

“Truly great achievements are the actualization of principles,” the professor had written

In Search of New Heroes and My Misplaced America

Carl E. Carlson

My heroes are all either dead or dying, especially me. I am much older now than I was before. Somewhere within me are memories of past bravery inspired by my American flag marching in parade, flanked by a band's martial music; more important to me now is the fear I feel—despite my intelligence—of the noise of a roaring subway train through a lonely station at night.

In my past there were a few mornings—a very few and never close together—when, upon awakening, a nagging, inconsiderate conscience pestered me to consider if I truly knew anything at all about all the things I thought I knew. Now I have those kinds of mornings every day, all day, and late into the night.

The worst of my problems is that I have misplaced my America and I need to find it. I don't think I lost it all at once. If I had, it would be easy enough to find; after all, it is a rather big thing. No, I didn't lose it all at once. I lost it a piece at a time.

One of the last times I remember having it intact was last year in Germany. It was with me on a beautiful evening in May in the grand banquet hall of the U.S. Army Officers' Club in Heidelberg.

A bugle calls together a gathering of proud American soldiers who serve their own nation in a foreign land; the officers of the Army Corps of Engineers are ready to begin their annual Castle Ball. The affair is named for the Engineers' traditional gold castle emblem boastfully displayed on colorful uniform lapels. The ball celebrates the Corps' two-hundredth birthday and, coincidentally, heads the list of many festivities by U.S. military forces in Europe leading to my America's Bicentennial. The Castle Ball also coincides with V-E Day of three decades ago, and with celebrations in West Germany and West Berlin commemorating the end of the Soviet Union's Berlin Blockade. I am a civilian guest, honored to be a part of the Castle Ball pageantry.

A colorguard moves into the hall with feet stomping in unison on polished, hardwood flooring. There is all the pomp and circumstance required of such an affair. I am

deeply moved as my flag passes through the field of proud men who display ribbons and citations for varying feats of bravery and service for me and my flag. My flag marches to the head table, receives a proper salute, and is posted to chaperone the festivities.

From the podium: “Gentlemen and ladies; I propose a toast to the President of the United States.” Nine hundred wine glasses are raised toward my flag as the officers and their wives or women friends toast in unison, “To the President.” There are more toasts. The wine glasses are held high again and again for the U.S. Army, for the Corps of Engineers, and finally for the women of the Corps.

During Europe's more than two thousand-year history different men with varying allegiances have had similar celebrations. The words have been different, the toasts to different nations, to different leaders, yet the spirit tonight in this banquet hall is the same spirit that echoes through all the ancient castles of history—a spirit pledging allegiance to a nation, a leader, a military might, and, of course, an undying love for a woman.

The wine, the toasts, the meal, the waltzing, all so rich tonight, could have inspired Epicurus to new heights. The wine, the toasts, the food, and the waltzing conspire tonight to make me forget what I have read about me and my America in the international press during recent days.

I've read the *Washington Post's* Moscow bureau dispatches that have told me, from where Kremlin leaders sit, that the outlook for the future “these days must be a decidedly rosy one.” Moscow, the *Post* has told me, “is having a splendid spring, one of the warmest in years, and to match the weather, Soviet prospects around the world have rarely, if ever, looked brighter.”

I've read reports from the British news service, Reuters, of China's great concern about a growing “Soviet threat to Europe and Asia.” The news service quotes sources as saying that of the two great superpowers—the U.S. and the USSR—China believes the Soviets to be the strongest.

The *Los Angeles Times* has told me the North Atlantic

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Treaty Organization has been "disastrously" affected by "doubt about the power and will of the U.S. and its people for continued leadership of the Free World." The newspaper says America's allies—my allies—are realizing they can no longer depend on my alliance for their security and they are making their own separate accommodations with Russia.

I cannot "carry out" my former "diplomatic promises and responsibilities," the *Times* has told me. Congress and I have proven we don't have the determination and power to provide for our own defenses and to aid our former allies.

The American Forces Network radio has quoted a U.S. military leader as saying my America could not win a world war today.

According to the *International Herald Tribune*, China has announced to the world that China is so afraid of the Soviet threat to the world that China is building massive bomb shelters that "can provide sanctuary against all known nuclear and chemical weapons."

