

harold j. laski

the american experience

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A generation after his death in 1950, Harold Laski, the eminent political scientist, socialist and British Labour Party leader, is now little remembered by students outside his own fields of government and political theory. Yet Laski remains an important figure in both British and American Studies. In an obituary assessment of his fellow political scientist, the distinguished Oxford don Max Beloff called the modern period "The Age of Laski." In intellectual history, Beloff believed, Laski had played a catalytic role much like that of John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century.¹

Along with his career as a practical politician, Laski was also an intellectual and an idealist. Most importantly, perhaps, he was a great personal influence among his contemporaries and an inspiring teacher. Thomas Cook, an American political scientist, predicted that Laski's most lasting effect would be through his students. His lectures, Cook observed, "were fraught with a dynamic sense of social ardor. He conveyed, as few teachers convey, the conviction that the subjects with which he dealt were the vital issues of life itself. . . ."² He encouraged differences of opinion that were honest and informed and made his students feel the worth of what they were doing. His ultimate concern with the problems of liberty versus equality and of individualism versus authority transcended in importance even his prolific political commentary on the issues of capitalism, communism, war and fascism. He is furthermore not the less interesting to Americans because of his involvement with the New Deal and friendship with Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The connection with Roosevelt, though at first only an acquaintanceship, began during Laski's teaching at Harvard during World War I.

Through his friendship with Felix Frankfurter and his ripening correspondence with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Laski was drawn into the circle of Harvard alumni who were also important political persons. Indeed, it is fair to say that for more than half his life the United States became Harold Laski's second country. Both intellectually and personally his American experience was significant. In the 1930s, for example, conservative opponents of Franklin D. Roosevelt often paid Laski the compliment of regarding him as the *éminence grise* of the New Deal.³ Although this rather exaggerated his influence, Laski's points of contact with America were truly not inconsiderable. This extensive relationship was, it should be noted, a mutually rewarding experience.

Since Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Americans had profited from the discerning comments of eminent foreign visitors. Although most of the traveler-commentators spent little time in the United States, James Bryce, following the visits which inspired his *American Commonwealth* (1888), served as the British Ambassador in Washington from 1907 to 1913. But Laski's more frequent periods of residence were not limited to a formal political role. Even more than Bryce, he had a wide range of friendships among his American hosts. An indefatigable lecturer and correspondent, he enjoyed extensive contacts with both the American academic and political worlds. If some Americans were rather overawed by his intellectual brilliance, his friends unflinchingly found him charming.

FDR, who by no means agreed with Laski's socialism, nevertheless appreciated his conversational qualities and spirited critique of the New Deal. In contrast to his rather prickly encounters with the British economist John Maynard Keynes, Roosevelt enjoyed a real intimacy with Laski. While the latter could never forget his function as a teacher and professor, he was careful to defer to the President and, as in his correspondence with Justice Holmes, to engage in the sort of extravagant flattery which Roosevelt loved.

Visits to the United States gave Laski the opportunity to test his political ideas and theories in the crucible of the New World environment. Like Tocqueville and Bryce, he was interested in how American government and society actually worked. Thus at least two of his many books—*The American Presidency* (1940) and *The American Democracy* (1948)—were serious efforts toward a better understanding of the life and institutions of his other homeland.

In the summer of 1916 Laski, while still in his mid-twenties, came to the United States to teach history and government at Harvard. Just two years earlier he had graduated from Oxford University with an outstanding scholastic record of honors and prizes. But before beginning his undergraduate studies he had contracted in 1911, at the age of eighteen, an extraordinary marriage to Frida Kerry, a woman eight years his senior. Laski's orthodox Jewish family were, not surprisingly, both outraged and dismayed by their son's marriage to a gentile girl. Although his well-to-do father reluctantly agreed to continue to support Laski financially through

FIGURE ONE: Harold J. Laski, in the 1930s, as Professor of Politics, the London School of Economics. (Photograph from *I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Certain Eminent Men and Women of Our Time*, ed. Clifton Fadiman, 1939, p. 146.)



his years of college, the family estrangement was complete; it was clear that the young couple would have to make their own way.⁴

Fortunately for the Laskis a teaching position suddenly became available in 1914 at McGill University in Montreal. England was now at war, but since Laski had been rejected for military service he was free to embark upon his American adventure—by way of Canada. For both Harold and Frida, McGill unhappily seemed an exile from family, friends and academic life at home. Laski, however, had a way of making contacts and attracting attention through the sheer force and brilliance of his personality. Most fateful by far was an opportune meeting with Felix Frankfurter who, on the advice of a friend, had stopped in Montreal to look up the highly recommended young instructor. Frankfurter, already a rising young professor in the Harvard Law School, suggested to the appropriate authorities that Laski would be a valuable addition to the Harvard faculty. An appointment as an instructor and tutor soon followed. Meanwhile, before taking up his duties at Harvard in September 1916, Laski, who had done some feature stories for the *London Daily Herald*, was able to spend the summer months in New York City writing for the *New Republic* magazine.

