

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Divide and Lose

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
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Dear Dick,

In Vermont in my youth language was clear and simple. Use a four or a five letter word and people knew what it meant. Right was Republican, and wrong was Democrat. Right was the hand I learned to write with; left was the other one. The sun came up in the East, over New Hampshire, to shine in my bedroom window. West was a dimmer place, although the sun set right back of our house, but I usually went west to go fishing. When in doubt about directions, I faced North, as I still do, placing South behind me and putting the West on my left and East to my right.

Sometime I heard that someone, probably a professor, was Left. There was also a right-wing. From our red, leather-bound Kipling I learned that there was another East and a different West. Smooth life suddenly had scratches on it. When I heard talk that East was Left, life became too confusing and I dropped the whole business.

Change didn't come as I grew older, as parents and elders hopefully predicted; I'm still confused and excuse my predicament by believing that others are more so. There is some evidence in my favor. I've given up Left and Right entirely, as places as hard to put fences around as heaven and hell. 'East' and 'West', though, continue to annoy me. What are they, where are they? They aren't words any longer, they're terms, and they have so many meanings that they mean nothing.

An Arab friend of mine, who was studying agricultural economics at Madison, visited a Wisconsin farmer. The farmer asked him where he came from and digested the answer. "I sure have heard of the Middle West," he said, "but where in hell is the Middle East?" The 'West' used to mean cowboys and six-guns, and the 'East' meant Harvard, Smith, and Culture. Then the headlines reported that 'East' had met 'West' at the Summit--though there wasn't an 'Easterner' present, unless Eisenhower's Gettysburg farm qualified him as one. A Thai once said to me, "You know, for us, the 'West' begins at Calcutta." Ideology, geography, and myth have run wild, leaving us with the pieces.

Nowhere have they run wilder than in describing the serious, if not mortal, contest between Communism and non-Communism as one between 'East' and 'West'. By calling Russia, particularly, and the Communist bloc 'East', the so-called 'West' is handing the Communists several dozen non-Communist nations on a semantic platter. 'East' is a homonym, meaning, in current usage, Communists, Russia, and an area running from somewhere about Morocco to east of Japan. When the so-called 'West' speaks of the 'East'-'West' struggle, it is hardly sure which 'East' it means and the listener from Morocco to Japan wonders if he is being called a Communist. As most of the persons in the 'West's' geographical 'East' well remember when they got their independence from a 'Western' colonial power, the 'East' versus 'West' misnomer has a familiar ring. It confuses them as to which 'East' the 'West' is against and makes them wonder if the Communists aren't their friends. The 'West' is making fellows of its friends and its enemies.

The Russians and the Communists are happy to exploit this affinity. For years they have been trying to convince these same peoples that they are their friends and allies against the colonial, rapacious 'West'. Russia, especially, has set herself up as a friend to the still-colonial and recently-colonial countries. Russia has tried hard to become the spokesman for the 'East', its champion in dealings with the 'West'. In 1954, at the Geneva Conference over Indo-China, Russia succeeded in becoming this spokesman. The peoples whom the 'West' chooses to call 'East', the Indo-Chinese generally, and the Vietnamese in particular, saw the issue with their own clarity: an 'Eastern' people were trying to gain their freedom from a 'Western' colonial power, France. That the most successful leaders of the struggle were Vietnamese Communists, made no difference (if they knew about it); for them it was a nationalistic war. The 'West', they saw, opposed the glorious fight for freedom; and when it came time to negotiate, Russia spoke for their interests. France and Britain were on the other side of the table. At Geneva it was not simply Russia defending Vietnam's interests; it was, because 'Western' pressmen and statesmen made it so, the 'East' parleying with the 'West'. Victory didn't go to Vietnam and her champion alone; it went to the 'East'. By homonym, Communism profited from the result. And again the 'West' had succeeded in making the interests of the Communists and the geographical 'East' seem to run parallel.

The man, whoever he was, who first used the term 'East' to mean Russia, and therefore Communism, propounded the most dangerous falsehood of our time. It is as absurd as calling a New England town Red because a Communist went to Town Meeting. Opposed to the 'East' for this man was the "West" --he would probably have defined it as the anti-Communist home of liberal democracy.

