

AMERICA'S IMPACT  
ON THE WORLD

This book is the companion volume to the author's  
*Impact of Western Man*

# AMERICA'S IMPACT ON THE WORLD

*A Study of the Role of the United States  
in the World Economy, 1750–1970*

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**To my children: David, Roger, Kirsten,  
Mark, Peter, Andrew, Thomas**

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## *Preface*

THIS book is meant to provide a synthesis of America's contribution to the common western achievement in the world during the past two hundred years. In merging the history of the United States into that of the modern world, I have of necessity stressed those aspects that are of world rather than of local or even of national importance. While I am conscious of the variations that exist between the different parts of the United States, I believe that at least in its external aspect it is possible to identify the 'American' impact in the world. And by 'impact' I mean not just the outward thrust of American life but the effect in the world of the colonising inward flow as well. Before the United States could give to the world, it had to take. I am also aware that any explanation of the historical forces that have helped to mould the American character must take account of domestic as well as external forces. Hence, the stress placed in the early part of my book on the circumstances surrounding the nation's inception and its westward expansion across the North American continent.

Because economic history is my major craft, I have emphasised the economic aspects, yet the story I have to tell cannot be confined to any particular branch of history. Unashamedly, in trying to explain the American mind and conduct in the world, I have disregarded the barriers of historical and economic specialism. Specialism to me is not an end in itself but a means to a greater whole. I no more think that the present atomisation of knowledge is normal and permanent, than I think that ultimate and universal history is just around the corner. I can only hope that in approaching my task from what is today an unusual intellectual angle I may add a new dimension to our present knowledge.

About one's approach to history there will always be dispute. About America's need to see its history in a world context there can be no argument. It is especially important for the Americans not only because of their world political

responsibilities but also because of their growing role in international commerce, industry and finance. There is ahead of us a struggle between the nation state and the realities of a growing world-wide economic order. Politically, the twentieth century is the age of the nation. In all other respects, – in religion, art, science, technology, defence, finance, commerce and business – it is increasingly international and anational. Here lies one of the dilemmas of the modern age.

The trouble is that most Americans are completely unable to see their own history in a world context. Their earlier desire to break with Europe's past bedevils their present thinking. Their belief that they can ignore history and wipe the slate clean and start all over again (as they are now trying to do with mainland China) has caused them to have little sense of proportion regarding the limits of human effort. It is their ignorance of the past – or, perhaps, their abhorrence of the past – it is their belief that they stand outside history which gives them a different sense of the human drama from that held by other people. While their setbacks in Vietnam have done something to change this attitude, they are still reluctant to share the 'vale of tears' of the less fortunate of the world; not for them the stress placed upon the imponderables, the miraculous and the spiritual forces of life that are to be found in Talmudic scripture. Because he believes himself to be in much greater control of his fate than history bears out, the American cannot understand how it is that, after several hundred years of what is called 'progress', the problems facing the world should be greater now than they have ever been. Must there be several more conflicts such as the one in Vietnam, several more leaders felled by assassins' bullets, before the American realises what an important yet what a devious and incalculable thing history can be? It is not only Great Men who make history; it is sometimes lunatics. As long as the Americans confined their activities to the colonisation of part of the North American continent, this weakness – this facility to see things in terms of the moment – did not matter so much; now, when America stands at the centre of the world stage, it is critical for the whole human race.

It is this same lack of historical sense that has deluded the

Americans into believing that they could provide a prescription for the world's economic ills; which is to assume that the United States has the only rational economic system and that all others are the results of ignorance or error. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no norm, no inevitable goal, which other countries have somehow failed to reach, or for that matter to which they should struggle. If the world has shown an eagerness to accept America's ideas on economic growth and development, it is because the idea of a world of plenty for the common man has filled a vacuum in man's thinking. Other people have their own ideas about religion and politics; what they did not have – until some of them took it from the Americans – was the idea of a universal economic plenty.

However critical some of my comments may appear, I write about the Americans as a friend; I acknowledge my bias. I have known them in peace and war. I have studied and taught their history for many years. I have spent the greater part of my working life since the Second World War among them. I am the child of immigrants myself and, but for the quirks of fate, would have been born and reared on the American side of the Atlantic. My father was one of those who, in the summer of 1914, voluntarily left America to fight in Flanders. A generation later, I took up the fight\* where he had left off. Indeed, I have come to the conclusion that there must be a fighting streak in the Woodruffs, for my paternal grandmother Woodruff of Fall River, Massachusetts, had more sons fighting under the Stars and Stripes in 1917 than any other mother in the State.

Finally, by way of explanation, I repeat what I wrote in my earlier *Impact of Western Man*. To those who see 'America' as larger than the United States, I apologise for using these terms interchangeably. My plea is that I have followed the general European and North American practice of identifying Americans with the people residing in the United States.

\* I have written of my experiences with the infantry in *Vessel of Sadness*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1970.

Where I have used the term 'North America', I mean Canada and the United States. 'Latin America' for me includes the area from the Mexican-United States border to Cape Horn, as well as the West Indies. When I speak of the western nations, and the West, I am dealing with those people who belong to a general European cultural pattern, regardless of where they were born or where they reside. Thus, the terms 'western nations' and 'the West' include those living within Europe as well as those whites living within the great European settlements of the Americas, Australasia, and parts of Africa.

As with my *Impact of Western Man*, my debt to others in the preparation of this book is great. While I cannot list all those who have helped me in my inquiries I would like to thank the following specialists who were generous enough to read and criticise either the whole or part of the book in typescript or in proof; Professors Henri Brugmans, David Carneiro sen., S. B. Clough, Wolfram Fischer, L. M. Hacker, Yoshitaka Komatsu, Takashi Kotonno, Henrietta Larson, Philip Locklin, Charles Morris, David Niddrie, Sir Arthur G. Price, A. L. Rowse, and R. S. Woodbury. Mr Dee Brown helped me with Indian sources. For statistical assistance I am indebted to Professors J. H. Dunning and C. P. Kindleberger. I also received help with figures from Monsieur Becker of the Ministère des Finances, Paris, Herr Bergmann of the Statistisches Bundesamt, Wiesbaden, Mr G. Fogg of the British Department of Trade and Industry, Drs Wolff and Senif of the Deutsches Bundesamt, and Mr Thomas Olmstead. Dr Anson Huang of the Missionary Research Library, New York, provided missionary statistics.

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*Berlin, 1974*

**William Woodruff**