The purpose of my European journey last year was not to be a tourist seeking picture postcard quaintness to write home about. The intent was more serious. In my heart I was to be an adventurer searching after the glamor of a Fitzgerald and a Hemingway; because of my age and supposed maturity I was too embarrassed at the time to admit it. Instead I contrived a story about traveling in Europe to immerse myself in life-styles different from anything I had ever known, to learn of other people and cultures. The truth was that I longed for adventure in distant places.

The bushes and trees parted and fell, their place was taken by an armored tank, its cannon barrel leveled at me. I stepped closer. The gun turret swung slightly from side to side—a warning, a signal to insure I had seen the tank appear. I took another step. A powerful roaring noise disturbed the quiet morning as the driver started the tank's engine. The tank moved forward a few yards. I took another step. The tank moved again several yards closer toward me. Some soldiers—maybe four, maybe

five—appeared from behind the tank and pointed rifles at me.

Across a hundred yards of a backwoods section of rolling hills and thick forest of West German frontier, on a cold, rainy morning, I was challenging the power of the East German Army. Here the Free World ends along a barbed wire fence.

I turned to look behind me some fifteen yards to where I had left my automobile at the end of a little-used dirt road. At the car a companion had been looking across the border through field glasses. He had seen the tank and pointed toward it. I nodded. My companion—an American—has lived in Germany for many years. He knows about such things.

"What will they do now?" I asked.

"You never can tell."

"Do they usually come out of hiding?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes not. Usually no."

"Why this time?"

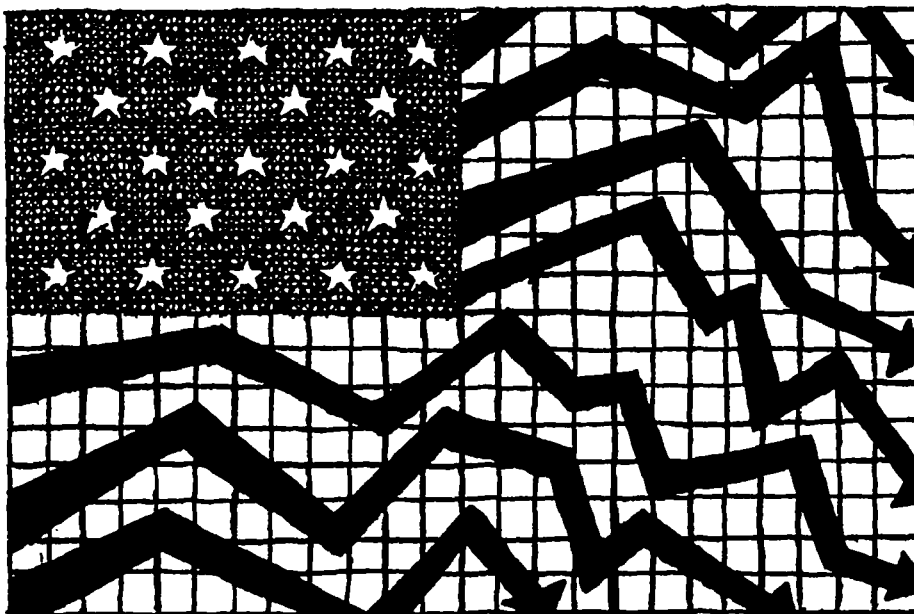
My friend shrugged. "Who knows? People try crossing every day. Maybe they think we're here to get someone out. Maybe they think we're trying to signal someone on their side. We better go now."

"That would be stupid, wouldn't it, to be trying to do something like that out here in the open like this?"

"People have done more stupid things," my friend said. He nodded toward the tank. "Maybe they're tired of us. We've been playing games on these back roads all morning. And we haven't been this close before. I think we better go. You've seen what you came for."

I turned back to face the border—a death strip that divides a country and the world. It seemed so very important for me to be there, to see it, to know what it was. On the map the border is a light green line that runs a zigzag course from the Baltic Sea on the north down to Czechoslovakia on the south. On the map the light green line is not different from all the other light green lines that indicate where one country ends and another begins. The green line on the map seems harmless and of little consequence.

But that morning I wasn't looking at a map. I was



STUART LEEDS

looking across ten yards to a barbed wire fence—a fence perhaps six feet high—and then across some thirty or forty yards of low cut grass to a water canal with steep concrete sides; then across a flat of bare earth with explosive land mines buried beneath it. Adjacent to the mine field was another barbed wire fence—this one higher, and beyond the fence was a concrete road. Beyond the road the ground sloped up into the hills and forest, and there was the tank. To my right, some several hundred yards, I saw a watchtower, and to my left at about the same distance another tower. Large searchlights were mounted on top of the towers. There were big lamps mounted on high posts every few yards along the barbed wire fence by the concrete road.

