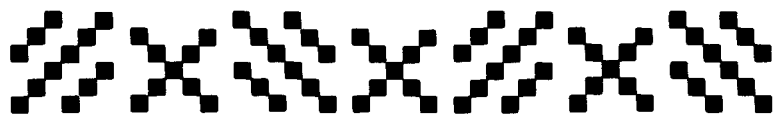


## A British Diplomat's Portrait of America in 1939

*Edited by Thomas E. Hachey\**



Ever since Alexis de Tocqueville first anatomized Americans and their country in his *Democracy in America* (1835), numerous Europeans have followed his example and have produced scores of critical books, articles, and essays of a similar nature. The value of such writings and the validity of their conclusions have proved dependent upon a number of considerations, not the least of which has been the perceptivity of the particular author himself.

Of especial interest to the student of Anglo-American relations in the twentieth century are the confidential and candid analyses of America prepared by British Foreign Office specialists during the period immediately preceding the Second World War. These accounts, representing the considered judgments of professionally trained foreign observers, are particularly noteworthy both for the insights which they afford of the Briton's impression of America and for the correspondingly subtle disclosures which they contain about the Briton himself. One such document is exceptional in each of these respects. Written in 1939 by a member of the London Foreign Office, it remained closed to public view until 1970 when British archives for this period were made available through a recent act of Parliament.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Access to these archives is now governed by the Public Records Act of 1967, which introduced from January 1, 1968, a "thirty-year rule," opening the archives to the end of 1937 and making provisions thereafter for the annual advancement of the open date on January 1 of each year. A few papers are closed for fifty years by the lord chancellor's instruments under Section 5 (i) of the Public Records Act of 1958.

On June 8, 1939, British Foreign Office Counselor John Balfour delivered a lecture to the British Imperial Defense College, a special staff college for joint service operations equivalent to the United States National War College. His audience consisted of officers from the armed services of the various Commonwealth nations who were attending the Imperial Defense College for the study of higher strategy and military policy. Balfour's training was in diplomacy, however, and his remarks on that occasion were intended to provide his military audience with an appreciation of those critically important but curiously complex people, the Americans.

Educated at Eton and at New College, Oxford, Balfour's career in the British foreign service had taken him to posts in Budapest, Madrid, Sofia, Belgrade, and Washington. In January, 1937, he was assigned to the London Foreign Office and was simultaneously designated an advisor to the Imperial War College.<sup>2</sup> It was in this latter capacity that he prepared his lecture, vaguely entitled "American Characteristics," a copy of which he gave to a close associate, Sir Frederick Whyte of the Ministry of Information. So impressed was Whyte with this essay that he was moved to write and ask Balfour if the Ministry of Information might publish it in a suitable magazine or perhaps print it as one of the ministry's own pamphlets. Balfour was told that he would be assured anonymity since the lecture could be published "over somebody else's signature."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, parts of Balfour's lecture were in any case borrowed liberally from "somebody else."<sup>4</sup> A few of his remarks reflect the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner's writings, while others reveal a familiarity with James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America* (1931) and Denis William Brogan's *The American Political System* (1933). Of far greater interest to specialists in this period, however, are the countless examples of this British career diplomat's personal value judgments and conclusions about Americans: the presumed relation between the radical climate patterns of the country and the frightfully tense people who inhabit it; the inference that violence is a generic part of American

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<sup>2</sup> *Foreign Office Lists: 1940* (London, 1941), 78.

<sup>3</sup> Foreign Office Minute, September 18, 1939, Foreign Office General Correspondence File 371, vol. 22814 (London Public Records Office).

<sup>4</sup> Foreign Office Minute, June 23, 1939, *ibid.*

life; the belief that American women retain the same qualities of "self-reliance, practical good sense and never-failing kind-heartedness" which supposedly distinguished their forerunners of the frontier era; and the observation that Americans are remarkably possessed with a sense of their national self importance despite the huge geography and the equally large population of the country. The reader will also perceive an elitist, if not a racist, attitude in some of Balfour's statements. His condescending view of naive and acquisitive American tourists abroad, his candid but unsympathetic remarks about the inequities suffered by the American Negro, and his observation that Americans had no choice but to keep new and unassimilable immigrants at an arm's length serve to illuminate the diplomat more than they do his subject.

London's Foreign Office was conscious of the sensitive state of Anglo-American relations in 1939<sup>5</sup> and was accordingly anxious to avoid any possible cause of provocation. Following Balfour's communication to his superiors of Whyte's request for a copy of the lecture, the Foreign Office replied to the Ministry of Information: "This proposal has been carefully considered here, but the opinion is that it is so difficult to keep secret the real authorship of a magazine article or pamphlet, that it would probably be undesirable to incur the risk which publication might involve."<sup>6</sup> Another Foreign Office member wrote Balfour saying: "I feel sure that after a time it would be known that you had written it, and as you have had to criticise in some respects—though mildly and good-naturedly—a friendly but touchy people, I cannot help thinking that it would be taking a risk. I should be inclined to let the Ministry of Information have a copy for internal use only."<sup>7</sup> And with that decision the document was placed among the British government's closed archives until the papers for this period were declassified and finally made available in 1970. After a delay of thirty-five years Balfour's lecture can now be published. Its value for the students of British and American history in the interwar years is manifest in the number of insights to be found in the lecture which follows.

