AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

Commencement

University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

18 June 1952
AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

HENRY M. WRISTON*

WE have become accustomed to assert that the United States is the leader of the world. It is one of many statements which, once they become habitual, cease to be vehicles of thought; on the contrary, they become barriers to the intelligent use of the mind. They are drawn into the common vocabulary of clichés and repeated until they are accepted as axiomatic, and so beyond question.

It is easy to see how this concept of our leadership gained currency. The United States became the economic prop for the free world. Lend-Lease during the war made victory possible for the allies without the complete disruption of their financial structures. We contributed a large share of the money for the World Bank and the European Payments Union. The Marshall Plan, and now Mutual Security, bought time and provided resources to help make an economically viable free world. Our productive capacity, in like manner, helped to arm our allies; and when we mobilized our manpower its vast potential was revealed to all nations.

Taken in sum, does this not add up to leadership? The only honest answer is a clear and categorical "no." The United States has a position of enormous weight; if not dominant, at least we are extremely powerful. But leadership means much more than the possession, or even the exercise, of power.

Two other factors are essential to genuine leadership: a clear sense of direction, and hospitality toward the views of those whom we seek to lead. We have done much better in the first than in the second. American policy has been as well developed and as consistently followed as that of any of the great powers. It is in sensitiveness to the views of our allies that we have not shown adequate capacity for leadership. In setting our course we must be alert to perceive how it will affect others not only physically, economically, or even politically; we must be able to foresee what their emotional response is likely to be. Recently Queen Jiiiana was a refreshing visitor. Speaking in Detroit on April 15 she said: "We will have to show respect to each other and not commit the error of wishing to shape each other into shapes like our own."

One reason we have been slow to learn this lesson is that we have become obsessed with the tension between ourselves and the Russians.

* The 196th Commencement of the University, on June 18, was the occasion for this thought-provoking Address by the distinguished President of Brown University, on whom the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws was conferred.
immensity. It must work out a way of life, and not a mere *modus vivendi*, with Pakistan. If India feels it has an ethos of its own, a tradition of its own, and distinctive problems of its own and must, therefore, be left to follow its own star and not be drawn into either orbit—Russian or American—should we be impatient with that determination? We should be more understanding since its desire is so like the decision we reached when Napoleon stood in place of Stalin, Britain in place of the United States, and we sought to remain at one side, associated with neither.

Evidence is mountain high that the exercise of leadership will demand an intense effort at historical, cultural, social, economic, and political understanding of other nations. Americans traditionally have been unwilling to learn even the most commonly used languages of our allies; it has always seemed easier for others to learn English! Centers for the study of oriental and Middle Eastern languages are particularly few in number and small in enrollment. Relative to our international responsibilities the United States is gravely deficient in persons who have knowledge of the languages, literatures, cultures, and economics of other nations. Until scholarly efforts have been greatly expanded and have time to bear fruit, we shall remain in the unhappy situation in which we now find ourselves. We are spending money all around the world, but receive small thanks for our pains. Our hearts are innocent of imperialism; yet we are accused of it with vigor by our opponents, and even by some of our friends.

If one seeks to understand the reason for suspicion, it is necessary only to recall the patronizing tone in which we promise with Point Four to confer the vast boon of our "know how" upon peoples who do not yearn for "know how." Other sources of irritation are more direct and immediate; call to mind the recent explicit interference of our ambassador in the domestic politics of Greece. If, in the days of our weakness, any foreign representative had spoken to us in such terms, resentment would have blazed into flame. Indeed, Washington's dismissal of Genet offers a classic example. Or, take another instance of our rough exercise of power: the terms of the 1951 Battle Act sought to put limitations upon the trading policies of our allies—with the loss of American funds as a powerful sanction. These illustrations should furnish plain hints as to the reasons the world fears an unconscious imperialism on our part. Many nations are afraid, too, that Congress will reverse the international policies upon which, temporarily at least, they have become dependent. They are anxious lest we withdraw support before they have built up their defense forces or restored their economies. We should realize, while there is still time, that weight in the balance of power, no matter how great, is not the equivalent of leadership.
Why should I speak of these things at a university commencement? The answer is simple: there is no other place, save the universities, where understanding and enlightenment can begin. There is no other source of persons educated as Americans need to be, if the use of our weight is to be translated into leadership guided by wisdom and skill. The task before our universities is magnificent in its scope and its power for good. Not all the authority of government nor all the resources of industry can achieve the goal by themselves. It must be done by men with the patience and the zeal of scholars, with a passion for learning and for teaching, and with that openness of mind which scholarship can inculcate.

