

SPECTATOR'S JOURNAL

A BRIEF MEETING IN GENEVA

by David Evanier

A man in his sixties, he glowed like a light bulb. His arm in an orange sling, red shirt, he looked dashing. Brisk color, fine skin. Slim. He resembled Barry Goldwater. He carried a thick paperback book.

When our plane was grounded in Geneva, he sat down at my table at the airport restaurant.

"Broke my shoulder skiing. Only New York can do this operation—fractures—properly. But my doctor won't wait for me. Three days is the limit on this. I've already used up two." He opened a bottle of wine. "Name is Levin. I'm on pain killers. Only way to get through this is to get stoned. Where are you coming from?"

"Israel. I live in New York City."

"They're losing \$100 million in P.R. on this business in the Gaza. Should have used water tanks. Flatten them with water. They can't swim anyway; let them drown. Hose them down."

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"But it looks bad. Or have the soldiers throw rocks back at them. That would be funny. Wouldn't that be funny, don't you think?" He laughed.

"Are you in business?" I asked.

"Years ago. Textiles. Where do you live in New York?"

"The Village."

"War zone. Homosexuals dying off."

"And you?"

"West Palm Beach. Four months in East Hampton. It can be delicious in New York those four months. Absolutely delicious. But why do you live in New York?"

"I like it."

"But you don't know how you'd feel about other places. That's the trouble with people. They form opinions without knowing. Why don't you pick up and move to some other city? Move to Aspen. Wonderful. You've never been to Aspen, have you?"

"No. I'd rather not."

"But how do you know without moving there? People don't want to make moves because they're

afraid. Go to Aspen for three months."

"Move there?"

"Why not?"

He poured another glass of wine.

"Take this lunch we're eating. This veal." He pointed at the chicken, which was rubbery. "These fluffy potatoes, and fresh peas. This is a better meal than you'd get at any of your Village restaurants—the good ones—at fifty dollars per person. The Swiss did this with absolutely no notice. Fix up 200 extra meals of superb quality."

"Where did you grow up?" I asked.

"Brooklyn. Erasmus High School. What business are you in?"

"I'm writing a book. On Soviet Jewry."

"I'm reading Armand Hammer's autobiography. Twelve-hundred pages. Great man. That's a book you should read. His father was a Communist and framed by the government. Hammer made a million by the time he was 26. I met him at the White House. He's 83, and he looks younger than you. He even looks younger than me."

"No kidding?"

"What Jew has ever exerted such power with the Russians? Bad time for your book. People are bored with the subject. Except conservatives."

"You met Hammer at a party?"

"A tennis reception."

He began his third glass. "The Jews aren't being sent to Siberia anymore. Change your subject. You don't mind making money, do you?"

"Not at all."

"I always went where the dollar was good. I came to Geneva fourteen years ago. Always followed the dollar. People don't understand anything. You know where's best now?"

"No."

"The United States."

He poured mustard on the chicken. "Anyway, why write about Russia when America is just as bad?"

I stared at him.

"I learned in the sixties. My son made me see. A million kids were destroyed on drugs. Cocaine. Nixon, that psychopath."

"I was in Washington Square Park with my son. 1968. He was going to

Berkeley, where he'd been radicalized. This boy had chased a squirrel up a tree. The squirrel went up higher. The boy scrambled up after him. A crowd gathered. The police came. They had riot helmets. They called to the boy to come down. It was a test. Then they called for reinforcements. A hundred police were soon surrounding that tree. The kid—he had a beard—wouldn't come down.

"The squirrel darted away. The boy was laughing. The crowd was laughing. Lovefest. The police were furious. Shaking their clubs. They demanded he come down. And suddenly the boy did a flip, a somersault, down the tree onto the ground. It was beautiful. The crowd applauded and cheered. He was grinning."

"And the pigs descended on him. They clubbed him. They beat him to a bloody pulp. The crowd protested, but they wouldn't stop. My son said to me, 'Now do you understand, Dad?' And I did."

He paused, looking at me, waiting.

"That's a good story," I said. "You told it well."

I stood up and said I had to make a phone call.

"That's all you have to say? A good story?"

"I didn't mean it was fiction. I meant it was an incident. It doesn't prove a thing."

"You're not an anti-Communist, are you?" he said.

"Yes. Yes I am."

"Well, what kind of anti-Communist are you? Are you anti-Chinese? Are you anti-Yugoslav?"

I didn't want to make a speech.

"I get your drift. I don't agree with it," I said. I began to move off.

He held up his glass. "Here's an idea for the book you should be writing. Two men exchange planes. A Russian winds up in Harlem, living among the blacks, impoverished, no hope, drugs. And a black goes to Russia, where he's a writer, living among the elite. Now there's a plot. Which one would you rather be, the black or the Russian?"

