

At the Cliff's Edge

At the Cliff's Edge

World Problems and U.S. Power



by Doug Dowd

Student Edition

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I wish to thank Michael Slaughter, formerly a student in my Bay Area classes, now my friend and webmaster, for his comments on and work with much of this manuscript. He has been a valuable critic throughout.

I also wish to express my loving gratitude to my wife Anna. As always, and in all ways, Anna continues not only to minimize my tendencies to run a bit wild, but also and vitally to strengthen my will and determination not to bow down and give up in this depressing, ugly, and dangerous world, but rather, to assume that the fight for a sane and decent world will not be lost unless we who work for it give up.

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DEDICATION



I dedicate this book to the students I have worked with since 1949 in U.S. and Italian universities. But most especially I wish to thank the many hundreds of students who, since 1971, have participated in the free community classes of “Doug Dowd U.” in the San Francisco Bay Area, more than a few of whom have become dear friends.

Students have often thanked me for what they have learned in our classes. I take this opportunity to thank them. Many indeed have been the occasions when, after a vigorous discussion, I have found myself thinking to myself: “I didn’t know I knew that” or “I should have known that.”

Students regularly thank me for those classes; my thanks to them are at least as strong. Fortunate indeed are teachers whose brains are invigorated by their students.

Doug Dowd’s website

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PREFACE



The whole world now stands on “a cliff’s edge,” consciously or not. As we stare down into the abyss below, what we see leering back at us are four related groups of horrors: existing and likely wars, a fragile world economy, pervasive and deepening corruption, and the earth dangerously near the “tipping point” of environmental disaster.

Where we stand now is what may well be the last stop of a voyage that began some centuries ago; a voyage produced by the marriage of fifteenth-eighteenth century colonialism and nationalism. All too soon, they gave birth to the blood brothers of capitalism and industrialism (which, taken together, transformed colonialism into imperialism).

Since World War II, the USA has been at the steering wheel of that voyage: economically, militarily, politically, and even culturally. As such the USA has been the most powerful nation in all of history, its powers much enhanced as World War II ended by the worst degrees of weakness for *all* other one-time powerful nations.

Those closely-related developments gave free rein to both the virtues and the defects of the USA, but, in doing so, produced an “americanizing” set of processes that smothered the best and brought out the worst in both its own and others’ ways and means.

Reading those severe charges against the USA, a reader might well jump to the conclusion that their author is “an America hater.” Doubtless there are such people, in and out of the USA.

I am not among them; I am, rather, a “disappointed lover.”

Nor am I alone: there are many born in the USA (and at least as many in other countries) who have long seen the USA as a the standard bearer of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” but who have become our severe critics.

However, and like so many of that group's members, I am not only disappointed but horrified.

I am now in my eighty-seventh year. My "disappointment" first began to stir in the 1930s, years of economic depression and political turmoil at home and — even more — abroad. Those were the years in which our government began to take at least a few hesitant toward a decent society — interrupted by a long war.

After four years of military service, the "GI Bill" subsidized my and others' return to school. My main interest was to seek understanding of why and how from its outset as a nation the USA had come to break its "promises."

But most relevant to *this* book is what I discovered not only during my formal education, but continued to discover when I became a faculty member; namely, how very much of what is discussed in this book had *not* been and was not being discussed — at all levels of university classes, let alone in high school. (The Foreword pursues at some length one of the most important of those "silences" concerning our history, from which we have never recovered: "The Compromise of 1877" — which formally allowed the South to re-institutionalize the horrors of slavery — except formal slavery itself — for all black people and which legally continued into the 1960s (and, all too much, since).

I have been teaching in U.S. and Italian universities since 1949. In addition, since the 1970s, I have taught classes to adults in the San Francisco Bay Area, sometimes with other teachers, mostly not. The focus of those classes has been much the same as the focus of this book. I was asked to write this book by Fred Doe, one of my students, himself a high school teacher of "social studies" He could not find books for his students that were readable, pertinent, and accessible; so he asked me to fill that vacuum. I now thank him for asking me to do this, for I have learned a lot in its doing.