At Harvard, though his teaching was in the college and university, Laski's closest personal ties were with the Law School faculty. For a brief time he even entertained the hope of studying law along with his heavy load of teaching and professional duties, and in 1917 he helped out as book editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. The new dean of the Law School, Roscoe

Pound, became a close friend as well as an intellectual inspiration through his continuation of Holmes's pathbreaking work on the common law. Just as Holmes had humanized American law for Laski, so Pound "sent a heap of cherished ideas into the dust-bin."⁵

In looking back upon the Harvard years, Laski expressed somewhat ambivalent emotions. Ultimately he was much hurt and disillusioned by the hostile attitude of the Cambridge community toward his support of the Boston police strike in 1919. Although President A. Lawrence Lowell and the administration correctly avoided any violation of the principles of academic freedom, an unfair student attack in the *Harvard Lampoon* and the intensely conservative feelings of many of the faculty made Laski despair of his future at the university. Twenty years later he wrote: "I came back from America to England convinced that liberty has no meaning save in the context of equality." This comment was too severe a judgment upon those Harvard days that he had earlier described to Frankfurter as "a great memory."⁶ Moreover, his most intimate friends did not desert him in 1919. Outraged at the conservative attacks on Laski, Dean Pound, for example, refused to sign a circular letter soliciting support for Governor Calvin Coolidge and the Massachusetts authorities during the police strike. Ordinarily, Pound wrote, he should have been glad to sign the circular, but "So long as people here at Cambridge take the position that Mr. Laski cannot speak, I shall take the position that I cannot speak either." Later, in thanking Pound for sending him a copy of Louis Post's book on the mass deportations of 1919, which resulted in a number of alien radicals being shipped back to Russia aboard the *Buford*, Laski notes: "It annotates an episode I shall long remember. It also confirms me in my sense that I was lucky not to be on the 'Buford' myself."⁷

Despite the postwar hysteria, Laski's Harvard experience, and especially his own intellectual achievements and personal ties had been most rewarding. He made the acquaintance of Franklin D. Roosevelt. He began his lifelong intimacy and correspondence with Justice Holmes as well as Frankfurter. Influential American magazines accepted his literary contributions, and Yale University Press published the scholarly books on sovereignty and the state to which he owed his first notice as an important political scientist. Moreover, the social as well as academic life at Harvard had been pleasant, and Laski was a spectacular success as a teacher. Still he had had enough of the Boston Brahmins; by 1920 he was happy to accept an attractive offer at the London School of Economics. "We miss Cambridge sorely," he wrote Pound, "but I am very glad to be back in London. The work at the School is extraordinarily interesting. . . ."⁸ Frida, it should be noted, took the opportunity of the homecoming to embrace Judaism and so heal the family feud.

Laski's lasting friendship with Holmes followed their first meeting in 1916 at the Justice's summer home in Beverly Farms, Massachusetts. "He is one of the memories I shall always live by," he informed a Harvard colleague. But, despite Laski's awe and reverence for the distinguished, now-aging jurist, their relationship was not one-sided. While Holmes on

occasion accused his young correspondent of “faking a little *pour épater les bourgeois*” in his wide-ranging comments on the arts and music, the letters between the two men are as remarkably frank and revealing as they are impressive intellectually. Thus Laski almost immediately amplified his ideas on sovereignty and the state by critical references to the practice of the American government. As a rebel and individualist, still under the influence of the classical liberalism of John Stuart Mill, he was skeptical of the growing powers, much accentuated in wartime, of the modern nation-state. Neither traditional representative government nor the growing device of intervention by administrative commissions, as in industrial disputes, seemed to work well. “I can’t help wondering,” he told Holmes, “whether the slow play of economic forces won’t actually give us the best adjustment. . . . I wonder how you feel to this anarchical doctrine,” he added. Laski agreed with Holmes that the sovereign state could compel obedience, but he denied the superior morality of the state as against the individual conscience. “That is why I like Bills of Rights.” As a pluralist in his political theories, Laski wanted the state’s powers shared with other groups and institutions in society. He wished “to take away from the state the superior morality with which we have invested its activities and give them back to the individual conscience.”⁹

