THE UNITY OF THE WEST AND FREE TRADE: A REPORT FROM WASHINGTON

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When the United States fostered the recovery and underwrote the security of Western Europe she had more than sentiment to impel her. That salient zone is a pivotal sector of the world balance, and while she may station fewer of her own troops upon its soil, she can entertain no total disengagement from it. But there is another West European item, the future of the Common Market, which calls for a fresh American scrutiny. The West will be better off if Western Europe acquires more of an ability to stand on its own feet. Gaulism, however, revealed a less modest goal, one that was not confined to France and did not vanish with the departure of General de Gaulle. On the contrary, it may have gained new leverage from his downfall.

Western Europe must enlarge the Common Market before it can fulfill the Gaullist dream. There will be such an enlargement if, through pending negotiations, Britain becomes a member. Simultaneously, Washington has been debating the pros and cons of American trade policy. There is no secret about the adverse consequences of steeper American trade barriers. But hazards also lurk in the game played at Brussels, and it is one that is being played for keeps.

The full nature of those hazards Washington is still loath to acknowledge. Nowadays, however, boosters of the Common Market are less audible than critics. American official quarters have assailed the Community for trade discrimination and, in return, that body’s Executive Commission has accused the United States of adopting protectionist measures. Under tariff curbs accepted during the Kennedy Round, the Six, it has been claimed, will not be doing as much to restrict trade as the United States, Britain and Japan.

This dispute has been a comparatively mild one so far. It may soon get worse. If the European Economic Community lets Britain enter, a group of smaller applicants (Ireland, Denmark, Norway to begin with) will accompany her. And trade discrimination, if that charge against the Common Market is a valid one, may thus have its sphere enlarged.

What must suffer is not only the prosperity but the comity of the West. An international mixed commission has been suggested as a device for lessening trade conflict between the United States and Western Europe. Yet no palliative may do more than relieve pain; it cannot penetrate to the seat of the trouble. Both Secretary of the Treasury, David M. Kennedy, and Secretary of State, William P. Rogers, have conceded that still more irritants will result from the enlargement of the Common Market. Such a step, nevertheless, is one which, through the entry of Britain, the United States has always favored.

American reasoning here has been simple enough. Washington has assumed that, as a member of the Common Market, Britain will push the cause of trade liberalization unremittingly. Yet even if the British try, they may not succeed and, after their outlook has been transformed by Europeanization, they may not even make the attempt. And as Britain turns her back on the overseas connections which have long sustained her economy, the greater the risk that the inward-looking policies of European associates will prevail.

Nor is the danger solely an economic one. It is, all the same, primarily from the economic angle that Washington still treats Britain’s entry into the Common Market. And that is odd because the Labor Government and Conservative Opposition laid stress on a political motive when, in 1967, the United Kingdom made another bid for membership. What they emphasized was how, after the Common Market had been enlarged, Western Europe might do more for peace than it is now doing. But across the English Channel that same political motive has had a more anti-American sound, and the British, on being Europeanized, might be enveloped by it.

What this could portend should be evident. The United States is charting a new course in world affairs. After Vietnam, according to pronouncements by President Nixon, America will steer midway between over-extension and neo-isolationism. With grave problems to cope with at home, it is in a spirit of retraction that America now looks abroad.

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Under the circumstances, the U.S. might be expected to cling to whatever historic assets she possesses elsewhere. Britain's cooperative role has been, since the end of the nineteenth century, foremost among these. Yesterday Britain was in the van, today America occupies Britain's place, and tomorrow—who knows?—such a bond might still have value. It will be lost if Britain becomes an integral part of a tight-knit European union. And so, if only from an American perspective, Britain needs an alternative. That which preserves the Anglo-American factor will also preserve for common purposes other affinities (in monetary affairs and international finance as well as in assorted imponderables) which, with the United States, Britain still maintains.

The main issue here is the road that the Common Market must inevitably take. A few of its components shrink from a pooling of sovereignty, and yet it cannot achieve its aims without one. The mere growth of trade within so compact a complex demands regulation in a variety of spheres. A federalizing process must ensue, and nothing may do more than Britain's entry to revive that federalizing process and speed it up. A political union might thus take shape—the framework, too, for a Third Force that could undercut American leadership and further impair the unity of the West.

In Western Europe, it is true, the drive for a political union ran out of steam during the 1960's. But this was not unusual; such ventures have generally evolved by fits and starts. Nor has Italy ever desisted from promoting one, and now West Germany, the most dynamic segment of the Common Market, has joined her in doing so—with, as Chancellor Willy Brandt has recognized, complete supranationalism as the ultimate objective.

Over no other question was General de Gaulle as paradoxical. If he had not vetoed Britain's entry into the Common Market, she might have collaborated with France as a brake on the trend toward federalization. But in the loose, non-organic union that he envisaged, Britain could still function as a free agent. The upshot would have been the survival of the Anglo-American factor when it was its extinction he sought. Again, the General urged Western Europe to operate as a Third Force between Russia and the United States. Yet this, his main vision, it could not implement until the Common Market, enlarged by the entry of Britain, had also undergone the closest political integration. To the last, General de Gaulle rejected the means by which alone he could realize his ends, but others might not reject them.

What will refashion the European Community is sheer administrative necessity. As an economic combine, it cannot make the most of its opportunities until it organizes itself as one, politically; and as it organizes itself politically it may strive more and more to meet other superpowers as an equal. Nor will this major new instrument render world politics any less complicated than they are. For the more a European union forges the capacity to choose a line of its own, the more it may be tempted, under the pressure of events, to pursue one.