<sup>5</sup> Foreign Office Minute, September 19, 1939, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> F. R. Gowell, London Foreign Office, to Sir Frederick Whyte, Ministry of Information, October 16, 1939, *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Foreign Office Minute, September 20, 1939, *ibid.*

AMERICAN CHARACTERISTICS<sup>1</sup>

As I see it the destiny of the United States has been determined in the first instance by the fact that, until the recent past at any rate, America has been regarded by Europeans as well as by its own inhabitants as a land of promise. A variety of motives—religious persecution, political tyranny, the stress of economic want, and the spirit of pure adventure—were responsible for successive waves of emigration to the New World. There were also profound differences in the type of immigrant—between the original English Puritan, Dutch, and German settlers of pre-revolutionary days, the Irish of the early XIXth century, the Germans and Scandinavians of the later period and the still later influx of Eastern and Southern Europeans. But whatever the motives which determined these movements and however little each crop of new arrivals might resemble its predecessor, it is safe to say that the hope of a freer and better life overseas for the individual emigrant was the main incentive underlying the exodus from Europe towards the shores of North America.

No approach to a proper understanding of what the United States mean to-day can be made without an attempt to grasp the part which the hope of a better and freer life for the individual in the land of promise has played as a recurrent theme in the chequered course of American history. The persistence of this ideal is, I submit, primarily due to the two following causes: the absence of class distinction and geography. With few exceptions the first generations of settlers no less than the immigrants of later times, were recruited from middle and lower class stock. Social distinctions might, and indeed did, subsist among the North American

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<sup>1</sup> This lecture, designated as paper number 4272, is in the London Public Records Office, Foreign Office General Correspondence File 391, volume 22814. In the typed copy of the lecture which was placed in the foreign office files and which has been used for this transcription, Balfour numbered each paragraph. These numbers have here been omitted. When quotations extended beyond one line in the original typescript, additional quotation marks were placed at the beginning of each new line. These superfluous marks have also been omitted as have the words typed at the bottom of each page which were repeated on the next page. Otherwise, vagaries of spelling, capitalization, and paragraphing have been followed exactly as in the original typed manuscript. A [*sic*] has been used to indicate errors only if it was felt that confusion might result concerning whether the mistakes were editorial, authorial, or typographical.

colonies as they progressed towards ordered communities, and an expedition to Mount Vernon or Monticello, the Georgian mansions of Washington and Jefferson, suffices to show the visitor to the United States how far the revolution owed its success to the leadership of well-to-do and cultivated country gentlemen. But the tradition which formed the minds of the fathers of the republic was not that of a feudal and privileged aristocracy. The newcomers to the North American continent found a wilderness to subdue and the process of hacking out homes for themselves from the primeval forests caused class barriers to be levelled away if only because free land was to be obtained for the effort and the scarcity of hired labour raised the relative position of the worker. In the northern colonies at any rate the self-respect of the individual was also enhanced by the prevailing Puritan code with its assertion that those who practised it belonged to a chosen race. It thus came about that long before the War of Independence the plain man had been able to assert himself in the affairs of his local community to a degree which would not have been possible in XVIIIth century England, and that the seeds of a self-governing democracy based upon the consent of the governed were already firmly planted on American soil.

With the Declaration of Independence of 1776, the hard-won struggle for freedom which followed it, and the promulgation of the Constitution of 1787, the Americans awoke to a conscious knowledge of their new found heritage. "We hold these truths to be self-evident" runs the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that amongst these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Every American schoolboy is made aware of this proposition and is taught that the United States exists, not as a mystic entity floating above his head, but for the rational purpose of defending the rights of man in accordance with the provisions for ensuring the equality of all citizens which the founders of the Republic embodied in a written document.

Although not immediately relevant in the present connexion I would at this point draw attention to two characteristics of the Constitution which have a bearing on the attitude of the United States Government both in external and internal affairs. In the first place the delegates to the Con-

stitutional Convention of Philadelphia in 1787 were concerned to win the adherence of the smaller States of the Commonwealth to a federal system. Whilst in the Lower House of Congress representation is based solely on population, the framers of the Constitution thus found it necessary to recognise the theoretical equality of the various States by limiting the representation of each of them in the Senate to two members. The Senators, who in virtue of a 1913 amendment are elected direct by the people, must consequently be regarded in the first instance as the guardians of States' rights; even now they are jealous of any encroachment by the President on their privileges of local patronage, and tend to approach federal problems with a critical detachment worthy of a foreign ambassador; they are apt, however insignificant in population the State for which they sit, to place its particular interests before those of the Union as a whole. A second and more serious defect from the point of view of governmental efficiency and the purposeful conduct of foreign relations lies in the so-called division of powers. In their anxiety to protect American liberties against any threat from a domestic Caesar aiming at the kingly crown the Constitution-makers set up a system of checks and balances which circumscribes the powers of the Executive. Occupying during his four year term of office a position which in some respects approximates to that of a Dictator, the President, with a Cabinet of his own choice functioning apart from Congress, is none the less fettered by the legislature which can override his veto and ignore his recommendations. In foreign affairs the consent of two-thirds of the Senate is necessary for the ratification of treaties, and, apart from the particularist tendency of the Senators already noted, the President must reckon with obstruction to his policies by members of his own party in the House of Representatives [*sic*] over whom he cannot exercise the strict discipline which our parliamentary system ensures to the Prime Minister of the day. The method of election of Congressmen in any case makes of them little more than the obedient delegates of the sectional interests which they represent. Lastly, by its power to decide whether a legislative statute offends against the Constitution, the Supreme Court, as President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt himself at one time found to his cost, is provided with a weapon which can seriously impede the plans of the Executive as approved by Congress.

