopeless situations.

The American message has been forming itself on this continent for three hundred years. Its spiritual, moral, and intellectual roots all go back, however, to the Old World. Surely therefore the European heritage is part of the depth of the American word. Although you declared your independence of Europe politically, you never broke away from Europe spiritually and intellectually. I must add the Mediterranean world and the Near East to this spiritual depth of yours, for it is from them that you received some of your supremest values. But, even politically, it is clear that the age of independence of Europe is now past and that we live in an age of essential interdependence, essential partnership. In a very real sense the Declaration of Independence is now superseded by a declaration of interdependence.

You have explored and integrated this vast space; there remains for you now to explore and integrate the last four thousand years which constitute your temporal and spiritual dimension. The broad integration of space and matter must now be supplemented by the deep integration of time and spirit. Whatever therefore the character of the final American word, surely it must be such that Plato, Aristotle, Paul, Zeno, Augustine, Averroes, Aquinas, Leibniz, Pascal and Shakespeare can more or less find themselves in it.

He who penetrates the depths must sooner or later discover that the most impressive thing in America is her Christianity. The good in this country would never have come into being without the blessing and power of Jesus Christ. Despite every external appearance of materialism and secularism, this is a profoundly religious land. Whoever tries to conceive the American word without taking full account of the suffering and love and salvation of Christ is only dreaming. I know how embarrassing this matter is to politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, and cynics; but, whatever these men think, the irrefutable truth is that the soul of America is, at its best and highest, Christian. When the tears and joy of Christ come to perfect fruition in this land, then America will utter her word.

When a people or a culture becomes conscious that it bears a message, it must sooner or later proceed to articulate it. For “no man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in a secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that they which come in may see the light.” Now the process of articulation is primarily intellectual, for we fundamentally understand each other by reason and argument. In constructing her word, America must resort to rational elaboration much more than she has cared to do so far. This is the responsibility of the great universities in refining and enlarging the American mind. Nor is reason only a vehicle or transmitting ideas arrived at in other ways; reason is at once means of conveyance and method of discovery. Just as the candle not only lights our way, but confers color and beauty upon the objects we behold, so reason discovers, constitutes, and transmits ideas. The urgent need is for a fundamental set of ideas, rationally defensible and universally valid. America will find it difficult to rise to this requirement to the extent to which subjectivism, relativism, romanticism, Freudianism, and self-separation from the positive tradition dominate her intellectual life.

But when the American universities regain for the mind its rightful authority, so that their graduates can methodically argue for hours, in absolute peace and joy, and without fatigue, not only concerning simple, immediate, practical problems, but also concerning the deepest issues of life and death and destiny, and when in this restful argument they make use of principles and horizons of thought drawn from the deepest attainments of the last four thousand years, then I believe a new day will dawn, not only upon America, but upon the whole world.

I come from a country and a people who have known more history than any other people. I tell you the excitement of time is important only if measured on the peace of eternity. What matters in the end is that which abides, that which remains immovable when everything else moves, even if it should be moved by it. And this is none other than the eternal spirit of truth and love, reaching for man, claiming and forgiving him, and sealing him with the



seal of its adoption. For I tell you man will die unless, remembering his origin, awakening to his constantly replenished, amidst tears of joy, by celestial food. It is possible for America to mediate the word of truth; it is possible for you to give this food to yourselves and your children, and to an incredibly hungry world. For the eternal is live and resplendent, though perhaps somewhat hidden, in your midst; and the roots of your tradition already draw their sustenance from the gathering of the ages.

When I think of what your churches and universities can do, by way of mediating love and forgiveness, imparting self-restraint, training the mind, revealing the truth; when I observe what your industries can accomplish, by way of transforming this whole material universe into an instrument which will lighten the burden of man; when I ponder what your God-fearing homes and small communities can create, by way of character and solidity and stability and humor; and when I reflect on the great media of the newspaper, the cinema, the radio and television, and how they can immensely help in the articulation of the American word; when I humbly and concretely think on these things, and when I further meditate that there is nothing to prevent all these agencies from dedicating themselves to truth and love and being; then, I say, perhaps the day of the Lord is at hand.