



## **Calling America to Greatness**

**Review of Adlai Stevenson, *Call to Greatness***

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## Calling America to Greatness

Review of Adlai Stevenson, *Call to Greatness* (New York, [1954]: Harper; London, 1954: Rupert Hart-Davis), *Sunday Times*, 5 December 1954, 6



A CYNICAL European statesman once remarked that Americans, and only Americans, believed that all human problems were in principle soluble; and that this belief brought untold disaster upon the world. In the nineteenth century such issues as the Eastern Question or the Problem of Nationalism were considered to be part of the permanent furniture of the civilised world. The notion that they could be solved by some drastic action was rightly regarded as utopian. Like chronic diseases, they were regarded as

painful but not fatal; nobody remembered a world which did not contain them. When they grew acute, palliatives were administered, conferences called, *détentes* effected. International relations were scarcely conceivable without them; they were the familiar landmarks in terms of which advances and setbacks were recorded; they waxed or waned, became ‘threatening’ or receded, but could not be abolished.

It was the Americans, in particular President Wilson, who were accused of conceiving the simple but terrible idea that problems necessarily presupposed solutions; moreover, that to any given problem there could be only one true solution, all others being fallacious; whence it seemed to follow that once the truth of the correct solution was established by the proper methods, it must be adopted by all those who had the interests of truth, justice and human welfare at heart. If persuasion failed to secure the realisation of the correct policy, then – anything being preferable to continuing in the night of error – it must be imposed by force. The most obvious result of this was that, so far from solving old problems, new disasters were brought about by the simple-minded and appalling activities of dedicated and pure-hearted fanatics who tried to change society by ruthless political vivisection in the name of a few ancient self-evident principles.

This is no doubt a caricature of the new morality, too indulgent to the methods of the nineteenth century, too intolerant to the new diplomacy of the twentieth. Nevertheless, it contains more than a grain of truth. And Mr Adlai Stevenson’s book, among its many merits, embodies a timely warning to his countrymen which Kant, in a forgotten epigram, once summed up by saying that from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.

The book opens with a rapid *tour d’horizon*: Mr Stevenson gives a lucid and convincing analysis of the changing positions of America and the Soviet Union vis-à-vis each other: defines Russian aims as ‘victory without war’ and Russian policy as the exploitation of those movements of our time which would have arisen had Lenin and Marx never lived – nationalism, anti-colonialism, the passionate struggles for freedom on the part of peoples at times

not ready for it. Mr Stevenson calls this 'the revolution of rising expectations,' not to be crushed overnight by 'massive retaliation' or 'nuclear intimidation'.

We – the Western world – must prepare for a long endurance test, since 'most of the sieges of history have lasted for a long time'. And because 'a policy based just on anti-Communism and military potency is not in the spirit of the great movement of the twentieth century and will win few hearts' – consequently we must contrive to live with neutralism, which, whatever we may think of it, is in any case preferable to Communism.

The chief danger to America is impatience, arrogance and belief in quick solutions, which in its turn is based upon a fatal tendency to believe in 'absolutes of right or wrong, black or white', leading to the exploitation of the public appetite for simple solutions and prompt and inexpensive results. 'We have let exploiters of fear and moral indignation reach dangerous heights in our country': Mr Stevenson is one of the few American statesmen (Mr Kennan is another) who understand that the sermons at present emanating from Mr Dulles – a kind of Wilson in reverse – so far from building a new and nobler public morality, constitute a menace which, with the caricatures and exaggerations which are inevitable in such cases, terrify America's allies and work in the interests of her enemies.

Against this Mr Stevenson pleads for sympathy, modesty and the temperate use of power; and warns against quick panaceas and total solutions for problems which may be the by-products of a passing historical period, more likely to disappear with it than to be solved, and will duly be replaced by other problems which no one can yet foresee. These lectures are the profession of faith of a humane, civilised, perspicacious man, who states a morally and intellectually convincing thesis with a sincerity and distinction not frequently to be found in political writing.

It is a striking and a melancholy fact about the present political situation that these propositions, with which no responsible statesman in the West, from Dr Adenauer to Mr Attlee, would disagree, could be treated in the American Press as – what in their

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time and place they are – a fearless statement of an unpopular doctrine, courageous and wise in the eyes of some, defeatist and almost subversive in the eyes of others. The difference of political climate between Europe and America has never been negligible, but it seems to have grown wider in the course of the last few years.

One of the merits of Mr Stevenson's book is that it constitutes the most effective available antidote to unbridled anti-Americanism both of the right and of the left. The mere fact that so sane, so civilised and so disinterested a man – and, above all, one who suffers from no fear of ideas as such – can make himself heard above the din of contemporary American chauvinism and irrationalism, and that more than twenty million voters should have chosen him as their representative is surely the greatest single asset on the side of liberal democracy in the entire world. Mr Stevenson has probably done more than any single man living to restore true perspective towards his country in Europe; and deserves well of all those who think that the preservation of truth and freedom is not incompatible with intelligence and the pursuit of happiness.

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