INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DGH-2
The Communications Gap
Between the U.S. and Europe

13 Thurloe Place
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

October has been rather a revealing month on both sides of the Atlantic.

Some weeks ago there was controversy in certain London circles over the Sierra Leone dance troupe appearing in connection with the Commonwealth Arts Festival. Were the female dancers to appear undraped above the waist in Trafalgar Square? Though goodness knows everything else takes place there -- as evidenced most recently by roughly 150 arrests on Guy Fawkes Night -- the question created a momentary storm in a teacup. In the finest British traditions of compromise it was finally decided that the dancers would appear as usual in Festival Hall but bodiced in the Square -- if that is not an intolerable contradiction in terms. A foreigner unwarily might have thought that the climatic factor could have been decisive; apparently it scarcely arose, as historical, esthetic and perhaps even unstated moral issues were carefully weighed. Then came an anticlimax which badly depreciated the worth of the Solomon-like judgment: late last month millions of television viewers around the country were given the opportunity to see the whole dance performance without additional costuming.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the water, the President of the United States lifted his shirt to display what many would consider a somewhat less interesting anatomical feature. The mystification felt by an American concerning the thought processes which determined the Trafalgar Square decision could not be compared with the bewilderment of a European faced with the now-famous photograph. Nor can other comparisons properly be made.

While in both cases the issue at stake appeared little more than a question of the fitness of things, the latter revelation quickly was seen in some quarters here in a much more significant context. It was regarded as yet another example of the truth of the proposition that Western Europe and the United States basically do not share the same values.

Time and again one meets this argument in England and on the Continent, even -- if not especially -- from those who have lived for some time in the United States and generally enjoyed the experience. It takes many forms and no account of inconsistencies. The dominant theme at the moment concerns the supposedly great similarities between Americans and Russians. Less frequently it is asserted how much Americans have in common with the Germans, with the implication that both are aliens in Western Europe. Whatever the actual thesis, the central message is clear: Americans really are like some other people, not ourselves. It would be quite wrong to suppose this theme is pursued only by individuals who are hostile toward the United States.

There are obvious difficulties in trying to pin anyone down on such amorphous statements. Indeed, after fruitless efforts to get "basic values" defined, one may conclude it is usually not values but a manner or style of living which is under fire. Perhaps the root of the matter is the existence in most European countries of a well-defined and cohesive intellectual community which is not closely duplicated in the United States. While a Western European author can leave his country, establish residence in another European state and soon feel at home in the cultural environment, settling in the United States often seems accompanied by severe problems of adjustment. One way of putting it is that the market place intrudes too much in the United States; another and possibly better way is to say that the world intrudes.

In this connection, the general reaction of the French academic community to the work of an American historian or political scientist is often instructive. The latter may find one of his scholarly books very well received in France. Then he writes on a current foreign affairs question in a way which seems to accept the framework of official policy and to offer advice within that context, and many French reviewers savagely take his work apart. They act almost personally affronted that an intellectual should appear to be devoting his knowledge and talent to the service of his government. Surely the fact is that French and American scholars are equally attached to the basic concept of academic freedom, but they translate it quite differently.

Given the influence of the intellectual community on European attitudes, the prevalence of such talk about differing values is a dismal portent. For the short term, this is a heavy straw in the wind rather than a critical

trend; it is neither immutable nor more than one of many factors affecting a nation's course. The historical record is full of alliances formed between nations with totally incompatible characters. Over the longer run, however, its persistance could prove very damaging to a major American policy objective. For progress toward any sort of meaningful and lasting Atlantic partnership -- as distinct from a standard alliance -- may depend in large measure upon the presence of a communal sense of identity. This in turn is unlikely to be achieved without widespread recognition of the existence of a common heritage and contemporary culture.

Yet the true significance of the question at the moment stems from its being a symptom of a much larger problem: namely, what must be called a gap in communications between the United States and Western Europe. It has been almost a year since the United States in effect took its hands off the levers of direct influence in Western European affairs. Last spring it was at least still plausible to view the consequent relaxation of pressures as a useful breathing spell in which the Europeans themselves could work out fresh approaches to joint problems. If it was possible then, it certainly is possible no longer.