Americans, Laski rather curiously asserted, in their reaction to the *laissez faire* of the nineteenth century, and in their admiration of “the success of centralisation in Germany,” now worshipped state regulation and national power. Although he approved some restriction of the hours of employment, he did not favor romanticizing “the simple beauty of the masses” or the notion that shorter hours at work would result in a more productive leisure. In American history he found he loathed Jefferson and Jackson because of what he assumed was their simple faith in majoritarian democracy. These early comments to Holmes on the American Constitution and government he developed further in the strictures on centralization in his first book. Local self-government and the rights of the individual, he feared, were being overborne by the decline of the federal system of government created by the founding fathers at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. In urging his pluralist and individualistic theories as against a monistic conception of the state, Laski concluded: “In a democracy, the surest guaranty of civic responsibility seems to lie in the gift of genuine functions of government no less to the parts than to the whole.”¹⁰

Laski’s defense of local as against centralized authority was illustrated in his view of the proposed child labor amendment to the United States Constitution. Although personally outraged by the practice of child labor, he wrote Holmes that he agreed with Frankfurter’s opposition to the demand for a federal amendment. The regulation of child labor should be left to the states. “There are far too many American reformers,” he observed, “eager to legislate the U.S. into their own peculiar nostrums.” In contrast, he had faith that “the slow process of persuasion always ultimately makes for greater permanence than legislative fiat.”¹¹

Although they naturally had their intellectual and philosophical differences—with Laski, for example, less reverent and patriotic than Holmes in respect to the citizen's obligation to the national state—both accepted the individual's right of dissent and labor's right to collective bargaining. Much of Laski's criticism of the United States in the 1920s revolved around these two issues, and he accordingly admired Holmes's efforts to give legal protections to labor and free speech. In some of the Justice's famous libertarian dissenting opinions, Laski also found legal support for his own defense of liberty. And he appropriately dedicated his *Authority in the Modern State* (1919) to Holmes and Frankfurter.

In his correspondence with Frankfurter and others, Laski, in contrast to his more philosophical and bookish letters to Holmes, liked to discuss the passing political scene. Although he had been heartened by America's entrance into the war in 1917, he was also concerned over such issues as the fate of conscientious objectors, the Russian Revolution and prejudice against Jews. Democracy after the war, he wrote in the *Yale Review*, seemed at the crossroads, unable to decide between traditional freedoms and "an increasing need both to abandon the regime of laissez-faire and to attempt an almost paternalistic improvement by government action of the mass standard of life." To Frankfurter in 1923, he wrote, "You will not misunderstand me if I say that at present I am very anti-American. I feel that you are so obsessed by your material power that you tend to mistake it for the capacity to contribute to the intellectual issues."¹²

Although English, rather than American, politics was understandably the subject of many of his letters, he observed American Presidents and presidential elections with keen interest. "I don't profess at this distance to catch the real meaning of American politics," he informed a former Harvard associate soon after returning to England. "I can see disillusionment with idealism; but I don't gather the basis of the liberals' discontent except in their certainty that Harding is likely to prove a useless president." La Follette's third-party candidacy in 1924, he hoped might lead to "some dramatic incident to awaken your people out of the morass of conservative complacency in which they dwell. The thought of four more years of Coolidge is only more awful than that of McAdoo or Al Smith or Glass." Four years later in 1928, Smith found little more favor than Hoover in Laski's opinion which, he assumed, was also his friend Frankfurter's view. That year, in an article about the American political system, Laski observed that in such a time of prosperity the average person cared little about constitutional or political questions. Unlike British Prime Ministers who served many years in Parliament, American Presidents generally had only meager political experience, while most Congressmen were unsuccessful lawyers. In Laski's mind, the Senate and the Supreme Court were the major achievements of the American system, but he objected to the rigid separation of powers and the lack of mutual dependence of the President and Congress. The office of Vice President was, of course, the outstanding failure.¹³

