

Destiny Burning at Both Ends

"America at Mid-Century," by André Siegfried (translated by Margaret Ledéssert. Harcourt, Brace, 357 pp. \$5.75), is a second look, twenty-eight years after, by the author of the widely-read "America Comes of Age." Here it is reviewed by Professor Allan Nevins of Columbia University, whose many books include several collections of impressions of the United States by European visitors.

By Allan Nevins

ANDRÉ SIEGFRIED wrote his perceptive book "America Comes of Age" at a singularly uninspiring moment of our history. It appeared in 1927, when Calvin Coolidge was in the White House, Babbitt controlled ten thousand communities, the Ku Klux Klan yet retained some vitality, our rural economy was sunk in a nadir of depression, labor was at the mercy of open-shop organizations, and isolationism in foreign affairs rode high, wide, and mean-spirited. He brought to that early survey a liberal spirit, a Gallic insight, and the outlook of a man devoted to world civilization. H. L. Mencken could not find a single misstatement in his ample book, and John Haynes Holmes praised it as combining microscopic penetration with astronomic sweep of vision. It was heartening to countless readers that M. Siegfried saw below the short-

comings of the nation to its real vigor.

Now, in "America at Mid-Century," he writes to describe the results of a many-sided and healthy revolution. He can analyze phenomena even more far-reaching and certainly more inspiring than "the lesson of Henry Ford": the lesson, good so far as it goes, of mass-production, high wages, and mass-consumption at ever-lower prices. He can delineate, that is, the fruits of the New Deal, of the tremendous wartime mobilization, of the neo-prosperity after the war, of the new social era at home, and of American leadership of the free world abroad. He traces a change that has affected every human being on the planet: the rise of America concomitantly with the decline of Europe. He comprehends the magnitude of his theme, which he sums up at the end with a quotation from Corneille: "A great destiny is ending, a great destiny is beginning."

M. Siegfried (now eighty) holds a unique place. Continental writers on the United States have had in general one great advantage and one prime disadvantage as compared with more numerous British observers. Their advantage is that, coming from a culture substantially alien to that of America, they see our life with a sense of novelty, a sharp appreciation of differences, which enables them to criticize it more freshly. Their point of view is brighter because it takes less for granted. M. Siegfried, a Frenchman through and through, makes the most of this qualification.

The prime disadvantage of a Maurois or a Jules Romains compared with, say, an Englishman like Graham Hutton in his extraordinary "Midwest at Noon" is that, being alien, they sometimes fail to understand shades of significance in our institutions which a Briton grasps intuitively. They commit blunders because they lack inbred instinct. No Spaniard can really grasp our church-state relationships; few Frenchmen but feel our two-party system (which is a triumph of rationalism) curiously irrational. But M. Siegfried minimizes this disadvantage. His curiosity and verve have never flagged. With a first-hand knowledge of America going back nearly sixty years, and with fifteen visits behind him, he has imbibed the true spirit of American life and ways.

His expertness is manifest nearly



THE AUTHOR: Despite the myopia affront of *The World Almanac*, which does not mention it at all in its year-by-year listing of "Memorable Dates," 1875 is, with striking generosity, certainly turning out a distinguished line of octogenarians these days. Albert Schweitzer! Fritz Kreisler! Thomas Mann! André Siegfried! M. Siegfried was born on April 21 in Le Havre, and soon began studying the world. By the time he was twenty-five he had visited five continents and spent a year in the U.S., an itinerary which launched his career as a stimulating, often conservative, and controversial interpreter of the world to France, and vice versa. Altogether he has been here fifteen times, a feat he discussed the other day in Paris. "I was attracted by the study of the USA, since my father, a cotton importer, had visited America during the Civil War and had had the privilege of knowing Lincoln, being often a guest at the White House," he said. "He believed in traveling and wanted his sons to go round the world when their studies were completed. I have had the privilege of being introduced to nearly all the Presidents: Cleveland, Wilson, McKinley, Coolidge, Hoover, Roosevelt, and Eisenhower." His impressions of the USA were first summed up in "America Comes of Age" in 1927. Further, he has written about England, Canada, Switzerland, Latin America, and, *ça va sans dire*, France. In between he has served as a French delegate to several international parleys, including the 1945 San Francisco Conference that wrote the U.N. Charter. (In his youth he tried to get elected to the Chamber of Deputies—his father had been a member—but was defeated.) Otherwise he teaches—he is a professor of political science at the École Libre des Sciences Politiques and a professor of economic geography at the Collège de France—and writes for newspapers—his articles turn up regularly in *Le Figaro*. Still he gets around. "Lately," he said, "I have traveled in North America, South America, Africa, India, and all the European countries outside the Iron Wall."

—BERNARD KALB.



—Burck in the Chicago Sun-Times.