“We have been here too long,” my friend warned me.

Across the border the tank and soldiers looked very silly to me, like toys left behind in the rain after the children had been called home by their mother.

I boldly walked the ten yards to the first barbed wire fence. I reached out and touched it—lightly at first with just my fingertips, then harder until I was holding it in my fist. I watched the tank and soldiers; they did not move. After a moment I dropped my hand, turned and walked back to the car.

“What did that prove?” my friend asked.

I couldn’t answer. I didn’t know. I shrugged my shoulders and got into the car.

I looked back across the border. In the time it had taken me to walk from the fence to the car, in that short time my back was to the border, the tank had disappeared, hidden again behind the green bushes and trees.

My Paris was Schwetzingen, a town not far from Heidelberg Castle and University. It is a town well known by the German people for its contributions to European history and culture; few Americans know of it or seem to care. By itself the town is a nice place to be; with its magnificent palace and seemingly unending palace gardens it is a beautiful place to live.

The people of Schwetzingen were friendly and ready to talk with me in English. They were people I could ask questions and people who would ask me questions and test my knowledge and my beliefs and join in friendly arguments about our countries’ principles. It is a quiet, lazy afternoon at a sidewalk café in the shadows of the Schwetzingen Palace. The café is for the local people; tourists, what few there are, are tolerated but not welcomed. It is an establishment where townspeople spend long hours drinking beer or wine and debate the solutions for their lives. I strike up a conversation with a university student, and the talk eventually turns to politics and nationalism and international leadership.

The young German listens patiently as I boast of my America’s accomplishments during its past two hundred years. When I finish, the German smiles and politely gives me a history lesson.

“You speak of history, my friend. My family goes back 790 years in this region. The Heidelberg Castle that thrills you so has a history to the twelfth century. Jerusalem was there before Christ was born, and the Romans—before Christ, more than 2,500 years ago—

marched along the Rhine not far from here.

“Tell me what your history means. Measure it for me and the generations of my family. You cannot get to the nearest star in two hundred years. And after all, it is not so much your history or my history that is important; it is the future—what you and I can do with the future—that is important.

“And you talk to me of your democracy. Did you know that it was your own John Adams who said two hundred years ago of democracy that democracies never last, that they waste themselves and suffocate themselves, that in all of history all democracies have committed suicide?”

The German reaches into a briefcase in which he carries many books, and he extracts one. He searches through the pages and, finding what he is after, looks back to me. “Do you know why democracies kill themselves? Do you know why your America is no longer a leader now that your money is gone and your military and economic power no long exists?”

The questions are obviously rhetorical; I do not answer.

“Let me read you something,” the German student says. “Can you guess who said this thing? ‘Instinct is no guide to political conduct. Effective leadership is always forced—whatever its motives—to present itself as the carrier of ideas embodying purposes. All truly great achievements in history resulted from the actualization of principles, not from clever evaluation of political conditions.’”

I admit to the German that I cannot guess who is the author of the impressive words.

“It is from the writings of your—or, should I say, our—Mr. Kissinger, from a thesis when he was a student, long before he became a politician.” The German hands me the book, an English-language edition of *Kissinger—the Adventures of Super-Kraut*.

“You have your history, my American friend, and your history has had its principles. But tell me, where are your principles now? And if you have principles, without authority—or, should I say, without the power to make the rest of the world listen—what then will you do with your principles?”

“Democracies die from within, from a cancer that grows because democracy, by its nature, must allow politics, and politics, by their nature, cannot be won through principles.

“I can respect America for its past accomplishments. I can stand in awe that you have survived so long. But in the future would I not be a fool if I chose to follow a weak leader? And if a leader is dying, can he be strong?”

It has been more than a year since I met the young German student. I do not remember his name; I cannot remember if he told me his name. But as I search for my heroes now, as I watch the festivities of my America’s Bicentennial, as I take part in the search for a President, I can remember the German’s words more than I can remember those of the guest speaker at the Castle Ball, and I can see more clearly in my mind the barbed wire fences and the tank than I can recall memories of the Ball’s pageantry.