Laski's own political philosophy was undergoing a dramatic change in

these years. From classical liberalism, pluralism and Fabian socialism, he had turned to Marxism and become a leading figure in the British Labour Party. As his fellow socialists gained political power, he abandoned his strictures upon the state. His definition of liberty as the absence of restraint was modified now by his desire to see the state actively encourage a greater economic equality. Much of the shift in his thinking was reinforced, in turn, by world conditions. The economic depression, the fall of the Labour government, and Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald's defection to the National coalition in 1931, together with the rise of Hitler in Germany and the triumph of fascism in Spain, all made for a more radical stance and a darker view of the future. He was dubious accordingly of his old hope that the Labour Party might engineer "revolution by consent." He wrote Frankfurter in 1932, "I am more than ever doubtful whether a Socialist society can be established in this country within the framework of existing conditions."¹⁴

Laski communicated these new anxieties to an American audience in the Weil lectures, which he delivered in 1931 at the University of North Carolina. Published later as *Democracy in Crisis*, a work which President Roosevelt complained to Felix Frankfurter "is not very reliable either in its history or in its conclusions," the book expressed Laski's conviction that capitalist democracy, with all its successes in the nineteenth century, "could not, from its very nature, bring liberty into a just relation with equality." Nor could capitalism abandon private property as its central principle and guiding force. At the same time, socialists had to face the fact that democracy required leadership, "and in a capitalist democracy the main weapons of leadership are in the hands of capitalists."¹⁵

Laski's socialist dilemma was resolved in part by the new sources of hope that he saw in the American New Deal and in the person of President Roosevelt as a leader of world opinion against fascism. As a Marxian theorist, Laski regarded the New Deal as simply another stage in the historical movement toward a socialist society. Its economic measures dealing with the depression were mere palliatives rather than any kind of fundamental solution. But, despite his disbelief in heroes, Laski admired Roosevelt, and he liked the way in which the New Deal was acquainting Americans with the positive state.¹⁶

As a socialist desiring radical solutions, Laski found himself in strange agreement with the conservative Herbert Hoover in opposing government spending and pump priming as weapons against the economic depression. Like President Hoover, he feared inflation and an unbalanced budget. But he was quickly caught up in Frankfurter's enthusiasm for Roosevelt's candidacy in 1932. "Of course I watch your election with fevered anxiety," he wrote to his friend. "It seems vital for the world to get Hoover out. At this distance F. R. doesn't seem to have run a great campaign; but at least he has recognised the existence of the common man." Laski therefore hoped for a narrow Democratic victory with the Socialist candidate Norman Thomas "getting some two or three million votes." In reviewing the "revolution" of the New Deal's first Hundred

Days, Laski did not “pretend to more than the sympathy of half understanding,” and he worried lest Roosevelt “underestimates the opposition which will organise against him at the first opportunity. . . . At least he has energy and courage; and if our government had something of these things it would be a matter of consolation.” What was important was that American liberals must keep up their “insistence on a minimum programme.”¹⁷

In the long run Laski did not believe the New Deal’s reforms could resolve the inherent contradictions of capitalism, but he continued to admire “The Roosevelt Experiment.” Russia apart, he wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*, nothing equalled the adventure of which FDR had embarked in his deliberate use of the power of the state. There was a distinction, however, between planning boldly and planning successfully. Many of the New Deal programs, including such a measure as the National Recovery Act, were not really new or revolutionary. While Roosevelt’s failure would mean the end of political democracy in the United States, “if he succeeds, he will write a new page in the history of the world and save Europe by his supreme example.”¹⁸

Laski, like others, was astonished by Roosevelt’s landslide victory in the 1936 elections, but he questioned the wisdom and tactics, if not the principle, of the President’s post-inauguration determination to revamp the Supreme Court. “I can’t say I was surprised at F.D.’s defeat over the Court,” he wrote to Frankfurter. “It looks as though there must be a deeper appreciation of the nature of the powers in battle before the significance of the Court as the true veto-power is understood.” The conclusion that Laski drew from the Court fight was the need for a greater centralization of the American government. The federal principle, which he had once so admired, he now regarded as obsolescent. Thus he was no longer impressed with Justice Louis Brandeis’ argument of the curse of bigness. “The positive state,” he wrote, “is the outcome of the maturity of giant capitalism.” The New Deal was a recognition of this fact.¹⁹