The majority view here seems to be that the United States has lost much of its interest in Western Europe's current affairs and future alignment. It is widely believed that there is no American policy toward Europe worthy of the name, and that the United States by default is in the process of abdicating the position of leadership with regard to the Continent which it has maintained for two decades. There are, of course, very mixed feelings toward this supposed trend. Many of those who in the past complained most about American domination and preached the need for independence are the ones most resentful of what they regard as growing U.S. detachment. A high-flown term like schizophrenia need not be used to describe these feelings; one supposes any parent with a 14-year old daughter would recognize the pattern. In view of the hypersensitivities enveloping everyone these days it should be quickly added that the analogy has no broader application.

One response here to such a view of the United States position regarding Europe takes the form of a falling off of public interest in American affairs and a greater concentration on more narrowly national concerns -- though there are other reasons for the latter trend. It cannot be documented, but one has the impression, that less space than in the recent past is devoted to the United States in

the British press as a whole (coverage of the conflict in Vietnam naturally is an exception from the statement). Supporting this impression is the uncertainty and concern about U.S. policies shown by many Britons who maintain their interest in American activities. Official representatives of the United States here are constantly being asked for reassurances that the U.S. Government does not really seek expansion of the Vietnamese war. By the same token, early last summer any American regarded as even partially knowledgeable was beseiged for information about U.S. actions in the Dominican Republic. This questioning came largely from Englishmen who wanted very much to support United States policy, but felt they could not do so on the basis of the evidence at hand. In parliamentary circles there was at least one case in which political party members convinced of the need for a special relationship with the United States eagerly sought data with which to defend American actions against other members who almost automatically took the offensive.

For there certainly are such critical tendencies here, despite the strong majority feeling of good will (for lack of a better term) toward the United States. And these are now feeding upon what is considered diminishing American interest in Western Europe. If the Americans can afford to be so detached about Europe, the argument goes, why should not Great Britain consider detachment from the United States? To a good many people, relatively standard American sales practices, especially concerning defense equipment, are increasingly appearing as unfair competition which takes no account of the interests of close friends. And the Gaullist threnody about independence from the United States is evoking muted echoes in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. It should be stressed that these are tendencies of minor importance as yet. But a prolongation of the drifting phase in the Western Alliance might well see them coalesce and gather the momentum of a trend.

Across the Channel the starch seems to be going out of those few Frenchmen who openly sympathize with American objectives, as distinct from the much larger numbers who disagree with President De Gaulle's foreign policies, or at least his tactics. The former are disheartened by the ability of the General to present himself as the one strong European leader who knows what he wants and who appears -- whether rightly or not -- to be on the road to getting it. Moreover, many of them resent what they regard as American quiesence on policy which plays into his hands. They are especially apprehensive about developments over the next two months or so. They are convinced that the

main theme of the presidential elections will be independence from the United States, and that the other candidates will be forced into "me-tooism" by the logic of events. It is not that they want a slanging match between the U.S. and France, but rather a recasting of policy alternatives which takes account of the changes of the last several years.

It is at this difficult juncture that the long process of cutting back on U.S. Information Agency programs in Western Europe has culminated in the closing of USIS libraries in Paris and London. To Europeans either favorably disposed toward the United States or open-mindedly seeking a range of data on international affairs, shutting down the libraries is a great misfortune in itself, as evidenced by the flood of protests. But they see a far greater importance in this action as a dramatic symbol of dwindling American interest in Western Europe.