As the References for each of the four Parts show, there are of course many, many books that supply the needed information and analyses. However, in my own formal education, except for one or two "rogue" teachers, never was a word said about any of those sources or their contents — in part, of course, because a teacher who might choose to do so would soon be seen as a "rogue"; and pay the price.

I am not all sure that I have supplied what Fred Doe sought, whether in readability or content. But at least I learned a lot in making the attempt; and, among that "lot" was that in order for me to provide what I hope is a decent analytical history of

what I take to be indispensable information, I had much to learn myself: “The educator, too, needs educating.” Who said that?

Postscript: References

Now and then, as the book goes on, there are references in the text to other books. These are meant to serve two functions — (1) to recommend further reading for those who are interested, and (2) to lend support to (what some would consider) the more controversial points made in this book.

Here and there, some of the materials in this book are borrowed from three of my most recent books: *Blues for America: A Critique, A Lament, and Some Stories* (1997), *Capitalism and Its Economics: A Critical History* (2000, 2004), and *The Broken Promises of America: At Home and Abroad, Past and Present, An Encyclopedia for Our Times* (2005, two volumes.)

FOREWORD



THE GAP

As you will soon discover, this book is highly critical of the entire modern world, and, because the USA has for half a century been the most powerful nation in that world, also of the USA. Much more time is spent criticizing the USA (what many refer to as “America”) than praising it. Here is why.

Those of us who are trying to make the USA a better country want to make it deserving of our love. We *care* about the country. We want this land to live up to its ideals. We are often accused of *hating America*. But we don’t hate the USA. We may be disappointed in it, frustrated by it, and sometimes even despairing for its well-being. For what it could be dazzles us.

There is a huge gap between what the USA is and what it could be — *what it should be*. Some background is in order, beginning with the term *America*. We call ourselves “Americans” and refer to all others who live in this hemisphere Latin Americans, South Americans, Central Americans or North Americans. While hardly a crime, this terminology is the unconscious way we have of seeing ourselves in the USA as *something special*, as somehow *better* than the others in the Americas.

We have to call ourselves something, of course. But even “the Americas” must grate on the ears of the descendants of many tribes and cultures here thousands of years before the European invasions that began a few centuries ago.

Even the simple point just made could lead some to see its author as someone who hates this country. Just the opposite; it is a critique and a warning for those who, like me, since I was a kid, have had a lifelong love affair with what has always stirred us and others when we think “America!”

But there is also so much that causes us pain or anger. *Of course* there has

been and there is much to admire and envy. But there is much else, too — things that most “Americans” ignore or excuse. Someone has put it in a nutshell by describing the USA as “a marriage of all that’s admirable with all that’s appalling.” It’s a marriage that needs a lot of fixing up.

Love of country should never mean acceptance of *anything* it does at home or abroad, not when it defiles what this country is supposed to stand for: decency, freedom, democracy, opportunity for all and, among other ideals, peace. When these are betrayed, love requires determined efforts to set matters aright. The long popular “American” slogan “My country, right or wrong; but my country!” has all too often been interpreted to mean *anything goes* if we’re the ones doing it — but, of course, not when others try the same thing.

We are by no means alone in living by such double standards, nor in committing crimes against humanity, against our own society, and against the environment. Indeed, no society has ever had clean hands. Even so, in some cases at least, our country is far from being among the worst offenders. Also, in some ways, it has fine qualities that are hard to find elsewhere — alas, in danger of being lost to us now.

Rather, the charge of this book is that we “Americans” see our nation as one that has cured itself of what few faults it might once have had, and we see the USA as a nation that, in past and present, is unique in its virtues. *Would that it were the case.*

The bitter truth, however, is that although more than any other nation we have indeed had every opportunity to become a truly wonderful society, from our very beginnings we have evolved toward something like its opposite. The gap between our realities and our ideals, rather than narrowing since our colonial days, has widened to resemble the Grand Canyon.