During the academic year, beginning in October 1938, Laski was in the United States, lecturing at a number of American colleges and universities. Much of the early winter he spent at the University of Washington where he liked the progressivism of the Northwest and enjoyed the hospitality of the Boettigers, FDR’s daughter and son-in-law. There he also heard the good news of Felix Frankfurter’s appointment to the Supreme Court, which made up for the personal attacks Laski was suffering from certain American conservative groups. All in all, however, “the experience has been very exhilarating,” he wrote his Harvard Law School friend Thomas Reed Powell. “Just enough red-baiting from the Seattle ‘Times’ and the D. A. R. to convince me that I am really not a respectable person; and enough kindness from the rest to make me doubt whether respectability really matters.”²⁰

In the spring of 1939, in the middle of his extended American stay, Laski was invited to give a series of lectures on the Presidency at Indiana University. The result was a book in which he summed up some of his

views on American government. Traveling about the country, he rejoiced in the signs of Roosevelt's continued popular support which, he hoped, would make possible a third term. "In this grim and ugly world," he told FDR, "you cannot easily imagine what a comfort your presence in the White House means to me. Let the dogs bark; you know that the caravan passes on."²¹ Meanwhile his *American Presidency*, published in the 1940 election year, was unsurprisingly a historical brief for a stronger executive power.

Despite his long familiarity with America, Laski admitted that he commented on its supreme political office from the vantage point of an Englishman and foreigner. Like his distinguished predecessors Tocqueville and Bryce, he had a distinctive point of view which made his book "an interpretation." The Presidency nevertheless had to be understood in American terms. Along with the wide-ranging character, power and responsibilities of the office, there was also the historic fear of executive despotism and the reality of the limitations often exacted by a hostile Congress. The crucial question in Laski's mind was whether the American Presidency could achieve the strong executive power which "the political evolution of the last forty years has shown that the modern state requires. . . ." Not the least of the qualities needed by a President, if the power of the position was to remain compatible with American democracy, was retention of "the common touch." Curiously, however, Laski combined advocacy of a single longer term of office with the rather ad hoc opinion that: "The true and only issue involved in the problem of a third term is whether, on a balance of considerations, the American people want any given incumbent who offers himself. . . ."²²

In contrast to the executive responsibility in the British system of parliamentary government, the American Cabinet was comparatively unimportant. Moreover, the separation of powers and mid-term elections resulted frequently in a Congress opposed to the President as was the case for FDR after 1938. Thus the American system prevented any clear line of command in government, except in the President's domination over foreign policy. The possible reforms, which Laski suggested, were all designed to augment the executive authority and thereby enhance the reality of the positive state. Power, with the temptation to its abuse, was ever a danger. Yet, in a democracy, it was also an opportunity in which the President of the United States "must be given the power commensurate with the functions he had to perform."²³

For Laski presidential leadership was all the more urgent because of the deteriorating world situation. During the twenties he had urged America to stay out of a Europe that had reached its zenith. "It is at least interesting," he wrote an old Harvard friend, "to watch the slow ebb of civilization. I am convinced that you don't know what to do with it. You are still too taken up with the belief that you can organise a civilization." Until the mid-thirties Laski's lingering pacifist convictions had inclined him toward disarmament and American neutrality. In October 1934, in a letter to Frankfurter, he passed on former Labour Foreign Minister Arthur

Henderson's bedside admonition. "Poor Uncle Arthur is dying," Laski reported. "I had a touching farewell with him yesterday—too pitiful to narrate. I doubt whether he will last another week. Will you tell F. D. R. that nearly the last thing he said to me was that the certainty that the United States would not help any belligerent next time, was one of the few hopes of peace. He repeated that three times." However, the news about Germany, Laski added, "gets worse all the time—new streams of refugees." Roosevelt was "the main barrier against Fascism," but the prospects for democratic government were gloomy. No nation wanted war and no class wanted revolution; yet both sought ends that were difficult to achieve peacefully.²⁴

As war loomed larger in Europe in 1939, Laski urged Roosevelt to stiffen English resistance to aggression.

I hope you will press the British government to hasten the completion of an Anglo-Soviet arrangement. That will have immense influence in building unity with Labour in England. . . . For I fear, as I fear nothing else, the coming of an imperialist war on the old model in which there emerges an unbridgeable gap between the Tories and ourselves. . . .

