

MAD, BAD THEORIES OF LAWRENCE OF ARABIA

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Lincoln Steffens, Paris, 1919

Author and investigative reporter Lincoln Steffens was one of the most celebrated American foreign correspondents during WWI. While he was in Paris to report on the Peace Conference (1919), he interviewed T.E. Lawrence. The encounter turned out to be one of oddest and revealing interchanges in journalism. Steffens described it as "the queerest I ever had in all my interviewing life." One of the shortcomings of the interview is Steffens' frequent and admitted speculations of what British soldier, spy, author, diplomat meant or intended. This is an excerpt from the meandering interview.—Editor.

It was my interview. It was in his room, at his hotel, but I asked for it and my purpose was to learn from this Imperial pioneer about the practical politics of Asia Minor and the Near East. And I thought I was directing the course of the conversation. It only occurred to me afterwards, with some shock, that he also had a purpose, and that his purpose was to load me up with British propaganda for the American mandate over the Armenians. I was amazed and not a little humiliated to discover that I had chiefly reasons—reasons which appealed to me, a self-determinist in theory—why we Americans should go halfway around the world to take charge of the Armenians and not only save them from the Turks, Greeks, French, Italians, British and themselves, but, somehow, to save ourselves from ourselves and them. He said, for example, that the Armenians were "the last word in human impossibility." They correspond, as a "race, with the last man" in academic debate. To an under-dog fancier like me, the undermost dog among nations had, and it has, an irresistible fascination. And I said so.

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We Americans were; too idealistic . And he thought the Armenians too practical. We were correctives, the one on the other, therefore; we were a cure for them, they for us; both desperate cases, especially the Armenians.

I gathered that he had some inexpressible sympathy or some knowledge or experience of the Armenians that gave him a human understanding for the Turks (and all the near neighbors of the Armenians), who are forever trying to kill off this orphan race. He seemed to think that was the only thing to do to the Armenians. He didn't say so. You may observe that I do not quote this authority very freely. The reason is that his method was, apparently, not to say anything himself, but to get me to say things he wished to have printed in such a form that he could, if necessary, deny them. So he didn't say that the Armenians should be killed off. He only gave me the impression, at the time, that was the sole solution of the Armenian problem; and that that was his reason for desiring us Americans to take on the job. He felt, or he made me feel, that the Turks shouldn't do it; they were too rough and ready—and not Christians. Nor the Greeks; they enjoyed it too much and were inefficient... And so with all the other rival races. They stopped work before all the Armenians were dead. Even when they all went at the task together they invariably left a couple here and couple there: Adams and Eves who, the moment one's back was turned, bred and bred and bred so that the next time one visited Armenia there were the Armenians as before, millions of them, all meek and lovely, but busy by day at business and at night secretly breeding and slyly breeding and spreading and---

He spread all over me his Malthusian despair and such a dread of the Armenians that I was about to swallow whole his whole scheme, for the American-Armenian mandate when my saving American humor gave me pause.

But why should not the British do the job also? I asked, and, to warn his sense of humor that I was striving to be not altogether final but funny withal, I smiled, in vain. He had no sense of American humor.

A perfect massacre of the Armenians, he reasoned, might make a scandal, if the British did it. British Imperialism, at this stage, was interested rather in natural resources than in peoples as such. The English are a practical folk; not idealistic, you understand. They realize that a world government must be founded, not like “your” League of Nations, upon ideas and ideals, principles and peoples,

but upon solid things—oil, ore, air, the sea.

"But," I argued "there are rich lands and fat deposits in Armenia.

He was still. He just waited and then reminded me that I had heard, as he said he had, that Armenia was to be divided. The back country, where the natural wealth is, was to be cut off from the front, where there is nothing but Armenians. The American mandate was to be over the Armenians; some other ally—not the British, but another equally practical power—was to get Armenia.

"But," I objected, "what is the use of the natural wealth of a country without the people to work it? And the natives are the natural labor thereof; the cheapest, the most obedient, the least organized, the best."

He was bored...I pictured to him the helplessness of the Turks or the French bankers, or any non-working people, trying to get out the riches of Armenia without the Armenians.

"I am crying," I cried, "not idealistically, not 'Armenia for the Armenians' but practically 'the Armenians for Armenia.'"

He rested, watching me and, seeing that I wasn't watching him, he slipped some more of his propaganda. "The Armenians," he said, "are the most intelligent, the most perfectly selected, the most highly developed race in the world—from the civilized point of view."

"The Jews," echoed. "You spoke of them before...The Jews are the most familiar example to an untraveled person of an old, shrewd, intelligent people, and yes, they are instinctive exploiters. They drive at the second-hand wealth. But they will work. They hate to, but they can be made to work. And worse still, they are creative, inventive, sentimental...

"Jews," he said, "taking breath, "the Jews themselves feel about Armenians the way the anti-Semitic Europeans feel about the Jews; and so do the Greeks, Turks—all other races that have ever had them on them. They feel that the Armenians would put them all to work. And they would. The Armenians are that the Jews are, plus all that all the other races are—and they are Christians besides!"

"The Armenians," he said, "must not have Armenia, not the back lands. They would not work themselves, not even for themselves. They would not even do the work of organizing the work of development. They would let them out as concessions to others to manage. They want to live on the coast, in cities, on rent, interest, dividends and the profits of trading in the shares and the actual money earned by capital and labor."

"There are lots of people like that," I said. "The Armenians aren't the only ones."