Ironically, in view of the argument that money need not be spent in an area theoretically filled with staunch friends of the United States, perhaps the greatest impact of the cut-back has been felt in France. This comes on top of eight successive years of budget reductions which resulted in the closure of all eight USIS branches outside Paris and almost cut access to newspapers in the provinces. Because of these cumulative cuts, USIS general operating expenses and the numbers of American and local personnel in the current fiscal year are roughly only one-third their size in 1957. The closing of the Benjamin Franklin Library is the most notable of this year's actions. But it now appears that a projected takeover at the Odéon premises by the State University of New York may largely recoup the loss of facilities, even if it does not reverse the bad publicity.

The overall effects of the budget slashes on U.S. Government operations in France cannot be mitigated, however. The USIS book translation program is now being eliminated; most film activities have stopped; the fine arts show formally was halted early last year, although one further showing has just been accomplished on shoestring backing; the Agency magazine will soon be going to half as many people half as often as in the past; an end has been made of all support to French and American private organizations operating in France. As an outgrowth of this last development, it is understood that the private American Library in Paris will have to close its four branches in provincial university cities before the year's end if some $30,000 cannot be raised immediately.

Although, or possibly because, the Information Agency's activities are on a substantially smaller scale in London than in Paris, the physical effect of the apportioned cuts on the program here has been at least as great. It is the lesser psychological impact which places it in a different category than the French case. Not only is the USIS library at the Embassy closing, two monthly magazines have to be discontinued and the numbers of U.S. and local personnel are being reduced drastically, the latter by about 40 percent. Parenthetically, my personal opinion is that the loss of local people is far more severe than the record can show, not because of the lower salary factor -- though it counts -- but because they seem of generally excellent caliber in both capital cities under discussion. At the same time, budget cuts are always more stringent than they appear because of rising costs, figured here at an average increase of 8 percent annually over the last ten years.

To relieve the generally gloomy picture presented above some mention should be made of achievements and opportunities on the English scene. These arise in connection with the disposal of the USIS library as a unit. Apparently there is very great interest among British universities in purchasing the collection, and this interest extends to the whole field of American studies. A dozen years ago there were no American studies as such in the United Kingdom. Now the USIS administers over 50 teaching positions established in Britain under American government and private foundation auspices. Highly receptive though the British universities have been to this trend, they generally lack adequate libraries on the subject to support further expansion; this is especially true of the newer institutions. Thus there seems an opportunity to advance American studies enormously through the judicious expenditure of a relatively small amount of money.

Rightly or wrongly, drastic reductions in the Information Agency's Western European program are now explained on this side of the Atlantic as representing the will of the United States Senate. Presumably a careful reading of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearings on H.R.8639 of the latest session of Congress would provide the answer as to the truth of the assertion. But that test cannot be made in European circles and the explanation will doubtless stand. It is further explained that the Senate argument in favor of the budget cuts, as noted above, was that it was wasteful to spend money trying to influence people who were already friends of the United States. Accepting this reason, one mildly embittered Frenchman said, "I wager if you told a U.S. Senator he need not campaign for re-election because a friendly majority had put him in office, he would think you completely

mad." All efforts to point out to him the inexactitude of the analogy and to describe U.S. Government procedures were unavailing.

Apart from this relatively narrow, if confused, question of the Senate's wishes in the present instance, it has been suggested in many quarters that the time is long overdue for the substantive committees of the Congress with jurisdiction over USIA to take a lengthy new look at the Agency's functions and performance. It is clear, for example, that the appropriate programs for Western Europe today should be quite different from those of a decade ago, and even more distinct from those now carried out in other areas of the world. Can the main task here still be comprehended by the implications of the term information, or -- not to mince words -- should there be a stronger public relations or advertising content? It may well be that the Agency is performing superbly in Europe within its limited resources; it may equally well be the case that the constant budget cuts have both crippled programs and stifled imagination and initiative. The answers to these and other wide-open questions presumably cannot emerge from the appropriations process.

In the last analysis, however, the overall response to the danger of a widening gap in communications between Western Europe and the United States can only come from the policy makers. Since almost a year of waiting has brought no fruitful initiatives from the European side, it would appear that the ball is squarely in the American court.

Sincerely yours,

D. G. Henderson

Donald G. Henderson

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