

OUTPOSTS OF LEARNING AND LIGHT

AN ESSAY BY

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We are all familiar with the general background and elements of the situation in the Near East. Several articles have been written and studies made about that situation during the last two years. Thus, we all know that we are dealing with a central region of tremendous strategic importance which is just beginning to wake up to its possibilities, with untapped and undeveloped material resources, particularly its oil deposits, and with a teeming population of something like one hundred million people, if we include the neighboring countries to the Arab world, whose standard of living is on the increase and whose political consciousness is anything but negligible. We are also familiar with the stresses and strains which permeate the entire region—politically, religiously, racially and socially. This, then, is the general, total situation in that part of the world with which I assume we are fully familiar.

We can, therefore, say that the Near East is in a state of fundamental ferment. It is seeking fundamental guidance in ideas, in social living, in economic organization and in political orientation. Everything in its future, therefore, depends on how and where it is going to get these ideas.

There are only four sources from which it can get them. In the first instance it has its own internal resources. These resources are indeed immense, because perhaps nowhere else in the world is history as living and real as in that part of the world. We have here a variegated deposit of native experience and ideas reaching back to the dimmest past; and so in its possibilities of self-renewal, the Near East can fall back upon its own internal resources, and draw therefrom much content and strength. But increasingly, those who are called upon to assume the ultimate responsibility in the various fields of re-creation are discovering that their own native resources are inadequate. They cannot cope with the problems and challenges of the day. They are not interpretive enough of the ultimate questions of the modern world. Often these resources, dear and venerable in themselves, are pathetically irrelevant to the insistent demands of the moment. But the Near East will not, can not, throw away whatever is positive and relevant and enduring in its own tradition.

The second source of our reconstruction is western Europe. This has taken the form, in general, of western imperialism. We have learned much from this contact with the west. We thus understand in varying degrees western government, western society, western science and western technology. The story of the positive side of European imperialism in the Near East is yet to be written. But it is a fact that imperialism in that part of the world has broken down, and will never work again, at least in its traditional form. We live today in the age of the United Nations; and some of us would never have dreamed, even as recently as ten years

ago, that we would be sitting at conference tables with the greatest states arguing back and forth fundamental policies. The principle of sovereign equality is written into the Charter of the United Nations, and therefore our dependence on western Europe is necessarily limited.

Then there is the great Russian challenge. Marxist ideas of social and economic organization, and of the interpretation of many and history, are seeping into the Near East. They are potent catalysts of our otherwise fossilized community, but in their sheer materialism they seem to run counter to the deepest genius of all that region. A country which has given the world its three greatest religions cannot be suddenly argued out of its deep-seated transcendentalism, not even by the seductive idealism of the materialists. The Russian challenge will continue to bear critically upon the Near East, but it will always come up against what we regard to be deepest and dearest in our own constitution.

And finally, there is the American impact upon the Near East. I am not talking of American commerce and the films of Hollywood. I am thinking, rather, of your innumerable schools, colleges and universities which dot that entire area. I regard this subtle intellectual influence as decisive so far as the possibilities of our reconstruction are concerned, precisely because it seems to combine the good elements of all the preceding three sources of direction without their bad concomitants. For, from the very beginning, American influence has studiously allied itself with and encouraged our own positive internal resources. Your schools have never endeavored to Americanize us or wean us from our own traditions. They have sincerely, if at times naively, applied the American principle of "helping them to help themselves." They have encouraged us to develop our own culture. They have always fostered the study and revival of the vernacular. They have not denationalized us; they have rather liberalized and democratized our life. But they have been also a distinct influence as critics of whatever is dark and outmoded and useless in our own background.

Then, they have helped also to impart the constructive element of western imperialism without the odious exploitation which all too often went with it. They have taught us science and the ways of democracy, and they have, in general, opened up the western world for us. Through American education, we feel we are in constant touch with the western world without any implication of exploitation by that world.

And as regards the message of Communism, nothing has been stressed more clearly and consistently by the American schools of the Near East, certainly by the American University of Beirut, than the idea of social service. We are constantly taught social responsibility for the masses, for the underprivileged, for the poor and dispossessed, and all this without in the least destroying the respect of the individual or rebelling against the deepest insights of our region. American education in the Near East is the only effective, positive antidote to the socialist challenge of Russian Communism.

It will then be my thesis that the intellectual and spiritual meaning of the United States in the Near East is the synthesis of the positive elements of all the sources from which we can draw in the great task of reconstruction ahead.

The United States, then, finds itself in an enviable position in the Near East today, thanks not to any official interest or planning in the past, but to the cumulative effect of a band of individual pioneers who went out there for a whole century trying unofficially but devotedly to give us of the best they knew. This century-old pioneering activity is now beginning to reap its fruits. Internally, there are many leaders throughout that region in all the walks of life who derived their education and outlook mainly from American influences. Externally, the American-educated representatives of those countries have made themselves felt in world conferences and in world capitals.