To return now to our central theme: if America had not in fact been a land of promise, the ideal of a freer and better individual life might have withered and died. The frontier, or rather a succession of frontiers, guaranteed that there should be no lack of opportunity for the individual to realise his dream. It is easy to single out one phenomenon in the history of a nation and to make it responsible for the behaviour of the people who compose it. If, however, for no other reason than that popular sentiment in the United States is still inclined to regard the small farmer as the essential Uncle Sam, we do not go far astray if we assign to the influence of the frontier a large part in moulding the character of the American and in determining his attitude towards the outside world. The quest for land and prosperity which, until the last decades of the XIXth century impelled the trek forwards to the West in search of new horizons, has left a fever in the American's blood which still stirs him to raw emotion. The conditions in which the pioneers' lot was cast in any case made for the adoption of clear-cut standards of moral conduct devoid of complicated half-tones. In the great open spaces men were indeed men, to be judged by their ability to dominate the rude forces of nature. In almost all sections of North America nature herself inclines to extremes. The United States extend over a continent of dazzling light and sharp shadows, of drought and overwhelming flood, of sunshine and violent storm, which, because of these sudden changes and for some other mysterious tonic quality inherent in the climate, tends to produce a high nervous tension in the living beings who inhabit it. The paramount need of conquering the wilderness and of ensuring its rapid development to ordered prosperity, combined with the very size of the country itself, caused the pioneer to attach particular importance to the quantitative measure of value. The frontier period, which reached its heyday between the years 1830 and 1880, thus saw the birth of the American conception of "bigger and better elephants" with its corollary of "boosting"—a method of advertisement conducive to the rapid growth of the animals. From this period too can be derived American restlessness, which at worst expresses itself to-day in a shiftless disregard of surroundings and an unwillingness to "stay put"—I myself have seen a house complete with its owners moving down a Cali-

fornian high road—and at best in an eagerness to acquire new experience and enlarge the boundaries of knowledge. The American is athirst for knowledge and to-day, when hitherto accepted values are being put to the test, this inherited characteristic may lead to the garnering of a plentiful harvest in the field of learning. The craving of the pioneer for news to break the monotony of his daily toil, his lack of a desire for privacy in circumstances where privacy was unavailable, his enforced concentration on the task immediately to hand, his energy and self-reliance, his disposition as a small town dweller to mistrust the motives of those whose intellectual and social background differed from his own—all these frontier traits have left their mark on the modern American. Although it may sound far-fetched I would also suggest that the sentimental streak in many Americans derives from these earlier days when Puritan emotion was like a rough hatchet and lacked the keener edge of intellect.

Contrary to what is sometimes argued I do not think that the lawlessness which has been so prevalent in the United States was primarily due to frontier conditions. Lynchings where the citizen took the law into his own hand, may have first become a practice on the frontier and they gained an evil notoriety as a result of the clandestine activities of the Ku Klux Klan during the period of misrule in the Southern States by northern “carpet-baggers”, poor-white “scalawags”, and negroes which followed the Civil War. But, no less than murders, mob riots and other deeds of violence, lynchings are to be found with increasing frequency throughout America from about 1830 onwards. This sinister blemish on the national life is the obverse side to the medal of individual freedom. A readiness to disregard the law, and particularly bad laws, of which prohibition provided the shining latter-day example, was imbued in a people who had rebelled against the inconvenient decrees of an absentee king and parliament. The very insistence of American political philosophy upon the rights of the individual was an incentive to the citizen to evade the more unpleasant duties which his lawgivers prescribed, and to the latter to refrain from insisting upon their performance. The absorbing passion for money-making, as the material evidence of success of which I shall speak later, proved an even more potent factor in lowering the respect of the average American for the law.



In the land of promise, where wealth spelt power and opportunity, and optimism was in the air as well as in the blood, the rich man was none too scrupulous as to the means employed to augment his fortune. His facilities for wrongdoing were enhanced as a result of the spoils system which, by entrusting the administration of justice to political place-men, rendered the courts amenable to graft and corruption. When himself engaged in thwarting the law for the sake of piling up his capital it was only natural that he should turn a blind eye to the delinquencies of those less favoured than himself, who in turn lacked the restraining influence of a better example. The congregating in mushroom cities of immigrant elements belonging to the lowest strata of society also offered a fruitful soil for a brand of crime which has added the words "gangster" and "racketeer" to the English vocabulary. We may, I suggest, ascribe the blame for this unhappy state of affairs, which is already in process of disappearance, to the growing pangs of industrial youth and to the state organisation of justice rather than to frontier conditions. In saying this I would not for a moment deny that there is much more than a grain of truth in the movie screen portrayal of the wild and woolly west, and that, owing to the starved character of the surroundings, the repressed emotions of the frontier dwellers were liable to find an outlet in indiscriminate acts of violence and in orgies of evangelical fervour. But on the whole the average pioneer was a hardworking honest and Godfearing individual; the product of a strenuous open air life where everything of importance to him, with the exception of his wife and his religion, was self-made. As a last tribute to the frontier period I would, *pace* the Hollywood blonde and the New York glamour debutante, date to the woman of frontier days some of the more commendable qualities of her modern American sister—her self-reliance, practical good sense and never-failing kind-heartedness, her complete indifference to artificial airs and graces—tempered withal by a tendency to gossip and pry into her neighbours' affairs.