THREE VALUES

Sitting in the dirty center of that gap are three unacknowledged ways of life, attitudes, *values* in the USA that have been mutually supportive:

1. Racism and other forms of prejudice
2. A leaning toward violence and militarism
3. A seemingly insatiable and socially sanctioned greed for money, things, and power

That other societies are also damaged in those ways doesn’t help — or excuse them.

The mutually supportive interactions of those tendencies are ingrained in us from childhood. They silently dominate our habits of thought, feeling, and behavior. Put together, they have become an important part of what it means to be “an American.”

The workings of the three values have been the main shaping forces of what we have become as a people and as a nation, and they have been vital for the nature and strength of U.S. capitalism. They are as normal to us as the institutions of marriage, as driving on the right hand side of the road, as Thanksgiving dinner.

THE COMPROMISE WE NEVER LEARN ABOUT

The deficiency of U.S. education is just one more instance of the huge gap between our country’s ideals and its realities. Let me try to make that point with just one very important example of what is missing from almost all of what passes for our education.

The Compromise of 1877 has been central to our history ever since that year. Ever hear of it? Even though the so-called “compromise” is among the most important and lastingly harmful of *all* the acts of congressional, I had never heard of it — not until I was in my forties, and a university professor teaching the economic history of the USA. It is one of the several skeletons in our history’s closet. So what was it about?

The Compromise was presumably concerned only with the South, after its defeat in the Civil War. But, as will be noted shortly, it has been, and still is, a vital shaping element of the USA, and very much for the worse. How and why?

The Occupation of the South

The explanation of the so-called compromise begins with the South’s defeat in the Civil War. Soon after, the ex-Confederate states were occupied by the troops of the North. Their responsibility was to administer the rules of the Occupation — which were, in fact, the ongoing laws of the USA, but which had to be enforced *by troops* in the defeated South.

Those laws gave the recently freed slaves the same rights and privileges as whites — education, the right to vote and to hold public office, and the right to be protected from harm of all sorts. Among other things.

Unsurprisingly, for whites accustomed to seeing and treating black people as property to be bought and sold and abused as one pleased — for those whites, every day was a nightmare of shame and fury: blacks in public office, blacks in

Congress, blacks in police uniforms, blacks eating in public places, blacks using *our* public toilets!

The Compromise of 1877 ended the Occupation and freed the whites to do as they wished to black men, women, and children. Until almost a century later, this freedom allowed for the savage lynching and murder of thousands of blacks by whites (including white sheriffs), in front of laughing and jeering crowds (of which there are many sickening photographs).

The free reign for southern whites to do just as they wished was *legislated* by the North-dominated Congress. What did the North get in payment for that disgraceful deal with the South? Read on...

A Stolen Election

The setting was eerily similar to the 2000 election that allowed George W. Bush to become president, even though Al Gore received at least half a million more popular votes than the “winner.” In the presidential election of 1876, Tilden (Dem., NY) received today’s equivalent of 2 *million* more popular votes than Hayes (Rep., OH).

When there is an indecisive popular vote, the electoral college votes are supposed to rule, through the Congress. And if there is any doubt there, a congressional committee takes over. It sure did, in 1877, “at night and by cloud.” In a secret session, the committee, on the basis of the rigged electoral vote from Florida (yes, Florida!) decided that Hayes had won. Period.

In his respected *Oxford History of the American People*, Samuel Eliot Morison describes the election simply: “There is no longer any doubt that this election was stolen.” Nor is there any doubt about who got what in the dirty deal — which was positively pitched as a *compromise*.

The Real Deal and the Raw Deal

This was the deal: Northern capital could do anything it wanted with the South’s resources — which meant owning or controlling its abundant mines, the railroads, and most factories (the all-white factory workers — called “poor white trash” — broke their backs for dirt wages, while blacks slaved in the fields as *sharecroppers*).

And what did white southerners, both rich and poor, get in return for giving up all those resources? They got the freedom to be vicious racists. But the rich also got something else. In that the South was an *economic colony* of the North,

the whites at the top, as in all colonies, got a split of the take — whether directly, as reps of northern capital, or in local, state, or national politics.