When the European war became a reality, shortly after Laski's return home from the United States in August, he predicted a long struggle unless there was a revolution in Germany. England was determined about the war, he assured Roosevelt, adding, however:

I do hope you will be able to keep America out. At some early stage we must have vital mediation and no one but yourself will then be in a position to suggest terms consistent with the preservation of international decency. And it is more than ever vital to go on full steam ahead with the New Deal.

To influential American friends, Laski reaffirmed his preference for America's formal neutrality. "I still want you out of the war on almost any terms for sake of the aftermath . . . ," he wrote to Felix Frankfurter. And to Rex Tugwell he declared:

The war eats us all up . . . and I hope we are going to win. What we are going to win for is another matter. Yet I see nothing but disaster in the communist hypothesis that our defeat will liberate the creative forces of the world. . . .

I need not tell you how the American response to our danger has heartened us all. Don't let anyone think that we ask for American participation; it is supplies we want, and, not less, the knowledge that you remain as profoundly committed as we to the maintenance of the democratic faith. Naziism, at bottom, is as much the denial of the American dream as it is of what is most creative in our madhouse.²⁵

Of paramount concern to Laski as a university teacher was the role of the intellectual in wartime. At the College of William and Mary during his 1939 visit to the United States he told the students: "I do not share the

view which would make of the scholar a detached spectator of a drama in which he has no part as an actor.” In *Harper’s Magazine* he wrote: “The Duty of the Intellectual Now,” was to “have an ideal and be willing to work for it.” Laski denied the traditional distinction between theory and practice as well as “the right of the intellectual to be impartial before the problems of his time. . . .” Unlike such American friends as Frankfurter and Archibald MacLeish he was not, however, ready to lay the blame for war and fascism on the isolationism and pacifism of the intellectuals and college youth of the thirties—MacLeish’s “irresponsibles.” It was wrong to pillory the younger generation for its finding of a disproportion between the reality of facts and the propaganda of official pronouncements.²⁶

During the war Laski had to forgo the trips across the Atlantic that had become such a pleasant and stimulating part of his life in the 1930s. Visits to American colleges and universities, where he was a much-sought-after lecturer, afforded an opportunity to meet old friends. “I miss America more than I can say,” he wrote to Clarence Berdahl at the University of Illinois. “It’s like having a piece of myself cut out. There are things that I want to see and smell and feel there which at this distance seem like shadows dancing madly on a wall.” On these excursions in the United States, Laski was always a welcome guest at the White House where President Roosevelt instructed his secretary to keep open possible luncheon dates, usually on a Saturday afternoon. Both men enjoyed each other’s company despite their fundamentally opposed political philosophies. “It just does not matter to me one tinker’s damn that I am a left wing socialist and you a liberal,” Laski wrote. “Of course,” he added, “I think you have made mistakes . . . ,” but the important thing was an FDR electoral triumph in 1940. “Never forget that your victory is ours.” By Roosevelt’s third term, Laski believed England “had won a victory comparable in magnitude to what we lost in the defeat of France.” He rejoiced also in the arrival of John Winant at the American Embassy in London to succeed the defeatist Joseph Kennedy. To Laski, Winant’s appointment as Ambassador signified all the President’s best intentions. For, as he told Frankfurter, “F. D. is that rare thing, an aristocrat who understands democratic aspirations. Such a lot of future turns on his power to communicate that understanding to Winston.”²⁷

Frankfurter, Winant and the President were all frequently furious over some of Laski’s wartime articles in the *New Statesman and Nation* criticizing America’s foreign policy toward Vichy France and Franco Spain. But they found their English friend a useful bridge to the British Labourites. Laski, in turn, remained “completely unrepentant” about his radical left-wing views. Thus he informed Winant early in 1943:

I think Anglo-American policy, at present, is laying the foundations for a vast betrayal of the common peoples of the world, even though it achieves the military defeat of the Axis powers. I love F. D. R. with all my heart; I care for America as that land of promise which first gave democracy its letters of credit. But I feel none the less that

the implications of these last months have already gone far towards losing the peace.