When I was in the United States between 1924 and 1928 the homelier virtues of the pioneers were somewhat at a discount amongst the inhabitants of the eastern seaboard (I have used the word "homely" in its English sense and not in its American and Scottish connotation of an ugly female).

Generally speaking all eyes were then fixed upon the astonishing results of mass production and standardised methods. Even the older stock of New Englanders who, thanks to a deeply ingrained tradition, have preserved intact a happy blend of puritanism and of the mellow culture of middle XIXth century Boston, had to some extent succumbed to the prevailing belief in unending material progress—were they not reassured by the presence in the White House of Calvin Coolidge, himself the quintessence of rural Massachusetts [*sic*] caninness? In those halcyon days it was thought that high wages and jobs for all had come to stay; economics and Mr. Ford had decreed that prices in Wall Street would soar to ever higher levels; the millennium of eternal riches had at last dawned. In point of fact, as is now known in the light of bitter retrospect, the United States with a frontier which had reached the limits of its expansion in 1890, restricted immigration, foreign debtors and an economy partly dependent upon world markets, were gathering the Dead Sea fruit of a post-war boom. Little though they recked it at the time, the gospel of rugged individualism preached so confidently by the prophets of that hardboiled period had lost its motive power with the passing of the golden age of unbounded opportunity. Whereas prosperity before 1914 had been real prosperity based on the creation of new values prosperity during and after the War was illusory; it proceeded from non-productive investment and from the manipulation of values degenerating into a fever of speculation.

This brings me to the influence of business on the American character. It is not my purpose when discussing this question to dwell in detail, even if I felt qualified to do so, upon the growth of industrial America which at an ever-accelerating pace proceeded side by side with the opening up of the continent. The stupendous scope of its achievement is revealed by the cloud-capped forest of skyscrapers which greets the traveller on his arrival at New York harbour. It seems evident, however, that the same causes which rendered possible the persistence of the ideal of a better and freer individual life operated to favour the accumulation of vast fortunes in the hands of enterprising business men. The size of the United States and the absence of any insurmountable class barriers intensified the competition to get rich quick, and from the late eighteen-twenties onwards the opportunity

for success was progressively enhanced by the opening up of the frontier, the increase in the population, the intensive exploitation of natural resources and the development of manufacturing and machinery. The race to capture the glittering prizes which were open to all accounts for some of the less creditable aspects of American public life. The expansion of big business the world over has been characterised by a certain ruthlessness of method and by a spirit of the devil take the hindmost. I have already alluded to the unscrupulousness [*sic*] of the American man of affairs when commenting upon lawlessness in the United States. The industrial revolution in England also saw the rise to power of a new class of merchant princes, railway magnates and factory owners whose standard of conduct was by no means always above reproach. But in the feudal society to which success gradually gave them entrance the possession of wealth was associated with the ownership of landed property carrying with it a sense of responsibility on the part of the rich man towards his dependants and a tradition of service towards the State. Whatever the defects of the aristocratic system, the idea that money-making was intrinsically virtuous formed no part of it, and the *nouveau riche* was concerned to accept the outlook of his betters if only for the sake of gaining their good opinion. In the United States no such consideration was present. It is true that, albeit on the basis of slave labour, the life of the Southern planter was in many respects akin to that of the English Country gentleman, but although cotton from the plantation estates fostered the growth of the New England textile mills, the type of civilisation for which their owners stood was antagonistic to that of the industrial north, and with the defeat of the Southern States and the economic ruin of their landed gentry, this leavening factor ceased to play any part in the development of the United States.

If we are to understand the spirit in which the American approached the business of money making in the Land of Promise, we must realise that the United States were not only Protestant in their religion and social outlook, but predominantly Calvinistic. The duty of the individual, so ran the Calvinist doctrine, was not to concentrate upon himself but rather to co-operate in furthering the will of God in this world. It was the essence of Calvinism to unite religion and daily life by teaching that the better the faithful performed

their daily task, the more they worked for the glory of God. From this conception of work as a religious duty, it was only a step to the thesis that money making was in itself a moral act which justified the aims of the person engaged in it, regardless of how the act was performed and of its wider social implications. This thesis, with the resulting confusion in the scale of ethical values which it involved, would not perhaps have gained such a hold on the mind of many Americans had it not been for the emphasis which public opinion necessarily laid upon the need for the speedy development of the United States. The man who went into business was contributing to the national welfare: in the process of amassing a fortune for himself he was enlarging the field of opportunity for his fellow citizens by building up the means of production, and was in consequence performing a patriotic service. What more natural therefore, in circumstances where everything desirable seemed to depend, and to a great extent really did depend, upon the steady and rapid increase in size, than that efficiency and vitality in business should come to be regarded as Christian virtues and that the riches of the successful business man should appear to be sanctified by the approbation of Divine Providence?