I waved goodbye, and he went back to Armand Hammer. □

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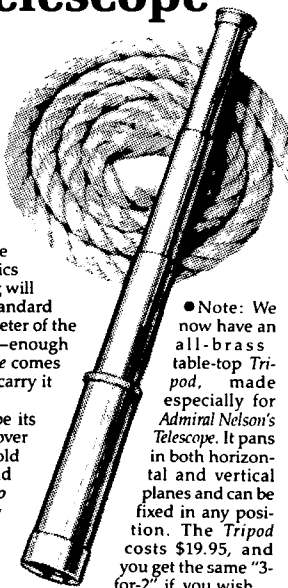
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BOOK REVIEWS

The fuss made in the United States about this book surprises Europeans, and amuses them too. Perhaps it tells us more about the techniques of hype in the U.S. publishing industry, and the state of mind of U.S. liberals—who seem to have fallen eagerly on the text as a master plan for reducing America's overseas and defense commitments—than it does about America's real predicament. The book was certainly worth publishing, because it has initiated a useful debate on the role of United States power in the world, and how and whether it should be sustained.

But is it worth reading? That depends on how much time you have on your hands. The first half is a long summary of the rise and fall of Hapsburg Spain, of Bourbon and Napoleonic France, and of the British Empire. This kind of large-scale potted history is extremely difficult to carry off, and I am afraid Professor Kennedy does not know how to do it. The need to cover the ground in a limited space reduces him to such feeble devices as encapsulating leading figures with a single adjective. Thus Henri IV is "charismatic," Richelieu "influential," Wallenstein "powerful"; Gustavus Adolphus is also "influential" but "attractive" as well, lucky fellow; Czar Alexander I is "messianic," Nicholas I merely "autocratic"; Pitt the Younger is "assertive" (Elder and Younger Pitts, incidentally, are conflated in the index). My advice to the reader is to skip the whole of the first half and begin the book on page 347. For the second half, covering the last half-century, the professor is familiar with the sources and has a lot of instructive things to say; he also has a great many fascinating statistical tables, though perhaps they do not prove as much as he seems to think.

The main thesis of the book is that there is an unavoidable correlation between economic and military power, and that when the economic power of a state exercising hegemony or paramountcy begins to decline, relative to others in the game, its military power, and so its political influence, is likely to decline too, sooner or later. In a sense this proposition is so obvious as to be a truism, and is scarcely worth stating, let alone writing a 650-page

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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GREAT POWERS: ECONOMIC CHANGE AND MILITARY CONFLICT FROM 1500 TO 2000

Paul Kennedy/Random House/\$24.95

Paul Johnson

book about. But Kennedy also argues, or rather appears to suggest (he tends to qualify or retract his major assertions), that the effort to prolong a paramountcy in a military sense after the economic power has passed its peak merely accelerates the relative economic decline. He hints that this has been happening to the United States and that its best course now is to reduce its physical outlays and concentrate on rebuilding its non-military economy. These are much more contentious points and amount to expressions of opinion rather than truths which can be demonstrated from the historical evidence. Anyone who has followed British politics closely for the last thirty years will be familiar with such arguments, in relation to British overseas commitments. They are strongly held

on the center-left of the spectrum but remain unproven.

Moreover, they beg the question of what motivates a major power in building or maintaining large military establishments. In an excellent review of the Kennedy book in *Foreign Affairs*, Professor W. W. Rostow has pointed out that it confuses powers which seek to establish a position of hegemony, like Napoleonic France in Europe, and powers which merely wish to preserve a certain balance of power, like England and (Rostow argues) the United States. Certainly, if one examines English policy at the Anglo-Spanish talks at Somerset House in 1604, or the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) or the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) or the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the one thread running consistently through them all is the

desire for a secure and durable settlement which will allow military spending to be drastically reduced. Hegemony, or even paramountcy (except in limited areas of special interest), was never an objective.

If we examine American policy in the period since 1945, similar aims were predominant. Even in the nineteenth century, when Britain was at the height of its relative economic power, governments of all complexions were usually most reluctant to accept new commitments. That has been the pattern of U.S. policy, too. One of the tragedies of the 1930s, as the British see it, was the inability of their governments to persuade the United States to undertake any kind of physical role in Europe. I well remember the almost desperate eagerness with which post-war British and French governments pressed the U.S. to accept an obligation to keep troops on the eastern side of the Atlantic, and the universal relief when Washington agreed to do so on a permanent basis. The United States, it seems to me, has always been a most reluctant superpower, and the fundamental instincts of the American people, I fear, are still isolationist.

Where I go further than Professor Rostow is in questioning some of Kennedy's assumptions about the drive to hegemony of the powers. I doubt if there was ever any Hapsburg plan to establish a European hegemony, more an unwillingness to surrender any of the rights of the family firm, including the right to impose a religious settlement of the prince's choosing. In all the wars the Hapsburgs undertook in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, dynastic and religious factors were the most important; they did not need a Professor Kennedy to warn them about the dangers of overstretching their resources in schemes of world conquest, since they went bankrupt often enough. In seventeenth-century France there was, it is true, an expansionist party, particularly in Sully's day, but Louis XIV's so-called "wars of conquest" may have been the result more of faction-fighting at the French court, as the latest research suggests, than any deliberate and considered scheme to dominate Europe. Napoleon, to be sure, had global, or at any rate continental, visions; but it is odd that he should have agreed to the Louisiana Purchase, recognized even at the time as an extraordinary act of largesse. The