"I see you still do not grasp my point," he said. "There are indeed others who would like to do that... But your Armenians will do nothing and they won't spend. They get and they save; they sell but only to buy again and so get more and more. It takes evolution to develop such perfection of the true

commercial spirit, and is a matter of degree. And the Armenians are the nth degree. I tell you that if ever the Armenians are given a fair start in the world, if they get a free hold of any corner of the earth, they will own the whole planet and work all the rest of mankind. That's what the Turks know and dread and the Greeks and—all of us who know them. And so—"

"And so," he sidestepped, as we Americans say crudely, "and so we must divide them up. Armenia to one mandatory, the Armenians to another."

"And so," sparred, "you are for Armenia for some ally, some partner of the British capitalist and the Armenians for us Americans. All right. Two questions occur: What can your ally do in Armenia without labor? And what in the world can we Americans do with the Armenians without Armenia?"

"Oh," he said, "there are other peoples in the Balkans, Asia Minor, India and Africa—backward nations, really backward, nations that would labor. They can be brought to Armenia and put to work. There is no lack of labor."

"So that solves the British, the practical problem," I said. "Now for the idealistic, the American problem. What are we to do with the Armenians?"

He would not say. His British humor or his diplomatic caution, or—something wouldn't let him. He shied off upon the danger to Asiatic labor and European capital of having the Armenians anywhere near where the mines and land were being worked.

"You don't realize," he concluded, "how difficult and delicate a task it is to govern a strange, a foreign people."

"You're wrong," I said, exasperated and repeated my charge that he didn't know us. "You are ill-informed about my people," I declared "as you say we are about the Europeans, Turks, Armenians and the rest." I cited the Philippines, Cuba, the Sandwich Islands—all foreign countries which we were governing successfully...But I happened to mention also our own natives, the American Indians.

He fairly leaped at that. "That's it," he cried. "That's what I have had in mind all along. Your policy with your Indians is the one for Armenians."

I was taken aback, astonished. I asked him what he thought our Indian policy had been and he said he understood that we had killed them all off—all; had we not?"

"And so," I said after a long pause, "you think that that is what we ought come over here and to the Armenians—kill 'em all off."

"No, no, no," he corrected. "How you pressman do misunderstand and misquote."

He didn't mean at all to say that we should adopt massacre as a policy. He knew we would not, could not do that.

Well then, what did he mean? What should we do? He would not say. He wheeled round and round

like a couple of whirling dervishes, it was wearisome. But I got it at least. I had to say it myself, but it was right—I think. He didn't correct me.

He definitely and distinctly did not mean that we should set out consciously and deliberately to wipe out the Armenians. Not at all. He merely trusted or believed that after trying everything else we would be doing That; and doing it well, too; leaving no Adam and Eve to go on raising Cain—

"But wouldn't that be a scandal?" I asked.

He thought not. He reminded me that we were so idealistic and enjoyed such repute for philanthropy that we seemed to be able to do anything within reason without losing either our idealism or our good name...

"...I suggest that you Americans could, and you would, do in Armenia proper that which has to be done there, with thoroughness; gradually, but completely, without missing a single or, rather, a married Armenian, and all without a scandal, without disturbing in the least your belief that you are—How shall I say?—well, not like us English or the French, German, Turks and I am afraid, not a bit like the Armenians."

"And," he hastened to add, "somebody has to solve the Armenian problem. It seems to me to be poetic justice, good politics and sound business to let the most idealistic people in the world to take over the most practical people in the world."

"As I understand it," I said, "we American are a commercial culture, as the Armenians, as all these old nations were that ought to be killed off." He nodded. "They thought they were developing business when they were really developing a certain variety of the human species—a race of business men dependent upon the productive labor of other people whom they do not now govern and who hate them because they can beat anybody at trade and live without working—liars, profiteers, parasites—the practical brains with the most Christian ideals and manners."

"You Americans talk well," he said. "No Englishman could be found to state anything like this as clearly as that."

"If now we Americans could, in our present, the early state of the development of this sort of man—if we could, by governing the Armenians, see close up the practical workings of our culture; if we could understand that what we were looking at and dealing with in the Armenian of today is the American of the future—"

"Of tomorrow," he corrected.

"Then," I went on, "we might, fail with the Armenians, we might in exasperation, kill them all—"

"Hear, hear."

"We might kill all Armenians, but, we would go home—"

"Cable," he suggested, "it's quicker."

"Cable home," I accepted tentatively, "cable a warning to lookout: "Look out for the crossing the practical business with Christian idealism..."

"Hear, hear!" he exclaimed.

"It might make of great, rich America an Armenia which the British and the Russians (of the future) would find it 'necessary' to take over as a mandatory divided into two parts: one, the United States proper for England; the other, the people themselves, for Russia."

He was silent.

"Your idea—" he began.

"My idea!" I exploded.

"Yes," he said, "That's an idea. It's a good idea, good in theory, but—It's characteristically idealistic. I am considering it practically. Do you believe that any American governors of the Armenians would be conscious enough to see their likeness to the Americans?"

"Yes English do," I retorted cuttingly.

"True," he agreed thoughtfully. "We see the meaning of the Armenians to the Americans, we Imperial British do. But I doubt, I am wondering whether our Little Englanders could be brought to foresee their fate in the fate of the old nations they govern."

I was beaten, helpless, flabbergasted. Fortunately he didn't see that. His eyes were down. He rose, but he was thinking deeply, as he led me to the door. There he looked up.

"Good-bye," he said, "I like your theory. I am afraid it won't work out in practice, but write it. It's suggestive. Write carefully; not too clearly, and, by the way, don't quote me. I have said nothing."