In thus trying to analyse why the worship of material success became embedded in the American scheme of things, I do not wish to overstress the seamier side of my subject. Indeed, in the pursuit of success, it should be noted that money was seldom regarded as an end in itself. During my four years experience of the United States, I personally never heard a rich man boast of his wealth—excepting a picturesque old Irish American who once declared to me with gusto that he could buy up the Vatican with all its contents. Money-making was a glorious game of chance in which luck tended to favour the devotee endowed with the greatest skill and ability. My real interest is in fact not so much in the phenomenon as in the reasons for it—the Calvinist outlook and the existence of an equal chance for all to get rich in a new country of vast opportunity, which alongside with the pioneer spirit lie at the root of much that is otherwise inexplicable in the United States. All three factors have in one form or another played their part in moulding the peculiar structure of American political and social life. We have seen that in drawing up the Constitution, the fathers of the Re-

public were concerned to found the future of the State upon the principle of the rights of man to which the inhabitants of the thirteen Colonies had already given concrete expression. Thanks to this rational basis the state in America, in direct antithesis to the totalitarian creed of present day Germany and Italy, was not called upon to function as a self-contained organism. The Federal Government, in which were vested strictly limited powers, was primarily created as a matter of practical convenience for administering to the welfare of the community at large whenever the latter required its services; the legislatures of the individual States of the Union enacted laws to regulate the daily lives of the people, and the whole fabric was the reflection of the popular will and designed for the specific purpose of expressing it. Excepting however on the issue of slavery, which divided the country into well-defined units, the very size of the continent precluded the evolution of parties with programmes which would adequately satisfy the needs of the various regions. Unless he voices the will of the people, the President himself, however forceful his personality, cannot impose his dictates upon the party machine whose platform is inevitably reduced to the least common denominator. The party machine itself exists as a practical means of ensuring success to the sectional groups who choose to make use of it. It follows that it is to the associations formed by these sectional groups to promote their interests that we must look for the mainspring of political influence in the United States. They, and not the traditional political parties are the real generators of political action; it is through them and their swarm of lobbyists in Washington that the business of government is directed. As André Siegfried well puts it in his book "America comes of Age"

"The system extends from the smallest county, through the State capitals, right up to the Federal government. We find them at every turn, formulating new laws, overseeing the wording of the text, and controlling votes in Congress. They bring constant pressure to bear, both indirect and direct; so the politician has no possible means of escape. Not merely do they get the laws passed, but they see to it that they are applied, and so carry out the maxim of Thiers: 'Un ordre donné dont on ne surveille pas l'exécution est un ordre vain' ".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> André Siegfried, *America Comes of Age: A French Analysis*, translated by H. H. Hemming and Doris Hemming (New York, 1927), 253-54.

As the best energies of the Americans were absorbed by production, politics could never be more than a secondary pursuit. In the era of rugged individualism, the moral if not the material foundations of which were swept away in the economic collapse of 1929, the business men who, broadly speaking, comprised almost the entire electorate of the prosperous classes, were content to allow their governments—Federal, State and Municipal—to be run by a class of hired politicians so as to leave themselves free to follow more lucrative callings. Public service, which according to the Calvinist conception required that the individual should fulfill the will of God by devoting himself to the good of the community, was synonymous with a business career. Salesmanship was more important than statesmanship. This outlook, combined with the spoils system, to the evil effects of which I have alluded in relation to the application of the law, accounts for many of the abuses that have disfigured American public life. It was, so ran the argument of the rich man, the function of Government and of the successful office-seekers who administered its decrees to assist him in developing the country's resources; if normal methods of persuasion failed, the lure of mammon would ease the conscience of the State legislator. The oil scandals of the Harding régime, where members of the Cabinet were proved to have sold themselves to corrupt financiers, marked the high water mark of this era, but the notion of graft is too deeply interwoven with the American public system to be easily eradicated. In the great cities teeming with immigrant workmen providing the cheap labour material for the capitalist, enterprising and unscrupulous politicians could emulate the business magnates by acquiring power for themselves as the bosses of the local machine—marshalling the votes of the illiterate and alien-born masses, to capture and often to demoralise municipal government. A history could be written of the immoral tactics employed by these organisations, of which Tammany Hall is the outstanding example. Although municipal reform is gaining headway, the machines are still a power in American politics and the enquiring student can find an illuminating account of them in D. W. Brogan's book on the "American Political System."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Denis W. Brogan, *The American Political System* (London, 1933).