Russia is not in the 'East', however. Russia is in Europe and the Russians consider themselves Europeans--proclaiming themselves Asians only in their eastbound propaganda. According to the

old usage, the 'East' was any place east of Christendom. (Medieval Christians stretched the term to include, in the Islamic 'East', Morocco and other places south and west of Europe.) Russia, with its Greek Orthodox heritage, is a Christian country--despite Communist efforts to change it. As if to uphold the great tradition, the Russians even colonized their own 'East', the Asian Soviet Republics. The Chinese are certain that the Russians are Europeans. Being European, Russia is excluded from what the 'West's' doubtful geography calls the 'East'.

Nor is there much 'Eastern' about the Communist bloc. The satellite countries are Eastern Europe. Only three of the dozens of nations from Morocco to Japan are Communist: North Vietnam, North Korea, and China. The others are non-Communist or anti-Communist--a distinction these countries may make in their foreign policies but not in their domestic policies, which are anti-Communist.

Communist ideology is itself European, or, if you still prefer, 'Western'. The egg was laid in Germany, hatched in England, and grew to roosterdom throughout Europe. Some persons have defined Communism as the only 'Western' religion--Christianity, Islam, and Judaism having come from the 'East'.

'East' was a hallowed misnomer long before Communism appeared on the scene. From a direction it grew to a geographical myth to an invidious cliché. When Portugal, Holland, France, and England sailed with cross, sword, or account-book in hand, it was first eastwards to the Levant, the Indies, and China, and then westwards home again. Trading Europeans developed the handy terms 'East' and 'West' for the non-Christian areas to which they went and for the Christian home to which they returned. Subsequent mythologists developed the Far 'East', the Middle 'East' and the Near 'East'. Why the explorers and traders of the 17th Century didn't call America the 'West', the history books don't say. It would have been logical; then Europe would have been the 'Centre'.

The vigorous Americans (apologies to those North and South, who are Americans too) pursued a better living westwards from Plymouth and Jamestown to China, Japan, and the Philippines. If Americans tried, even in their short-lived period of imperialism, they never succeeded in rechristening these countries as the 'West'--and their westward ships were still bound 'East'.

'West' and 'East' presume a boundary line. Does the 'East' begin at Vienna (Asia begins at the Landstrasse.), with Morocco, at Suez, or with the English Channel (The wogs begin at Calais.)? My Sixth Grade geography had the 'Eastern' and 'Western' Hemispheres separated by a line up the Atlantic. At one time Turkey was the 'Eastern' question. In present British official usage, the Near 'East' is the Balkans and Turkey. The Middle 'Eastern' armies of Lord Alexander fought to Tunis. The Middle

'East' to the National Geographic Society is mainly Pakistan and India, and the Near 'East' runs from Egypt through Iraq. Though he lives far in the 'East', call an Australian a Far 'Easterner' or an 'Oriental' and see what happens. Perhaps we should create a 'South' adding Australia and the Congo to Mississippi, Georgia, and their environs.

The 'West' equates 'Orient' with 'East'. Here at Oxford, Oriental languages are Syriac, Aramaic, and Hebrew. The Orient-Express ran to Baghdad once and now it stops at Istanbul. To the Frenchman half the world is Orient, some of it Pröche, some Extrême. It seems, according to 'Western' terminology, that the 'East' runs from about Morocco to east of Japan.

But if my Thai friend was right, the 'East' begins near Rangoon and the 'West' at Calcutta. If the Chinese are right (can 600 million Chinese be wrong?), the 'East' begins with Japan and the 'West' begins with Tibet and Russia, for the name China means Middle Kingdom. To many Indians the Arab countries are not the Near or Middle 'East', they are in West Asia. That everyone tends to see the world from where he stands is as innocent as it is understandable. The 'West' has got into the habit, however, of thinking that its own particular peak is the only superior height for viewing the world, forgetting that the 'West' is east of somebody.

The 'West' has had many clichés about the 'East'. It is mysterious. Its peoples are wily and inscrutable. They are also incapable of governing themselves--having no atom bombs with which to keep the peace. Not being Christian, they are called pagan or heathen. Their culture, because it is not in the European tradition and because the 'West' can't read their books, is negligible. The 'West' is white in its virtues and superiority; the 'East' is black in its backwardness and inferiority: white men are superior to men of all other hues. When the 'West' doesn't mean Communist, this is what it means when it says 'East'. Although many of these clichés are old, none of them are dead.