As noted above, whites could now do anything at all against the now “free” blacks — while the free blacks got: no schools, no votes, no safety, wholesale lynching (with no legal recourse), and so on. (For more on all of that, see W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* and C. V. Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. Both authors are deeply critical, and both were from the South.)

The South became a social cesspool, and hell on earth for all blacks and most poor whites. That was certainly bad enough, but it didn’t stop there. Beginning soon after 1877, the cesspool flowed over to stink up the whole country. The South became *the Solid South*, the home of the worst elements of the Democratic Party. No small matter, in that for almost a century, that Solid South had seniority in almost all congressional committees, disproportionate influence in Supreme Court appointments and, more often than not, decisive control over the Democratic Party’s presidential candidates.

Did you know about all that? Maybe you did; most do not. A main purpose of this book is to bring up the topics, the event, and sometimes the people, important to shaping what the USA (and by implication the world) has become — but that are not part of one’s conventional education. The contemporary classroom is geared to promoting cultural fairy tales, sustaining the pleasant fictions that maintain the status quo. I hope this book gives its readers the information, the facts, and background to help bring about change.

I hasten to add what you may have already guessed. This book goes well beyond the South (Solid and otherwise).

KEEPIN’ ON KEEPIN’ ON

There is something else I wish to impart here, in addition to information. It is especially for readers who find themselves in agreement with the book’s criticisms. The book is *so* critical and emphasizes *so many* awful problems, it might seem reasonable to throw up our hands in frustration or resignation and get drunk, or get high — do something self-reflexive, temporary, and ultimately futile — and we’ll still get the blues the next morning...

To Live, to Suffer

So I add this one last personal note. There have been lots of terrible times for lots of people, everywhere. And many have fought to end those bad times and put something better in their place. At least as often as not, those who have made

those efforts have not succeeded, or even been punished for trying. So, it *is* tempting to give up. That is nicely summarized by something I found scribbled in a used book: “To live is to suffer; to think is to mourn.”

Most of those of us who read books have not had to suffer very much ourselves; but too many of us see things as being so bad they can only get worse. Maybe they will, maybe they won't. If there is anything I have learned for certain, it is that *nobody, anywhere, can predict the future with accuracy*, and for a simple reason: The social process is just too complicated. It is always changing in all of its areas, and everything interacts with and affects everything else. For better and for worse. Unpredictably.

Two Men

I have learned from two men who both had much reason to give up, but didn't. Instead, after having lost personally, they gave the rest of us some help in not quitting the fight. One of these men was an Italian, Antonio Gramsci; the other was an American, Joe Hill. (Joe was originally from Sweden. He came to the USA when he was in his early 20's). Both have sustained my morale, even when times look bleak.

As World War I was ending, Antonio Gramsci was Italy's leading Marxist. In 1922, Mussolini led Italy to become the first fascist society in the world and Gramsci led the opposition to it. (See *Part II*.) In 1926, Gramsci was arrested and imprisoned. His health in the fascist prison deteriorated. He died after about 10 years of incarceration.

While in prison, Gramsci wrote many critical essays about the modern world. Many have benefitted from them. I'm just one who has. They were collected as *Selections from The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Eds. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith). Writing day after day in prison, and with no reason to believe he would survive incarceration, Gramsci was able to advise the rest of us to live by this maxim: “Pessimism of the intellect; optimism of the will.”

And the American? He was Joe Hill. While he was trying to help mine workers organize a union in Utah in 1915, he was arrested and falsely accused of murder. Just before he was to be taken out before a firing squad, he wrote this note to his fellow organizer Bill Haywood: “Don't waste time mourning. Organize!”

Antonio Gramsci and Joe Hill...Thanks to them, whenever I find myself sinking into pessimism, or begin to mourn past and present outrages and those that seem to lie ahead, I straighten up and get to work.

Will and Intellect

I can't remember
Ever expecting
To win the struggle
But I have known that
If I do give up
Then I have lost — and
Have helped *them* to win.

Doug Dowd
Bologna, Italy
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