This system, which I have attempted to describe in outline, would not perhaps have worked had it not been for the fact that until 1890 the unlimited areas of free land available for settlers simplified the task of Government and that the American in any case has a genius for spontaneous co-operation. Quite apart from the fact that from the Calvinist point of view the group and not the individual is the social unit and the foundation of the religious structure, the idea of collaborating with others is in harmony with the natural bent of the American's inclination. He takes to the community spirit like a duck to water, is gregarious by temperament and at his happiest in a noisy crowd. How vast a difference there is between the aloofness of the Englishman coldly buried in his "Times" in club or railway carriage and the American with his enlivening "I'm pleased to meet you" and "How are you feeling brother?" The words "cordial" and "informal" which spring to the American's lips express a warmth of democratic spirit towards his fellow-men which his behaviour does not belie. If his approach to them sometimes strikes the foreigner as unduly hearty he is punctilious to a fault, and in comparison the Englishman sometimes appears off-handed and even rude. His hospitality is as large as his heart and he asks for nothing in return. Like every other human quality these pleasing and almost never failing traits in the American character are something which defy analysis. If, however, I may hazard an opinion as to the herd instinct which exists so strongly in the United States, I would suggest that it is in part at any rate derived from the conditions of the frontier period. At that stage in the country's development the man who joined a community and did his best to hasten its growth was not only an added unit in a population which might have been just as happy and prosperous without his presence; he was regarded as contributing to the prosperity and as furthering the ambitions of every other member. The hard life on the frontier also favoured the survival of the individual who was best adapted to make his own personality subservient to the common good. The successful man set the tune to others and in a community where the people were as busy as bees in finding new outlets for wealth there was no place for the sensitive introvert and unkindly critic. Religion and education were pressed into the service of community development—the former, as

we have seen, by exalting production as an ideal—in my time in the United States one preacher went so far as to assert that Christ was the super-salesman of history—and the other by tending to concentrate upon the teaching of subjects which make for a successful business career. Brought up in such an atmosphere the average American, who because of his fundamental honesty is usually acutely aware of his own shortcomings and almost pathetically responsive to the praise of foreigners whom he is ready with however little justification to credit with superior qualities, would naturally prefer to associate with his fellow-men rather than to reflect in a solitude for which he is ill-adapted. For purely utilitarian reasons he can welcome the company of a stranger as a means of obtaining new 'reactions', 'view-points' and 'angles' bearing upon his personal problems. It may even lead to his securing valuable business contacts. Whilst there have been many exceptions to the rule—and a galaxy of living authors in the United States both critical and creative, reinforced by innumerable students eager for knowledge of every description, would seem to hold out the promise of a New World Renaissance in thought—American culture has proved on the whole to be extensive rather than intensive—it resembles a river in full flood spreading over acres of virgin soil rather than a deep lake hemmed in by rocks of ancient geological formation.

Just as success on the frontier demanded the creation of bigger and better elephants so the rise of big business encouraged the expansion of the beasts to mammoth size. Success in business required expert organisation, the canalisation of effort, the establishment of large-scale undertakings to ensure that men were not worsted by their rivals and that the best possible advantages could be derived from the vast potentialities of consumer demands. Other countries in the new economic age came to grapple with the same problems of big business organisation, but the captains of industry in the United States headed this march of progress with their Corporation trusts, giant mergers, controlled banks, and horde of lawyers versed in the art of circumventing the law. Apart from the exercise of pressure on government already noted, the need for increased profits and ensuring a ready domestic market for standardised products, led to the development of high power salesmanship, or what is termed



"public relations", and the whole technique of advertisement for which a press, largely controlled by big business, and later still the radio, provided the requisite medium. The art of ideal salesmanship has familiarised us with such terms as "pep", "punch", "go-getter", "he-man", "redblood" and "good mixer". In parenthesis I should point out that the consequences of the machine-made age were not all on the moral debit side. However callous in the conduct of his affairs, the Captain of Industry normally remained a kindly and unselfish person in private life. What he might do as a man and what he might do as a business man bore little relation to one another. The fortune he had amassed was there to spend; it not merely provided means for his wife and daughters to acquire luxuries [*sic*], but also enabled his home to be beautified. The later generation of multi-millionaires went further and endowed their country-men with educational and social welfare institutions and with collections of art treasures which are the wonder of the world. I am not amongst those who think that the migration of artistic works to America is a thing to be regretted.

It would seem to stand to reason that a public incessantly deluged with mass-produced propaganda and slogans should itself tend to exhibit somewhat mass-produced emotions of a character appropriate to the aims of those who sought to arouse them. In the United States this ambition for converting bigger and better elephants into mammoths falls upon a public avid for sensation as a relief to its somewhat cramped outlook and highly susceptible to appeals based upon mass psychology. The power of the press and radio in the United States is however a debatable point and I should hesitate to express a definite opinion on so thorny a subject. In so far as they are able to tell the public exactly what they wish them to know, their power for misrepresentation is incalculable. In the international field, no less than in the narrower sphere of domestic news, the tendency of the agents of publicity is to pander to the appetite for sensation of a people prone to exaggeration. But public opinion in the United States is an incalculable thing—swayed on occasions by sudden emotional outbursts sweeping the country like a prairie fire, whilst normally only responsive to the secondary interests which govern daily life. It is moreover a baffling paradox that in a land that displays a greater uniformity in

its language, habits, and daily routine than any other comparable area in the world the average man should none the less possess a sense of his own individual importance and a disposition to interpret events and information after his own independent fashion and with a directness of intuition disconcerting to the European. The word "debunking" best expresses this process and woe betide the individual or institution which is subjected to it! Incidentally I suspect that an eagerness to debunk himself and others accounts for much of the peculiarly invigorating flavour of the American's humour—its shrewd realism and enormous sense of the ridiculous, beside which the Englishman's quiet innuendoes and revelling in the sheer delight of pure nonsense appear like the antics of a Lilliput in the land of Brobdingnag. However this may be, the full force of propaganda to some extent loses its effect and as American public opinion is a volatile substance, the citizen, whose reflexes tend in any case to be dulled by the constant bludgeoning to which they are subjected, quickly tires of the sensation of the moment and is off on the trail of fresh emotional experiences.

