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The Truth About the Yanks As A Frenchman Sees It

THE fine compliments bestowed on Americans by visiting Europeans are generally pure "bunk," in effect says Louis Thomas, a Frenchman who has been sojourning in our land for a time and now has gone back home to tell of that funny America. Americans adore compliments, avers Mr. Thomas, and the astute European, quickly perceiving this weakness, for his own devious purposes proceeds to "lay it on thick" by handing out bouquets just as he would distribute glass beads to African savages. But he makes up for it when he gets home, we are assured, by saying "more unkind things about Americans than they deserve." Apparently, Mr. Thomas feels that the Yanks deserve having a few unkind things said about them, however, for his article appearing in *L'Opinion* (Paris) is frankly critical. His point of view, however mistaken it may be, contrasts interestingly with the compliments to which America has grown accustomed. Speaking of the business of "soft-soaping," of which he accuses the Europeans, the Frenchman opines that this was carried on to a positively indecent extreme during the war, especially by his polite countrymen, who now apparently regret that they did not exercise more restraint in this regard, when they see how the naive Americans and others, believing what they were told in France, have conceived the notion that they won the war, and are inclined to look upon the French as a bunch of mere "also-rans." As Mr. Thomas puts it, "we Frenchmen, who have the habit of criticizing ourselves out loud and washing our own dirty linen in public, gave our allies a daily present of courtesies and polite lies . . . which so inflated them that at the end each of them thought he had accomplished more than we." This was particularly true in the case of the Americans, we learn, and we read further:

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From the day that they sent us a hundred men and one general we said to them: "It is you who will decide the outcome of the war!" That was in accordance with our idea of the polite formula. . . . Later, when the Americans decided, after months of inaction and hesitation, to fulfil their duty as allies and to send to the battle-fields of France a fraction of the men who were being mobilized in their country, we called all the gods to witness this action.

We did not speak of our dead; we were too well bred to insist on that detail, and we told, we sang, we repeated to the Americans, "You have won the war!" And they believe it! Whenever an American division was incorporated in a French army we talked so much about the division that in America they thought the army was composed entirely of Americans. In a similar situation the British General Staff, more far-seeing, would forget to mention the Americans at all. General result: The Americans have won the war and it is no longer permissible to criticize them.

As a result of this "old-school politeness" and "worn-out diplomatic small change," freely made use of by the French, we are told that the Americans have reached a state of mind and have assumed an attitude where Frenchmen have had to bend to "all their preconceptions," and to submit to "all the absurdities of a proud professor, who, while President of the Republic of the United States, could not even command a majority in the Congress charged with ratifying his actions." This, in Mr. Thomas's opinion, has led to intellectual and political disaster—

Political disaster, in that we have almost entirely lost the confidence of the Americans without gaining anything through their support. Intellectual disaster, because the Americans will grow further away from our influence, which—among all the intellectual influences—is the one most potent to elevate, enrich, and humanize them.

We pass our time congratulating each other, toasting each other, speaking of Louis XVI., of Lafayette, and of Rochambeau; meantime, the *boche* acts, with an always more manifest impudence, admirably disguised as a 100 per cent.

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American. The English sent the Prince of Wales to dance with *débutantes* and to be polite to every one, and Sir Auckland Geddes, one of their great business men, as ambassador, who sees American business men, speaks in public, and travels a great deal. Only certain New England thinkers understand that the intellectual elevation of America is found neither in an external Americanization, nor in exchanging stale and empty compliments, nor in nationalism after the Brandenburg pattern. The Frenchman alone, absolutely disinterested in intellectual affairs, with his clear intelligence, his highly developed but in this instance helpful critical sense, his good taste, and his elegance, can bring to the America of to-day a real contribution to its culture.

As appears from the foregoing, one of the things the observant Frenchman took note of in this country was the movement now on for Americanization. The Americans, who, he says, are never discouraged and who have "a certain childlike candor of mind," have figured out and affirmed that with money and organized effort they can succeed in Americanizing all the races and minds in their country. He regards the whole Americanization scheme with skepticism:

All this is very well in its way—and very natural. . . . We can even admit that public instruction may have an effect on the young. . . .

Nevertheless, in our quality of old skeptical Europeans, we ask ourselves if the results will not be more harmful than beneficial. What will it be, this ready-made Americanization? At the very least superficial. Will it not often serve as camouflage, as in the case of certain Germans, thoroughly imbued with the Germanic culture, point of view, character, and taste, but provided with recent naturalization papers, who are at present competing with the allies in America, and who, under the disguise of Americanization and the formula of "One Hundred Per Cent. Americans," pull the wool over the eyes of these good, simple Americans with a skill I am compelled to praise. And, assuming that one achieves appreciable results, will it not mean lowering still more, if that is possible, the average level of American culture and civilization?

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As a consequence there are very few highly skilled native workmen in the United States. But what shall we say of a flux like the present, when in the spring of 1920 at Pittsburgh, the iron and steel metropolis of America, three thousand workmen leave the city's workshops every week, forcing employers constantly to engage unskilled men entirely ignorant of their new trade?

Nevertheless, the fact remains, and everybody knows it, that the United States at present exports much more than it imports; that the country in general grew rich while most other belligerent countries grew poor, and that it is perhaps easier for an individual to make a good living there, and even to acquire wealth if he has luck and is thrifty, than in Europe. Finally, this country, in spite of the scarcity of labor and rising wages, is prospering and progressing.