

THE LONELY AMERICANS  
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Some of the common trails that continually frustrate and keep Americans in hot water are our strong beliefs that all life's problems are solvable, that people the world over are basically the same as us and that there are no limits to man's perfectibilities. We have a compulsion to control all hazards, defeat blind chance and overcome fate. We hold a strong feeling that Utopia must be only a few inventions away. Along with these is a philanthropic urge to spread the blessing of American ways to all of mankind. Such beliefs, in combination with our national impatience and insistence on immediate results, cause us chronic anguish. These are some of the conclusions of Luigi Barzini in his latest book, *Americans Are Alone in the World*, published just a few months ago.

In Barzini's opinion, America inherited Christendom and world responsibility in 1945. After that, "It took America almost three years, too late to save China and Eastern Europe, before they began to suspect what had happened. That they were alone in the world and that history would be shaped by their decisions."

One of Barzini's earlier books, *The Italians*, published about ten years ago, stayed on the bestseller lists in this country for more than a year. In it he probed and dissected the Italian national character with penetrating insight and delightful humor. It was not nearly as well received in his native land as it was here. Europeans, generally, are not given to breast beating and don't derive the same pleasure as do Americans in deprecatory self-analysis and public exposure of their own frailties.

In the interval between these two books, we had the good fortune to visit once with Mr. Barzini at his home just off the Via Cassia in a suburb north of Rome. He is a very charming man in his early sixties, and his conversation is just as gracious, intelligent and interesting as his writing. (*The New Yorker* calls him "one of the finest stylists writing today.")

As a young man in the 1920s, Barzini spent five years as a journalism student at Columbia in New York City. After his return to Italy in 1930, he worked as a reporter for the Milan paper, *Corriere della Sera*, and on several occasions in the prewar years between 1933 and 1939, returned to this country as an international correspondent. He went back to Italy just before Hitler attacked Poland and, within a short time, because of his anti-Fascist writings, was occupying a Roman jail cell as a political prisoner. Shortly thereafter he was banished forcibly and interned in a small village in Southern Italy where he spent most of the war years. After the war he resumed his career as a journalist and editor and, in 1952, again returned to America for an extended visit. His notes and

impressions of the change evident in the United States during this post-war period constitute the bulk of this newest book on Americans. He has sandwiched these observations between introductory and concluding chapters written from the vantage point of 1972.

On that pleasant Sunday afternoon in May at the Barzini villa overlooking rolling green hills to the west, first on a backyard terrace under fragrant blooms of orange and lemon and later in a comfortable living room over teacups, we compared notes about the war years in Italy. He recalled that during almost four years of isolation in village exile he had time to read most of the classical books he should have read as a student. When Italy capitulated to the Allies in September 1943, he made his way back to Rome only to be forced into hiding again for another eight months during the German occupation. During this second period of isolation, the only literature available was the twelve volumes *Memoirs of Casanova*, which he read and reread. He observed that this famous adventurer was either the world's greatest lover or the world's greatest liar (or probably a combination of both).

Mr. Barzini admitted that since his student days he had been a great admirer of young American women: "The best looking, most vital, freshest, most attractive and interesting women in the world." But he lamented over the state into which they had fallen at present. "Now when you see young American girls in Europe, you must look twice and try to imagine what they might look like with a bath, clean clothes and a haircut."

The conversation that day covered many subjects; some of them, based on his past and present experiences in this country, appear now in the new book. He has a long-standing, sincere affection for America and Americans. He writes that America's principal contribution to civilization (and one of its greatest sources of power) has been its industrial technique. Its ability to build and reproduce wonderful machines quickly, cheaply, and in such great quantity. But in our machine-oriented outlook exists one of our great misconceptions: that life, too, in spite of everything, can be made to function like a machine. If you put in the right amount of money in the right place, if you carry out the correct experiments, if you follow the technical instructions on the box, if you sign carefully worded contracts, you must always get satisfactory results." When the results don't appear, the reasoning is not that it can't work, or that the problem itself has no answer, but that what is needed is more study, more effort, and more money. The solution must be there.

America, he says, is more difficult to know than any other western country, and most Europeans know only its confusing, often irrational, external image. They cannot conceive how the United States can function as a nation except in the customary manner

of all European ones. They vainly attempt to attribute to American politics the same conscious motives which have always guided their own leaders. They are often more comfortable dealing with Russia, a country they all fear, despise and know to be a heartless, bureaucratic tyranny, than they are dealing with the United States. Why? Because Russian policy never changes and its moves can nearly always be predicted. It is a familiar monster. On the other hand: "Foreigners never know how much authority American leaders really have, what pledges will be kept, what Congress will do to treaties, promises and agreed plans of action, or how soon public opinion will tire of a specific line."

Barzini notes that there has been some maturing of American thought in the last two decades. We have lost some of our annoying self-confidence; some of our missionary zeal, and much of our certainty that what is good for America is good for the world. Our experiences in both Korea and Vietnam have demonstrated to us for the first time that neat and final solutions are not always possible. Europeans have had to live with this kind of sobering knowledge for centuries and have adjusted their lives to it. Perhaps, if we take the time to read more history, learn again the lessons of the past, remain strong, and realize that ". . . the rainbow ends nowhere, and there is no pot of gold to be found," the American experiment—which Barzini believes to be "the only form of workable government for all men"—may yet survive.

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