It would be altogether mistaken to suppose that because the rhythm of life in America moves along uniform lines the temperament of the inhabitants is drab and lacking in zest for variety. On the contrary the average American, who takes pride in performing his work and values activity for its own sake, possesses a spontaneous capacity for enjoyment, and if the range of pleasures offered to him conforms to a standardised pattern, he does not enter into them with less enthusiasm on that account. Leaving aside petting parties and the pictures, let us glance for a moment at some of the varied pursuits which cater for the restlessness in our hero's blood. Does he seek relaxation in make-belief from the drab round of his daily business? He can 'get together' with his brother braves in the Lodge-night mysteries of his own peculiar order or ritual, whether it be the Elks, Oddfellows, Knights of Pythias, Loyal Order of Buffaloes, Shriners, Cedars of Lebanon, Knights of Columbus, Sachems, Sagamores or Wiskinskies, disguise himself in fantastic apparel and swear awful oaths of secrecy. Does he feel the ancestral urge to better the life of the community? He can 'join up' with one of the local branches in his home town of the innumerable moral uplift societies which besprinkle the coun-

try, such as the National Civic Service Reform League, the National Committee on Prisons and Prison Labour, the Free Press Defence League, the Physicians Protective Association, the League for the Preservation of American Independence, the National Committee for Soldiers and Sailors Relief, or the National Committee to secure rank for Army nurses. Is his spirit moved with a craving to revive the ardours and adventures of frontier days and to resavour the kinship of the caravan camp-fire? He can repair to the nearest golf course and there, arrayed in plus-four of portentous dimensions and gayly coloured woolen stockings, pick his path as best he may from one predestined goal of green turf to the other, returning afterwards to the friendly pow-wow of the club-house to learn from his brethren how they have fared in their cross-country trek, over fiatlands, between hazards, 'through bog, through bush, through brake, through brier'.<sup>4</sup> Is he bitten with the travel bug? He can embark on his Ford V 8 and drive to the neighbouring small town, stop off there to liquor up and exchange wise-cracks with his friends, replenish his car with gasoline at the filling station and so home to bed. Or, if his means and affairs permit, he can clamber with his wife and family on to the European band wagon, hustling according to schedule from museum to hotel and from hotel to museum, indulging to his heart's content that sense of moral superiority inherited from his ancestors. It's a grand life!

In thus selecting for the hero of my excursions into the realms of 'uplift' golf and 'old world charm' a citizen of pioneer ancestry, I have not over-looked the fact that millions of inhabitants of the United States do not hail from this stock. To the older breed of American, who is abnormally sensitive to criticism by foreigners owing to his suspicion that they regard themselves as superior beings, there are few things more galling than to be badly reminded by a tactless Englishman that, whereas the population of Great Britain is largely homogenous, the people of the United States are composed of heterogeneous elements derived from a variety of races whose migration to the New World is often of com-

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<sup>4</sup> Balfour is taking liberties with a quotation from William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The actual quotation, from Act II, Scene I, reads: "Over hill, over dale, / Through bush, through brier, / Over park, over pale, / Through flood, through fire."

paratively recent date. Intolerant by nature of alien ideas and influences and mistrustful of the foreigner's motives, the American of this type is apt to look with distaste upon the latest arrivals on the American scene and to label them, including the tenderfoot "limey" from England, with terms of opprobrium [*sic*] such as "wops", "dagoes", and "polaks". A negro is a 'good nigger' provided he keeps his place. This means everywhere that he should not compete with white labour and that in the Southern States he must resign himself to exclusion from the vote, an arrangement brought about by various expedients designed to defeat the 15th Constitutional amendment which gave the franchise to the blacks. In a sense our Anglo-Saxon American is right to react in this manner. It is perfectly understandable that newly-arrived immigrants or elements which cannot be fully assimilated should be held at arms length. To this day there is a social ban on the two million Jews in New York City, in spite of the great wealth of some of their leaders and their influence in the banking and newspaper world. It is also true that a surprising degree of success has attended the process of assimilation known as the melting pot. Scientifically planned laws enacted in 1921 and 1924 have, moreover, excluded Asiatics and arrested the invasion of Roman Catholic Orthodox and Jewish aliens from non-northern European countries which threatened at one time to overwhelm the Protestant and Anglo-Saxon elements in the United States. In his book "America Comes of Age", from which I have already quoted Siegfried points out that in 1920 only 58 million out of the 95 million white inhabitants of the United States were the children of American-born parents.<sup>5</sup> It is an astonishing tribute to the vitality of the Anglo-Saxon Americans that, aided no doubt by the radical change of environment to which the immigrant was subjected and to his herd instinct to conform to the community, they should have succeeded in blending into their social pattern such a medley of ill-assorted races, to a degree which enables us to-day to pick out the average citizen of God's own country from a bunch of "Snooty" Britishers or a gang of other "lousy" foreigners, not merely by the cut of his clothes, but by his distinctive facial appearance.

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<sup>5</sup> Siegfried, *American Political System*, 8.