Such a contingency, Washington appears to believe, is remote. Lest the global balance shift against her, the U.S. must persevere in resisting the subjugation of Western Europe by the Soviet Union; since America does most of the job, her Atlantic allies, as in the past, bear less than their due share. It will be difficult for Washington to take seriously a Third Force which has no vast military core. But there is a lot to world politics short of a final confrontation between superpowers. Until the nuclear stalemate breaks down, the New Europe, enlarged and unified, may be more unpredictable in behavior than the United States has anticipated. For that matter, how will the European Community dispose of British and French nuclear weapons? From Washington to Moscow a European deterrent, with West Germany refusing to be excluded, would exert an unsettling effect; but if Britain is Europeanized, there is bound to be one. Defense, after all, is an essential attribute of sovereignty.

Unsettling, too, would be a relapse from representative democracy by important branches of the European Community—the Germans, the French, the Italians. Here again Washington presupposed that Britain, together with lesser continental partners, can police members who become unruly. But the British will lack autonomy and resources for so onerous a task. When Americans recoil from a mission as global gendarme, that of regional policeman would hardly attract the British.

There is a way, all the same, for the U.S. to avoid these anxieties. If a stable West is desired, the Common Market should not be enlarged; its optimum size may be its existing one. That means that if Britain stays out, she must find economic scope in other directions. And an open-ended, multilateral free trade area, by covering a number of fields at one stroke, is surely the answer.

What this might accomplish for the United States, as for Britain, should be clear. It would express, first of all, the progressive trade policies to which Nixon Republicans and most Democrats subscribe. Within the limits of the West, secondly, it could also ward off a politico-strategic threat to U.S. pre-eminence.
As for Britain, she no longer enjoys top rank. She would count for still less if her destiny were to be that of an outer island province in a West European union. But she could save herself in a big free trade area from having to make so basic a sacrifice. A project of that kind, moreover, would offer room for residual overseas ties with Commonwealth countries and the United States. And, for what these are still worth, they should not be disregarded needlessly.

Washington might have to mount such a program in conjunction with London and Ottawa. It would, though, be global rather than regional in scale—despite the NAFTA (North Atlantic Free Trade Area) label that has, for the sake of convenience, been pinned on this approach. A free trade area may stretch from the EFTA group in Europe to Australia and New Zealand. It could, given an improvement in Japanese trade practices, put out a welcome mat for Japan. As a single entity, even the Common Market, if it were prepared to lower its external tariff, might enter.

But would the United States promote so wide-ranging an endeavor if Japan, for one, were to abstain? Washington, with an eye to the security of East Asia and the Western Pacific, will hesitate to sharpen differences with Tokyo. Japan, nevertheless, has a stake of her own in the well-being of the free world. A multilateral free trade area might contribute to that inestimably.

Through a free trade area, industrial countries may do more, in unison, than they are doing at present for the less developed. As an economic stimulus, the enlargement of the Common Market can never match it. And as far as such a project staves off a deeper politico-strategic rift within the West, it could be of the utmost benefit on other crucial grounds.

A free trade area traversing the globe might be, then, more than a vehicle for trade liberalization. As an economic instrument, it could signalize for Washington a highly imaginative brand of political realism. Power for peace must not only be reckoned in tangible, quantifiable terms. The U.S. has more than relations with other colossi to consider—an expansive one like the USSR, one that is semi-inert like Communist China, even a potential one like the United States of Western Europe. There may be some Americans who contend that Washington no longer requires separate access to so tested an ally as Britain; that, since an enlarged Europe will not vie with the U.S., Washington should not worry about Britain’s future incompetence, as a state of the European union, to deal with the U.S. on her own. Still less may it alarm some Americans that, after Britain has merged politically with European neighbors, the Americanization of Canada, Australia and New Zealand will proceed faster than ever. But at a juncture when the United States tends to be more and more preoccupied with the domestic scene, it is in the continuing independence of friends that she has a source of strength.

Over this issue, at any rate, the West, within the next few years, may again reach a turning point. Britain’s signature on the Treaty of Rome will be an irrevocable one. And even if it were not, she could scarcely retrieve former export channels with ease or resume the advantageous conditions under which, by importing cheap foodstuffs from Commonwealth countries, she may still compete in foreign trade with others.

Significant, too, have been reports of recent British opinion polls. Despite the prolonged, one-sided efforts of most British mass media, it would seem that a majority of the British people do not wish Britain to join the Common Market. Nor is such diffidence likely to be reduced by costs of entry as exorbitant as those published by the Wilson Government in a recent White Paper. So remarkable a change in the attitude of the British public might yet stir an upheaval in British party politics. Meanwhile, the British people have been told little about the countervailing merits of an open-ended multilateral free trade area—though, in any case, these may remain academic until the idea takes root in the United States.

Will there be time for it to do so? No governmental initiative is going to come from Washington as long as negotiations between London and Brussels continue, for those most involved are allies of the U.S. It will be counter-productive, Washington fears, if American proposals, even if they provide the British with a more viable alternative, ruin the latest attempt to enlarge the Common Market. But it may be still more counter-productive for the United States if, with a self-imposed vow of silence and passivity, she also does nothing to help herself.

Another kind of initiative is feasible at once. American opinion-makers at least can speak up—notables in Congress, big business and trade unions, public men who are out of office, broadcasters, editors, columnists and other writers. This might prevent any stampede by Parliament before there has been a better chance to ascertain the prospects for positive action by the United States. It will also bring before the American people what, in the light of vital American interests, politico-strategic as well as economic, the enlargement of the New Europe may entail.

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