

Wrong end of telescope

WHEN the Falkland War started, American opinion (or American published opinion) was almost unanimous that the British public's support for the expedition would crumble as soon as the news of British casualties began to come in. This was, of course, a complete error: British support, on the contrary, hardened.

The American media view was based on how they thought American opinion might have gone in the same circumstances—though they may, indeed, be wrong about that too. Anyway, American misunderstanding of Britain is, as this column has often pointed out, as persistent as it is deplorable. Similar mis-evaluation arose over the recent British election.

But there is more to it than that. I was in America (and France and Italy) just before the election, in Britain during it, and in America again after it. The first American error started well before the election, at a time when almost the only reporting from Britain was on the Greenham Common women—who were, indeed, typical American liberal media heroines (one reason, perhaps, why they became so unpopular in Britain). The American public was not, however, informed that the polls showed overwhelming British support for nuclear deterrence; nor that the Social Democrats were sound on it; nor that moderate Labour leaders had declared themselves against their own party's stand on the matter. And even during the campaign, it was never made clear that the issue was overwhelmingly a losing one for Labour.

Less reprehensible, and shared to some degree by French, Italian, even British observers, was the notion that the level of unemployment meant that the Conservatives were unelectable. Polls which showed that while the Left-wing British media, and the Trade Union bosses, blamed the Government, the public, even the unemployed themselves, on

ROBERT CONQUEST on American misunderstanding of recent events in Britain

the whole did not, were not heeded.

In spite of all this, the Americans (like the Italians and French) treated Mrs Thatcher herself with respect. It was not exactly a reluctant respect, but it was a puzzled respect. It grew, as the opinion polls showed her keeping her lead, and after the election it became a sort of awed affection. Even the photographs, almost always reasonable even before, began to look like Deborah Kerr in some particularly good 'fifties film. "The darlint" a rather hard-bitten Irish-American said to me a few days ago—and which of us would say him nay?

It had already been clear that they admired her as a woman of principle. The moderate liberal columnist Meg Greenfield lately expressed this well when she wrote that Margaret Thatcher was clearly a political leader who was prepared to say "No"; that there was obviously a point at which she would refuse compromise, concession, fudging or evasion or any of the normal political shifts to which American politicians feel themselves obliged to resort, if with the best of motives. And Miss Greenfield added, this appealed to the British public, which liked to feel that there was a leader who would not indulge them or fawn on them; such leadership, she added further, would also be welcomed by the American public.

All this was known and appreciated already. What emerged newly in the American consciousness, I believe, was the realisation—in a country where skill is most deeply admired—that Mrs Thatcher is a superbly skilled politician. That this mastery is at the service of principle, rather than being a mere technical ability like Wilson's, is all part of the mix. And it became clear, too, that the electorate's refusal to blame the Government for unemployment was no freak, but the

result of several years of action and persuasion by the Prime Minister. The mere achievement of this result, unmatched by the American administration, is a political feat of the highest order, a re-education of the British public unequalled in the Western world.

It is not only Americans who need to make a new appreciation of the Prime Minister. All of us who may have felt that she was too slow in transforming the post-Heath Conservative party, perhaps too indulgent to the appetites of the nationalized industries, must think again. In both fields, the possible has been achieved, the basis laid for a major advance. She once said to me, "Politics is like music: you either have it or you don't." Those of us who don't "have it" in this sense, and have been backseat driving in print over these years must reconsider.

It was right enough that we should have pressed for a Conservative party different from the paternalists and the technocrats of the past; but our fears that the "Etonians" over whom Peregrine Worsthorne and the GUARDIAN wax so weepy would simply wait out the upsurge of modern thinking and popular feeling and regain power, like Kipling's Boer War generals, are proving wrong.

Of course the transformation is not complete: no transformation can ever be complete in democratic politics. But, in spite of storm and fog, of mutiny and misunderstanding, and however slowly, however breathless the suspense, the ship of state, at the very edge of the reef, has been turned back towards the open sea. What a feat of navigation and captaincy, of skill and leadership! And, for future historians, what a study in the art. For art it plainly is, a matter of experience and feel, of instinct and judgment, quite irreducible

to "Political Science."

And what lesson can Americans draw from this *tour de force*? First and least, they might abjure reliance on the horde of political science academics who infest their politics. Then, they could extricate themselves from the self-righteousness and what can reasonably be called the "ideological" attitudes which are even more of a bane, on the Right almost as much as on the Left, and realise, with the Prime Minister that (in the words of AMIEL'S JOURNAL) "the ultimate ground upon which every civilisation rests is the average morality of the masses and a sufficient amount of practical righteousness."

President Reagan is another skilled professional, if of lesser calibre. But he is both more ideologically preoccupied on some issues and more inclined to compromise unnecessarily on others. He has not (some Americans argue) relied on the general feelings and understandings of the public, but has taken too much time appeasing, or attempting to persuade, the "liberal" media and the North East Establishment who would, if they had their way, forbid the use of American force in areas where it is overwhelming, like Mesoamerica, and permit it, perhaps insist on it, in areas where it can hardly be applied, like the Persian Gulf.

But it looks as though what will save America is the sheer brute power of the American economy, now once again surging forward, together with new signs that American ingenuity will soon be beating the Japanese and everyone else in the next phase of the computer revolution. With advantages like that, Mrs Thatcher would have triumphed without effort. Americans remember against what odds, in what desperately difficult circumstances her victory was obtained. Moreover, it was a most important contribution to American morale, as to the morale of the whole civilised world.

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