At the same time the ingredients in the melting pot have not merged into the body politic without some modification in its quality. The "wop" and the "dago" may change from bad Europeans into 100 per cent. Americans, but their new personality frequently lacks the large-spirited generosity and unselfishness of the true Uncle Sam, whilst displaying his intolerance and self-righteousness in an exaggerated form. Writing as a Roman Catholic Frenchman, and before the full effect of the restriction laws had time to assert itself, Siegfried, who discussed the assimilation problem in detail, tended perhaps to underrate the power of survival of the Protestant Anglo-Saxons who until now have led the van of the country's progress and have provided her with all her Presidents with the exception of three, and they, including the present President, were of old Dutch extraction. Subject to the reservation I shall make later I agree however with his conclusion that

"The danger of a numerical inundation is past, and the declining birth rate does away with any chance of over-population; yet from the point of view of the composition of the race, it is quite a question whether the measures against foreign penetration have not been taken too late, for these heterogeneous seeds will continue to grow once they have been planted. We must not exaggerate the danger, however; for it is not a real menace to civilization. All these foreigners will become Americanized, but they will not be Anglo-Saxons; for Protestant America will not assimilate them."<sup>6</sup>

I would qualify this judgment to the extent of pointing out that in the United States, in rural areas as well as in great cities, there exist compact groups of non-assimilated persons who, although they may have become American citizens and to some extent have taken on the colour of their surroundings, are none the less foreigners within the gates and to all intents and purposes national minorities. I have in mind, for example, the Swedish farmers of Minnesota, the Poles of Massachusetts, Ohio and Illinois, the widely dispersed Italian communities and the Welsh of Pennsylvania. All these groups, and others like them, have in one form or another retained the habits of thought of their country of origin and it may take years or even generations before they are truly Americanised.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Greatly aided by works of reference, and in particular by J. T. Adams' 'The Epic of America' which thoroughly investigates this very question,<sup>7</sup> I have now completed as best I can my review of American characteristics. In attempting the task it has been my object, with however little success, to arrive at the truth, obedient to the precept of Abraham Lincoln "with malice toward none, with charity for all." If I have stumbled by the wayside, it is due to the intricacies of the subject, my own shortcomings, and to the difficulties of the foreigner confronted with the variegated scene which constitutes the United States of America. As growth is the essence of countries no less than of individuals and has burgeoned so abundantly in the springtide of American youth, it may be taken for granted that the traits I have described have undergone some change in the decade of heart-searching which has followed the economic collapse of 1929. The optimism and bumptiousness of the era of ballyhoo has lost its buoyancy. But the down and out American, even if he has lost faith in the slogan of "two cars in every garage and a chicken in every pot", still retains his belief in the beneficence [*sic*] of Dame Fortune and pins his faith to a lucky break which will lead him to the pot of gold at the rainbow's end. The rugged individualist sits back and hopes that his turn will come again. In the meantime he has transferred his former hatred of the Bolshevik to President Roosevelt. But even if, as is distinctly possible, the Republican Party to which he belongs is returned to power at the next Presidential election, the old order has gone perhaps never to return. With upwards of ten million unemployed the Government is undertaking the task of financing enterprise and something akin to the paternalism so long familiar to the settled communities of Europe is being substituted for the individualism which was hitherto the breath in the nostrils of every American. In spite of the criticism levelled at the New Deal, it possesses durable aspects which will survive its author: it has strengthened the power of Government in relation to the vested interests and many minds in the United States are now engaged in studying the problem of how to construct a new America on the basis of modern scientific and technical knowledge. Amongst other questions which are being seriously tackled

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<sup>7</sup> James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston, 1931).

for this purpose particular mention may be made of the concerted efforts, already attended with great promise of success, to combat the devastating effects of soil erosion—an evil legacy from the care-free past when the American pioneer farmer, having extravagantly exploited the top soil of the land, advanced to new horizons—leaving tracts of exhausted ground in his wake.

In the international field the 'good neighbour' policy, a mild-mannered method of promoting harmonious relations with the countries of Latin-America in which the United States has always taken a keen and direct interest, would also appear to have come to stay. In the attitude of the United States to other regions isolationist sentiments remain as deep-rooted as ever. On the other hand Americans are becoming conscious that they cannot afford to lose their economic stake in the world and that it behoves them to make their country strong and self-reliant if it is to promote peaceful intercourse between nations and to avoid the deadly consequences of the game of power politics which is being played out elsewhere.

Whatever the outcome of this testing time—and prophecy would be premature—it seems certain that, as in the past, the main emphasis in American values will continue to be placed not so much on abstract principles of justice and democracy, so dear to the lips of the politicians, but upon the importance of the plain man and his right to enjoy his freedom and liberties in the scheme of things. The United States are not infected with the scepticism which comes from gazing too intently upon the mysteries of an ancient past and the darkness of the present; the temperament of their people is idealistic, intolerant of evil and confident that eternal good is mirrored in the heart of every human being, no matter how vile he may be. This is the precious gift of America to mankind. It is this faith, born in the dayspring of her youth, and reaffirmed by Lincoln on the battlefield of Gettysburg, that hitches the future progress of America to the morning star. Judging from all that is best in their people and past history, there can be no doubt that the destiny of the United States is assured and that the roaring torrent of American life will sweep steadily forward into deeper and everwidening channels of experience.