I should like to argue, therefore, that even if you wished, you could not withdraw today from the Near East intellectually and ideologically. I say this for four reasons. In the first place, you should not withdraw; on the contrary, you should consolidate and expand, because we need and want you in the Near East. We shall continue to need you for at least fifty years more. It therefore would be a strange spectacle indeed if while you are asked, while you are welcomed, to stay, you should thereupon decide to withdraw.

Then, you should not withdraw, on the contrary, you should consolidate and expand, because the vitality and endurance and survival of democracy is measured by whether it can teach others, by whether it can impart a positive message to others. If it cannot do this, then it is not universal; and not being universal, it is not true. In that case, it has already been vanquished.

In the third place, you could not withdraw even if you desired to, on the contrary, you should consolidate and expand, because if you withdrew you would be disfiguring if not destroying one of the great monuments of the spirit of this country, namely those magnificent institutions of learning abroad. If only you knew and saw with your own eyes what these rare temples of the spirit and mind have been and are doing in those lands! I can assure you there is no greater pity than if the inarticulate but very real need for intellectual and social guidance which this country can meet through those institutions, were not met. If you for whatever reasons, should let down the silent expectations of you which that part of the world deeply holds, you would have missed one of your greatest possible achievements.

And finally, you should not withdraw, on the contrary, you should consolidate and expand, because if you withdrew, somebody else would move in. This is as certain in the present closely-knit world as is any law of science. If physical nature abhors a vacuum, intellectual and political nature abhors a vacuum even more insistently. This has never been more true than it is in the world today; and nowhere more than in the Near East.

Those outposts of learning and light, those front lines of ideological defense, are among the dearest products of your culture. If you love and protect them, you will be loving and protecting the deepest elements in your tradition.

It is true that certain official or semi-official lines of American policy may be objectionable to us in the Arab world, but the presence of these American outposts of enlightenment and service, and the fund of goodwill they have patiently engendered in our hearts towards your country for a century now, will always intercede for America in the moment of decision.

The vision I have is that, far from withdrawing at the present critical moment, you should intensify your interest in that part of the world. And your great opportunity is to ally yourselves with the liberal elements of those lands: the educated, progressive, youthful elements; the elements which have been trained in American schools, in your schools, to work day and night for the equitable uplift of the wretched masses, but never to allow this healthy social zeal to degenerate into materialistic socialism wherein any western authentic values, the sacred values on which the West has been patiently built for three thousand years, the values, namely, of the sound, genuine American tradition, are entirely put aside if not trampled under foot.

And what have we learned from these American institutions? We have learned science and technology. We have learned social responsibility, namely, to see and criticize and correct the excesses and abuses of our feudalism. We have learned the basic ideas and practices of democracy: the ordinary decencies of civilized existence; the supreme worth of the individual and especially of individual effort and initiative; the sanctity of man, of the human soul, and that man is an end in himself and never only a means toward something else, like the State or the race or an idea; the democratic form of government, public debate, representative government, the principle that the people ultimately rule, that they are sovereign. We have learned, both by precept and concept, honesty and uprightness, and the supreme importance of character. It has been constantly hammered into us that the spiritual is supreme over the material, and nothing shocks some of us when we visit this country more than to realize that this principle, which we were taught by Americans, is belied by so many things we see. We have learned also that truth is attained by reason and argument, and not by despotic fiat or the dark following of the blind impulses of the masses. We have been made to see that there is a great tradition of thought and life and noble sentiment built up throughout the ages which we may seek and find and understand, and in which we may liberally participate. And certainly we have learned that not by xenophobia, but by fair cooperation; not by hatred, but by dignified and trusting friendship; not by pathetic withdrawal into oneself, but by an adventurous outreaching toward what is positive and valuable and abiding in others, will East and West form a fruitful association with one another.

We have learned these things in the classroom, in the leisurely intercourse on the campus, from our books, from the lectures and sermons we have heard, from the friendships we built up with Americans, from the campus societies and clubs, from our joyful mingling with one another in an atmosphere of freedom. And, therefore, I ask you in all simplicity and humility: is there anything more important than all this? Can this be neglected, overlooked, weakened?

I understand, that you are trying to raise for the Near East College Association fifteen million dollars. Pray tell me, what is this sum by comparison with what it can do for that central and perhaps decisive region in the world by way of transforming and educating and emancipating our existence; and by comparison with what it can do for this country by way of buttressing your basic ideas and way of life, at a moment and in a century when, I can assure you, this way of life will be sorely tried.