Why, then, have the universities done relatively so little? Because they have been under social pressure to perform tasks of more immediate public concern. There is not a university in the country, either publicly supported or privately endowed, no matter how generous the appropriations or how vast the endowments, which has the resources to carry through an adequate program in international studies, broadly conceived, in addition to the other responsibilities with which society has already burdened it. If we are to lead the world, the intellectual capital of the United States must be vastly strengthened; the universities must have the resources upon the one hand and public understanding on the other to achieve their destiny.

What is true of international studies is true of technology and the sciences. The universities alone can develop the basic advances in pure science upon which all technology must rest. Fundamental science is exactly like the foundation of a building. It may be buried beneath the earth; only the beautiful superstructure is visible; but the strength and security of the entire building rest upon the adequacy of the foundation.

Basic research requires great skill and demands enormous self-discipline, yet neither skill, nor self-discipline, nor the combination of both is enough. In addition, it calls for risk-taking to a degree running far beyond the risks of “free enterprise.” A professor may work arduously and intelligently in a laboratory for many years and find himself up a blind alley, through no fault of his own. On the other hand, he may hit upon a valuable discovery in a relatively brief time. Or, by long labor, he may achieve something really significant and have it lie virtually unappreciated for a generation or more. Rarely does he receive any income from discoveries in pure science, yet industry is free in its own good time to exploit for profit the fruits of his devotion.

The war stimulated technology, but haste and preoccupation with immediacy obstructed fundamental research. The secrecy involved in “security”—a modern fetish—was even more hostile to advance in the
pure sciences. Vigorous progress requires the cross-fertilization of minds—which secrecy disrupts. The situation is the more critical because the United States has traditionally imported basic scientific discoveries from abroad. If one thinks of the earliest achievements in atomic theory, or atomic fission, or relativity, or other absolutely first-class modern developments in pure science, he will look in vain for the name of an American, trained in an American university. It is as exploiters of fundamental discoveries that Americans have done marvelous work. Though we have become the creditor of the world financially, the support of the world economically, and the primary producer of the world's goods, we are still debtor to European universities for intellectual innovations of the first order of magnitude.

European universities have been so disrupted and disorganized as a result of political tyranny and war, so impoverished both financially and in personnel, that they can no longer supply intellectual capital for our exploitation. American universities alone can make us a creditor nation scientifically; if they are to perform their essential functions, the public must realize that in the production of experts, quality is even more necessary that quantity. It is said repeatedly that we must have more engineers and more scientists; it is seldom said, though it desperately needs saying, that we require better scientists and better specialists in the social studies—people who understand both our allies and our enemies, as well as those who wish to be friends and no more.

To make the same transition in the educational world that we made long since in the world of finance and production will require not only public patience, faith, and appreciation of excellence which have thus far been lacking, but also enlarged financial support. At present the public is not giving to universities resources adequate for the formation of essential intellectual capital. In terms of modern dollars and numbers of students, private philanthropy donates to higher education only about one-quarter of what it provided in the 1920's. Business corporations generally will have to develop a point of view that some industrial leaders have already manifested. Many more must realize that the interests of stockholders run beyond today's dividends; the production of future dividends is equally important. The tragedy of our forests resulted from a short-range view of the profit motive. Agriculture cannot prosper over the long pull if the soil does not benefit from conservation practices. Similarly, business cannot thrive without ensuring the succession of leadership in science, technology, economics, foreign affairs, languages, and cultures.

Any industry which hesitates to give money to a university because it claims "the profits belong to the stockholders" is impoverishing the
source of the ideas and the personnel which alone can guarantee dividends for the years to come. It is incredible that we should see vast commitments for the future in plant and facilities and the retention of earnings for such physical expansion on the ground that only thus can the stability of the dividend structure be maintained, while other elements equally important for the investor are neglected. I say, without fear of successful contradiction, that the universities of the United States have been giving business the greatest "free ride" in history. Without the universities they would not have the scientific personnel, the technological staff, nor the executive leadership requisite to their continued strength and prosperity.

As American business has acquired world-wide ramifications, its need for men and women who know the language, culture, economics, and politics of other nations has grown apace. Even domestically, when business takes the long view, advances in the theory and practice of politics and economics become just as vital as the immediate and direct development of scientific research and technological processes. With conspicuous exceptions corporations have as yet failed to make a sufficiently statesmanlike approach to this problem.

Personnel is the only item used by business for which no costs of preparation have been paid. It is no more defensible for business to refuse to support and strengthen university sources of essential personnel than it would be to stay in old buildings with obsolete machinery and let the future take care of itself. Independent education is essential to the independence of business—and independence can be achieved only by gifts. If business does not want to be taken over by the government, it must see to it that the universities are not forced into federal dependence. Let us hope that in the instant future the industrial giants whose strength is drawn so largely from the intellectual contributions of the universities will see that their own true interest lies in securing the growth and vitality of intellectual centers such as this.