

G. Bernard Shaw On Anglo-American Relations

Famous Writer Discusses Attitude of Great Britain Toward United States with His Customary Frankness and Brilliance

By George Bernard Shaw

(Copyright, 1916, by THE NEW YORK TIMES COMPANY.)

A FEW years ago I was invited to the Mansion House to celebrate the conclusion of a hundred years of peace between England and the United States. The invitation was irresistible to any one with a sense of comedy. The two great powers had been bound to one another, like the members of the Chuzzlewit family, by the tie of kinship. And their relations had been precisely those of the Chuzzlewit cousins as described by Charles Dickens in the book in which he expresses so vividly the English view of America as a land of Jefferson Bricks and Hannibal Chollops and Scadders and Homines, with a top-dressing of implacably exclusive New England snobs. A hundred years of nagging and squabbling, of dislike and ill-natured stories, of fits of temper just saved from actual violence by pettiness and prudence; in short, of the least cordial relations of any two independent free nations in the world. Ireland appeared always to the United States as to a recognized enemy of England, and did not appear in vain. The British governing classes took the anti-national side in the great conflict in the sixties as a matter of course, and were amazed to find that the English working classes were on the side of the North. Like most countries, the two nations were natural enemies—a condition which their community of race and language tended powerfully to develop, because they understood one another's minds and one another's insults. Nobody in England ever said, "They do these things better in America." Nobody dreamt of an entente cordiale. Italian heroes, Hungarian heroes, Polish heroes, all sorts of European heroes except Irish heroes, were heroes in London; but with the single exception of Buffalo Bill, no American hero shared these honors; and even he was admitted to no more than a brief spell of fashion as a scalp hunter who had nothing to do with American politics, but could ride and shoot and kill Indians.

The celebration of a century of this sort of thing brought out the British character in its most exquisite specialty. We rose at it, gorged it, wallowed in it. Never had there been such a meeting, even at the Mansion House. Headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Prime Minister, we sang rapturously of the century of perfect peace from Venezuela to the Canadian border, and contrasted the silken calm of the sea of love in which we and our cousins across the sea had been basking all that time with the turbulent ocean that so cruelly separated us. Not an unkind thought, not an angry word, ever had, or ever should, come between us and our stock in the west. A glorious hand-in-hand achievement, a shoulder-to-shoulder stride in the march of human progress toward the parliament of man, the Federation of the World (don't hear!) was this hundred years of hearty and unruffled concord between 127,102,487 white men occupying no less than 3,095,523 square miles of the earth's surface, (figures gathered that morning from the Statesman's Year Book by our secretaries.) No such globe-encircling brotherhood had ever existed before; and, best of all, it was indissoluble.

We went on like that for hours. The Archbishop boomed it, the minor speakers bleated it, Mr. Asquith swayed from side to side in a solemn delirium, to innocent eyes a profoundly impressed and deeply moved philosopher-statesman; to my sophisticated eye (for I, too, have had to do platform stunts) a weary and heavily preoccupied Cabinet Minister wondering whether he could find another platitude to go on with.

If I am asked what good this orgy of lying—for that is just the blunt truth about it—could have done, I reply that it was a display of good taste and good feeling, and a quite friendly shake-hands. It was not hypocrisy. I cannot too

often repeat that British hypocrisy is not real hypocrisy, because its first condition is that it shall not deceive. In English public life it is a point of honor, when once the truth is so apparent that there can be no possible deception, to get up and lie about it. A man who tells the truth unnecessarily is not considered a gentleman. A man who tells a lie that is believed is considered a liar. The perfect gentleman does not give pain to his audience. He says what they like to hear. He proclaims the thing that ought to be, the nice thing, the good-natured thing. And that is never the thing that is. As nobody is taken in except the people who want to be taken in, nobody objects. Very often that is the condition of the entire audience, representing therein the entire nation. Conscientious persons, or, as they are called in London, cantankerous persons, perceive that this voluntary self-deception may prove dangerous. They are apt to say on sufficient provocation: "Take yourself in if you like, but don't expect me to encourage you; and don't forget that the actual facts are thus and thus." Hence the unpopularity of the conscientious objector, whose appearance in English public life is by no means confined to the military service tribunals.