The man on the street from Morocco to Japan knows this is what 'East' means. He knows that he is being called inferior and that he is being lumped with Communists. He hears the tones of colonial days and suspects that the 'West' is still trying to push him around. He understands that he is neither a man nor part of a nation; the 'West' considers him a generality or a problem. He is not an Egyptian, an Indian, a Cambodian, or an Indonesian, he is an 'Easterner' or an 'Oriental'. Everytime someone in the 'West' uses the term 'East', 'Western' stock from Morocco to Japan drops a point.

The ill effect is doubled because bad clichés drive out good words. The Asian newspaper editor will use 'East' and 'West' in his columns, although he likes neither term and resents being

called an 'Easterner'. This is partly because he believes, almost instinctively, that his 'East' still has a bone to pick with the 'West'.

For centuries, the 'West' meant Europe. America, as Europe's offspring, became part of the 'West'--though the term was not frequently used there until after 1920 and did not become popular until after 1945. The Englishman or the Pennsylvanian today would almost certainly define the 'West' as Europe and North America, as democratic and anti-Communist. To him the 'West' has a ring about it. As the 'West' once brought the benefits of her culture and technological progress to the 'East', so it must continue to aid backward countries. The Christian myth has been replaced by the message of liberal democracy; the 'West', must save the 'East'--from the 'East'.

But the 'West's' glories aren't so bright seen from Morocco to Japan. There are dictators among the democrats. Some of the virtues are marked For Export Only. The colonial or ex-colonial, hearing of the 'West', is liable to remember that when his country was a colony, the democracy was for white people only. He remembers the white man's burden. He remembers that 'Westerners'--for so they styled themselves--treated him as an inferior, as a man worth raising, but not too high.

America long escaped the odium attached to the 'West'. But since the last war her insistent theme that she is the firmest bastion of the 'West', and her frequent paternalism, to mention only two items, have convinced many 'Easterners' that the choice between the United States and Europe is one between the kettle and the pot. America may even be blacker, especially as she was once their shining ideal.

The desire of the European and the American to see the rest of the world achieve his own level of comfort and health is, I'm sure, quite genuine. Americans and Europeans desire also that the world that is still non-Communist should remain so. This is not only because their own necks are involved, but because they believe that men deserve a government less arbitrary and deadly than Communist dictatorship. The ladder to these noble achievements, like charity, begins at home. Unless Americans and Europeans eliminate the clichés 'West' and 'East', and especially the idea that one means better and the other worse, they may never get higher than the first rung.

The 'West' wants unity, but the terms it uses divide. The world has so long been told of their incompatibility that a 'West'-'East' marriage seems a bit shocking. But it is in North Africa, the Arab nations, and throughout Asia (itself a slippery term) that America and Europe most want allies against the Communists. To call this area the 'East' degrades it and sets it apart from Europe and America.

When America and Europe call themselves the 'West', they are keeping alive an extremely perjorative synonym for themselves. When they preach about the 'East'-'West' struggle, they are behaving, with their customary superiority, as if they were the only true non-Communists and only they can save the world. The situation is the other way round, it is the rest of the world that can save America and Europe. These nations might cooperate happily with America and the countries of Europe, but they dislike the 'West' and wouldn't lift a finger to save it.

'West' is an isolationist term. Americans and Europeans put off possible friends by using it and, in their own minds, set themselves above other nations. Inheriting the unwarranted superiority of earlier Christianity and the paternalism of the white man's burden, today's Americans and Europeans have tried to command allegiance instead of trying to win it. But no one can hear the voice from the top of the white horse any more.

When Americans and Europeans get off and slap the horse on the rump to make it run away, they can start over again. At a conversational level they might learn to talk of Asians, Africans, Americans and Europeans, of Frenchmen, Nigerians, Syrians, Indonesians, and Chinese, of non-Communists and Communists. Their statesmen, politicians, and newsmen might ban 'East' and 'West'.

With their feet on the ground, Americans and Europeans might get their sense of humor back--a case of sore feet wouldn't do any harm. To soothe their pride--and their first blisters--they can remember that, in the long haul, a man on foot can outwalk a horse.

Sincerely yours,

*Red Austin*

Granville S. Austin

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