

# WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?

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lip service is necessary. On that staff we met socially and without embarrassment. "Did you have them in your house?" said my neighbour. Then one day I drove across town with a Negro couple in their Packard. (Whatever some war workers, Negro or white, had done with their wages, these people had bought a house, furnished it, and ran an expensive car as well). As I left the house my husband stood at our door watching heads appear from every window in our courtyard.

Americans in the North either ignore the Negro situation altogether, or argue about it, or indulge in all the myths concerning the Negroes in the south. The bog of intermarriage is always thrown across any serious discussion. It confuses the real issue that there are vast hurdles of petty restrictions and frustrations, let alone real discrimination and actual persecution—all to be removed before the Negro enjoys his full privilege as an American citizen. What a staff like ours learned from working alongside those Negro women came to us as a rare opportunity. Margaret Halsey says in her book *Colour Blind*, "There is no perfect way to live with our Negro compatriots, any more than there is a perfect way of living with one's husband or wife. But there are better ways at our finger tips than we are using now."

There has lately been a flood of books by white writers of distinction, all in vocal support of the American Negro. Miss Halsey has written two, Lilian Smith provided *Strange Fruit*, and Sinclair Lewis has just had his *Kingsblood Royal* distributed among the reading public of the Literary Guild. But White Americans who ignore the colour bar and go to the length of mixing socially with Negroes are suspect to the average American. There is a Negro president of the Portland chapter of the American Veterans' Committee, and at Vanport the chapter succeeded in persuading the authorities to combine Negro and white families in one unit as an experiment. For their pains these courageous people are branded with equal scorn as "nigger-lovers" and "Communists." These brands do not always settle with equal vigour on people or on organisations, but these "Communists," these "radicals" were under fierce fire in the States as I left.

## Liberals are "Crack-Pots"

As the fear of Russia grows and the fever of propaganda and prejudice rises, the merest liberal is branded and condemned. Talking about progressive Americans as liberals is less than kind in one sense, but what else describes them, a loosely contrived bunch of intellectuals, labour leaders, and ordinary citizens? These are the remnants of the New Deal, divided among themselves and apparently unable to rally sufficiently from the death of Roosevelt to make themselves felt politically. Somehow and rarely we discovered these people, branded in every society but their own as crack-pots, cranks, and Reds. At the higher level they are people like Eleanor Roosevelt, still under fire from conservative groups for her long career of honest effort on behalf of minorities and underprivileged

groups in her own country, and still without prestige after her work at Lake Success; men like David Lilienthal, who suffered ignominiously and was branded a dangerous radical for his fine job of developing the T.V.A. into a servant of the people.

Americans would rather be divided sharply between Republicans and Democrats than fall to right or left of centre. But actually there is a sharper line right across their two-party system than there is any longer between the parties. What defeated the remnants of the New Deal legislation was the combination of Southern conservative Democrats with the Republicans. Against this New Dealers like Senator Pepper and Henry Wallace could not rally enough support, even with the help of Republicans like Wayne Morse, of Oregon. And where telegrams and letters to Congressmen were the weapons of liberal organisations and labour unions, the conservatives had on their side most of the Press, most of the radio commentators, and all the large powerful organisations designed to protect the status quo. With millions of dollars of advertising the National Association of Manufacturers broke the brave attempt of O.P.A. to hold down the cost of living; with all the pressure it could exert the National Real Estate Board defeated every effort of Mr. Truman's administration to cope with the housing shortage; the American Legion occupies its time with plans for a bonus and leaves its members without a lead in supporting legislation that would have housed them better, given them better rights to a job, and kept down inflation.

## "The American Way—or Else"

To suggest that there is any other way than to give Free Enterprise its arrogant head is to run foul of Americans. Behind such a suggestion there is always a taint of "Communism." They blithely disregard the compromise between unbridled capitalism and rigid socialism that we have here in New Zealand and that they know in Sweden and England. It must be the American Way—or else. Suggest socialised medicine to an American bemoaning his doctor's bills, and he looks at you as if you were taking away his birthright. Suggest that some opportunities are closed to Americans without financial backing, let alone the hindrance of belonging to a minority group, and he will launch out romantically on variations on the theme of Rags to Riches, and Log Cabin to White House—and that is that.

An American woman said to me that the things I wanted so badly to bring to New Zealand told her exactly why she would rather stay home. But leaving behind the devices and gadgets was not so hard. It would be harder to pursue against inflation the dollars that provide the comfort and luxury she could not give up.

Then her argument lost all its force. "Besides," she said, "It isn't even a democracy." She meant, I imagine, that we have "socialised" away our freedom. Her America is the land of the brave and the free and the privileged. There you are privileged to take whatever you want, to take it and pay for it through the neck.

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