Let us forget the Mansion House platform for a moment and consider what are the real relations between the British Empire and the United States. To begin with, let us banish the illusion, if it really exists, that on sentimental grounds the British Empire is less likely to go to war with the United States (or vice versa) than with Germany. The King of England is, to say the least, not less likely to quarrel with his republican fourth or fifth cousin, who is only his cousin "in a manner of speaking," than with the actual grandson of his grandmother, and an Emperor into the bargain. Our Foreign Office is not republican. It will allow an allied Emperor to saw a Bishop in two (provided he is not a well-connected English Bishop) and march his troops in triumph between the two halves; but a very trifling discourtesy on the part of a republican Government to a British official bigwig would move it to a passionate conviction that the republican ruffian must be taught a stern lesson. This is not anti-American feeling; it is the kind of political prejudice that is founded on class exclusiveness, and that is the chief danger to the peace of the world today, and must remain so until all the powers become republican. The importance of my insisting on this, in defiance of all good feeling and good taste, is that general expressions of good feeling and good taste are really only a pretext for not coming to business. Sentimental twaddle is practiced and encouraged because it commits neither country to anything; the most profuse gush of it raises no presumption that Sir Edward Grey or President Wilson will not announce next week that they have declared war on one another, and that they leave it to their countrymen to uphold the glorious traditions of the flag. It will not be forgotten that in 1914 Sir Edward Grey did not even pretend to consult the House of Commons on the war until the day after he had placed the British fleet at the service of the French Government.

For my part, I think the two powers will have to come to an explicit understanding one of these days. After the present convulsion I presume the United States will no longer neglect to equip themselves with war material enough to take the field as a first-rate power, and, by a system of compulsory training, (which is not the same thing as compulsory service,) make it possible to improvise an army on the European scale in case of necessity. The world

is growing smaller; and the saying that Great Britain is no longer an island will soon apply to the whole North American continent. When the bridging of the sea by aircraft and submarine has gone a little further we shall become acutely conscious of the fact that the belt of habitable land round the waist of the globe is now practically continuous; and that the hemming-in process, by which we in England have so craftily and successfully circumvented the Germans, has possibilities perilous both to ourselves and to our American cousins.

With Russia and the yellow world on one flank America must be considering what she has on the other. Is it an aristocratic ally of the Mikado and the Czar, in instinctive sympathy with the Old World which these new allies still represent, or is it the England that, on the point of embarking in the Mayflower, changed its mind and cut off King Charles's head instead? That is going to be a very momentous question, and I sincerely hope that when it becomes pressing Sir Edward Grey will not be at the Foreign Office. On our side, if the war ends as we hope it will end, the very success of our great diplomatic coup, which, thanks to the folly of the Hohenzollerns in attacking France instead of manoeuvring for the defensive, now threatens to carry us further than we ever intended to go, will effect a formidable reinforcement of Russia. The war may end with Russia in Constantinople, in Persia, and in part of Prussian Poland, with the German barrier between Russia and the west battered down. So much we triumphantly anticipate. What we forget is that when that dread of the German Army which is the real cement of the Alliance, is dissolved, the whole European situation from the point of view of our balance of power diplomacy will change to an extent which we are too preoccupied at present to conceive. A world in which nobody is any longer afraid of the British fleet and of Russia, is a Europe in which the value of every factor will have changed as completely as the value of the German factor. With the binding string cut, the difficulty will be to prevent the faggot we call the Alliance falling to pieces in an instant. It will for a time be each for himself. The French will strengthen their navy and their air service. It will occur to English diplomacy that the alliance with France and Russia is not the only possible combination in the world; and one of the possible alternatives will be a combination with the United States and Germany. The necessity for choosing between France and Germany will then be so inconvenient that we shall begin to ask whether it is really a necessity at all—whether it was not a mistake all along not to play for a combination of the British Empire with America, France, and Germany to defend that homogeneous part of the earth's waistbelt that extends from the Rocky Mountains to the Carpathians; the heterogeneity beginning with Japan at one end and Russia at the other.

I said in November, 1914, that, without peace between England, France, and Germany, there could be no peace in the world. That America must also be a party to that peace is now too obvious to be worth saying. Germany has been deluded for a moment by the romantic dream of making this peace a Pax Germanica by the simple Napoleonic or Caesarean process of conquering the other parties. It has been necessary to knock that notion out of her head by violence; but when it is finally and thoroughly knocked out—and already there can be little left of it—she must seek for alliances; and it is clearly not our interest or America's to allow her to seek her allies in the east. To put it in another way: Germany must be defeated; but the British Empire and the United States will have to take the consequences; and I hope I have said enough to make it clear that they

will be wildly unlike what our fire-eaters expect. I prophesy that the scientific pro-German will yet shake hands with the scientific jingo power balancer on a basis of smashing the Hohenzollern Holy Roman ambition by an allied victory, and then roping Germany into a combination which will include the whole of Western Protestant civilization, uncomplicated by the heterogeneous impermanence of the

present Eurasian Alliance. France would not stand aloof even if she could afford to; for France is republican and Voltairean; and the deism of Voltaire and Rousseau, once absurdly called atheism, has practically become the faith of all the Free Churches of England and America that are still intellectually fermenting; though they have not yet noticed it, being largely ignorant of what Voltaire and Rousseau really

preached. And how old-fashioned do those names now seem in the days of Bergson! It will indeed be a struggle between France and North America for the honor of being the Mecca of republicanism.

If this is not our aim, then will some one kindly tell me what is our aim, and why the United States is helping us so powerfully to achieve it?

The New York Times

Published: October 22, 1916
Copyright © The New York Times