Believing that the war was “only a stage in a far wider process than the fighting itself defines,” Laski urged Roosevelt to push for more radical reforms. Winston Churchill was an admirable war leader, but Laski hoped that Roosevelt might counter his essential British Toryism and limited world vision. An FDR fourth term accordingly was “necessary not merely for the United States, but for the whole of civilisation.”²⁸

For Laski a continuing source of disappointment and frustration during the war years, along with his regret that he could not make clearer his message “to the millions who hope for the four freedoms,” was his failure to be sent to visit the United States in some sort of semi-official capacity. Although he could have come over privately, Churchill refused him the status that he felt necessary to justify such wartime travel. Thus an invitation from his friend Dr. Alfred E. Cohn of the Rockefeller Medical Institute and Eleanor Roosevelt to address the International Student Service Assembly in Washington in September, 1942, and to stay at the White House, had to be declined. As he told Mrs. Roosevelt, “a glance at the President, talk with Felix [Frankfurter], these would have been a new life to me. But I thought I ought to consult the Prime Minister’s wishes, if only because, from time to time, I have written criticisms of his policy.” Churchill, in turn, informed Laski that he would “deprecate” his acceptance. “I would have given a year of my life to talk to F. D. R. and Felix just now,” Laski complained to Ambassador Winant. But he reiterated his praise of Churchill as “the indispensable war leader” and agreed that “he is, of course, the proper judge of what he wants to be heard.” For Laski, meanwhile, there was consolation in the “grand talk with Mrs. Roosevelt” on her visit to England late in the fall of 1942. “She gives one,” he noted, “not merely a sense of new hope, but of wisdom and magnanimity that makes one envy America the possession of her.” Most cheering also was the President’s last letter in January, 1945, in which he communicated to Laski his hope that at the forthcoming “meeting with Marshall Stalin and the Prime Minister I can put things on a somewhat higher level than they have been for the past two or three months.”²⁹

Despite a serious nervous breakdown midway in the war, Laski managed a steady stream of publications in which he delineated his visions of a desired postwar world. Once victory was assured, he was quick to resume his old prewar attacks on American capitalism and the so-called negative freedoms of its political democracy. In the long run he was confident that Russia and the United States, each in its own way, was moving toward a truer socialist society. But, despite his awareness of the brutal excesses of its system, he maintained his sympathetic explanations of Soviet policies, even as he advocated increased social and economic planning for Great Britain and the United States. Like many other commentators, socialist and non-socialist alike, he assumed that America would suffer a severe postwar depression which would necessitate the modification or abandonment of its prewar capitalism. “Plan or Perish,”

he told an American audience late in 1945. "There is no middle way. Free enterprise and the market economy mean war; socialism and planned economy means peace. We must plan our civilization or we must perish."³⁰

Laski was most critical of America for its conduct in the Cold War. The American attitude toward the Soviet Union, he told Frankfurter, "has involved you in a policy where you back every counter-revolutionary movement there is in Europe." Underlying American diplomacy, he feared, was the new militarism of the atomic bomb and the reactionary temper of American public opinion. These he feared gave American support to the continuance of European colonialism and imperialism in both Asia and Africa. In postwar articles in the *New Republic* and the *New York Nation*, he offered a favorable picture of Stalin, based on a personal interview, as well as apologies for Russian violations of civil liberties and political democracy. Accusing the United States of holding to a double standard in Cold War diplomacy, Laski asserted his belief that the Soviet Union desired international security and world peace.³¹

Two years before his sudden death in 1950, and shortly before his last lecture tour to the United States in the spring of 1949, Laski published his massive *The American Democracy*. Subtitled "a commentary and an interpretation," the book gave Laski the opportunity to sum up the American experience in terms both of its history and contemporary institutions. Few nations had enjoyed such material progress or had been so successful in giving the common man the opportunity for freedom and advancement. The basic traditions of the country, moreover, were individualistic, and the spirit of America remained optimistic and idealistic. "But no honest observer," he wrote, "could analyse the operation of the spirit of America in the nineteen-forties without hesitation about its outcome." The idea of equality, which no one had been able to attack successfully, was still compromised in practice by poverty and racial prejudice. Thus, despite the vigor and vitality of the American spirit, as evidenced in the late war, "There was a wide abyss between the dream and the reality." The demonstration and explanation of this abyss became then the argument of his book.³²

In his analysis of American political institutions, Laski followed the theme of his *American Presidency* with its emphasis on the emergence of the strong positive state under President Roosevelt and the New Deal. Even more, during World War II, "The era of the positive state had arrived in America as decisively as in Europe; and with the arrival of the positive state there was no room for negativism in the White House any more than in Downing Street or in the Kremlin." In its foreign policy as well as in its domestic program, the United States needed to enhance presidential power. Laski accordingly urged the adoption of a constitutional amendment permitting the President full control of foreign affairs. This would enable the United States to align itself with the collective security policies of the United Nations and so avoid the isolationism of the post-World War I years. The two-thirds rule for the Senate's approval of treaties, he

believed, should be changed to a simple majority, and he also proposed that a special advisory cabinet on foreign affairs be drawn from Congress.³³ This last suggestion was not much different in practice from the role played by the National Security Council following its creation in 1947. Indeed, most of Laski's recommended revisions in the structure of the American government were precisely those which liberals a generation later were to denounce as integral parts of "the imperial presidency."