"The Full Picnic Basket."

everywhere in this new book. Appreciating the many-sided transformation which has overtaken America in thirty years, he has carefully resurveyed every problem. Hardly one—the Negro, the Jew, the schools, the church, immigration, birth-control, labor, the personnel of government, the press, television, and such abstractions as nationalism—does he fail to treat in the light of our latest development. At times we feel that the vastness of the subject overpowers him: that America has grown too big, too complex, for one man or one book; that to escape superficiality, a corps of economists, sociologists, and historians is needed. M. Siegfried commits some errors, as when he writes that in 1952 most newspapers, even Republican, supported Stevenson. He makes over-sweeping generalizations, as in remarking that the American child “is not badly brought up, he is just not brought up at all.” He sometimes exaggerates, as in treating the difference between Protestant and Catholic views of marriage. He fails to discuss some great and complex problems, such as recent changes in the structure of industry and the enlarged role of managerial and technological groups.

But M. Siegfried is stimulating even when he is less than profound. He is provocative in the reasons he gives for saying that American public opinion is shaped mainly by our women and adolescents. He is equally provocative in his reasons for believing that the Protestant Anglo-Saxon tradition continues dominant in the nation. If he fails to see deeply into economic affairs, he certainly understands our Government in a way that the theory-ridden Harold Laski never did. One of his wise remarks is that Senator Taft’s career under Eisenhower, after all his right-wing isolationism, “proves that the responsibilities of power inevitably bring those in authority into a political orientation which is always the same.” What he has to say about our progress toward a specially trained administrative corps in government is shrewd and encouraging.

IN HIS observations on the spirit or soul of America, M. Siegfried says in large part what Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau, Mackay, and Bryce said before him, but with novel illustrations. Like them, he is struck by our materialism, our aggressive personal independence, our nomadism,

our pragmatism, our weakness for uniformity, our love of comfort combined with a queer inability to sit down and enjoy it. He puts some of his definitions acutely. All Americans, he notes, however diverse their origins, are similar in bearing, action, and outlook. “They all have the same spontaneous reactions, a similar slowness of thought and movement which contrasts sharply with the vivacity of the Latin races; but the deliberation is accompanied by a restlessness that contrasts strongly with the habitual calm of the Englishman. It is the paradox of a sluggish temperament swirled along in a hectic, relentless rhythm.”

One central point upon which M. Siegfried insists is that during the last thirty years America has become more American, accentuating its divergence from Europe. This is of course true for two main reasons, of which he deals with only one. Europe has grown away from America because of the terrible disruptions which have maimed and distorted its life; two civil wars and the threat of a third have abraded its culture, warped its views, and here and there (as in sections of France) broken its spirit. Meanwhile America has grown away from Europe. It has become an economic giant; its faith in its own literature, its own art, its own ideas, has partly kept pace with its belief in its political and economic superiorities. Along with more self-confidence and more maturity, we have also developed our own special psychology. Optimism, hurry, absorption in the future, and restlessness are part of it; so also is the spirit defined by Henry Ford in a sentence caught up by M. Siegfried: “Progress is an attitude or an atmosphere rather than a definite frontier that has to be crossed.”

This book so far as it concerns America is a cheerful volume. Its import is that our republic has changed for the better. The idealism of the New Deal years, the altruism of the Marshall Plan, the vigor of our war effort, the resiliency of our postwar economy, have greatly impressed M. Siegfried. He sees our American scene, with a few dark spots, irradiated in general with sunshine. But in its occasional glances at the world in general this is a rather sad book. M. Siegfried sees it out of balance. Its freedom, prosperity, and courage depend too largely on one nation; in a healthy world material and moral power will be better distributed. To this view we can well say Amen. It is one of the duties of America, in the next thirty years, to help bring that healthier and better balanced world into being.

Siegfriedisms

“America at Mid-Century,” which Allan Nevins reviews on these pages, is a discerning and friendly assessment of the U.S. as it appears to the European economist and historian Andre Siegfried. That M. Siegfried can also be needling, is proved by the following excerpts:

•• In the United States everyone is ready to give his opinion on any subject with the greatest assurance . . .

•• The development of strange religious sects is not an American monopoly . . . but the United States appears to have a soil particularly favorable to their growth. . . . If I said that I was Elijah come to life again there would be Americans who would believe me.

•• The [American school] pupil is given plenty of meat, but no effort is made to see that he chews it and assimilates it.

•• There are in no country so many women who devote themselves to the public good, concern themselves with social reforms; from this, since the whole country

is imbued with a semi-religious idea of service, comes a dangerous combination of morals and politics, as seen in temperance societies, in anti-colonialism, and in numerous leagues in support of good government, the effects of which are not uniformly beneficial.

•• If I were drawing up a guide to the religious attitude most suitable to adopt in order to gain social distinction in the United States I should state that a Presbyterian would find no advantage in becoming an Episcopalian, but that a wealthy Methodist or an important Jew might well consider it.

•• It was said ironically in Austria-Hungary, under the old regime, that no man below the rank of a baron need be considered as a man. In the United States is the Negro really considered a man? The American message to the world is thus weakened by not being entirely humane.

•• The American is convinced that man can accomplish anything and that technical progress can solve any problem.