One measure of the rise of American big government, which bothered the still anti-bureaucratic Laski, was the enormous growth in the numbers of the federal civil service, and there was also a perplexing archaic quality to American politics which bewildered the foreigner. Laski, in a reminder of his own youthful libertarian philosophy, saw the explanation of this in the continued American acceptance of the old Puritan idea that men could be made good by legislation or over-legislation. "And once there is a law which touches a theme from which men desire to escape, it is obvious that they will pay for their liberation." The rise of big business following the Civil War was accomplished in part by its willingness to pay for the privilege of exploiting labor and the environment. In World War II, though businessmen hated Roosevelt, they wanted the contracts and subsidies which added to the federal deficits, and, especially after Pearl Harbor, the government needed their cooperation. Thus America continued to be dominated by class politics and business elites.³⁴

If the United States was to remain true to its democratic ideals, it could "no more survive as a plutocracy than it could, before the Civil War, survive half slave half free." The thrust of the constitutional system, as interpreted by the Supreme Court through its excessive protection of individual property rights, was away from the majority principle. At the same time, discrimination against racial minorities—Negroes and Jews particularly—stood as a major blot on American ideals. In contrast, labor, which in Laski's view was the only American group devoted to equality and majoritarian democracy, represented the salvation of the country. He accordingly urged a labor movement strong enough to become in time the nucleus of an independent American labor party.³⁵

The key to Laski's interpretation of American culture was his conviction that "The business man dominates American civilization." This, he believed, was less true of religion where the Puritan tradition and later the Roman Catholicism of the new generation of immigrants were both strong, relatively autonomous forces. But in education the proposition posed by progressives, as to whether the schools dared build a new social order, had to be answered in the negative. Laski, interestingly, because of his own familiarity with American higher education, was especially critical of its bureaucratic worship of what William James had called the "Ph.D. octopus." Professions other than teaching, though more open to egalitarian influences in America than they were in Europe, as well as the press, movies and radio, were all similarly penetrated by strong business pressures.³⁶

From the vantage point of the complacent prosperity of the 1950s, it

was difficult for American readers to accept Laski's harsh attacks on American business. Thus Max Lerner, whose *America as a Civilization* (1957) also offers a comprehensive critical view of American institutions, nevertheless took issue with Laski. Although he shared the British socialist's enthusiasm for social and economic planning, he was more ready to admit the success of America's postwar mixed economy. In a comparison of the two works, it is evident that Lerner's thoroughly documented account is the superior scholarly study. It is also less doctrinaire in its left-wing bias. Laski, however, was not shrill or strident in his Marxism, and he continued to reject violent revolution.

In his general assessment of American civilization, Laski did not accept the idea of America's uniqueness, or of what Marxists termed "American exceptionalism." As he had indicated in some of his earlier writings, the United States was following in directions already well charted in Europe. Thus Roosevelt had begun the transformation of the essentially negative, laissez-faire state of his predecessors into the positive, social-service state of the New Deal and its successors. The frontier, and then the great wealth and material resources available to the United States, had afforded greater economic opportunities than in Europe. But to Laski it was clear that "the peculiar complex of qualities we call Americanism is now subject to much the same forces as the peculiar complex we call Europeanism." His final plea, echoing Tocqueville, and especially fitting in terms of his own transatlantic career and broad American experience, was for a fuller, better European understanding of the possibilities and purposes of American democracy.³⁷

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notes

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3. See, for example, Amos Pinchot, "The Roosevelt-Laski Scheme," *Scribner's Commentator*, 10 (October, 1941), 62-68.
4. For his marriage and subsequent details of his life, see especially Kingsley Martin, *Harold Laski (1893-1950): A Biographical Memoir* (New York, 1953).
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33. *Ibid.*, 77, 81-82, 127-28, 159-60, 183, 523.
34. *Ibid.*, 99, 159-60, 183.
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