

Switzerland and the Honor of America

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For the last two years, the American-Swiss relationship has sustained a series of shocks arising less from Swiss failings than American carelessness with the truth. At this time when the American-Swiss relationship has been placed under unprecedented strain and scrutiny, it is more important than ever that Americans who know Switzerland speak clearly about what Switzerland really is and has been and how the United States (U.S.) media focus on highly selective details of Swiss history during World War II has served to create a grotesque image of a Switzerland that never was.

Historically, the American disposition toward Switzerland has been conditioned by one enduring principle, namely, Switzerland's commitment to constitutional democracy entitles her to be counted as a natural friend of the United States. Switzerland's institutional structure, like ours, distributes and limits political power so that would-be despots are "cut off at the pass." Elaborate civil safeguards ensure due process. Religious and press freedom are protected, as in the United States. Intelligent economic arrangements, rooted in the recognition that economic and political liberty are mutually reinforcing, offer individuals the possibility to make full use of their abilities.

In the postwar period we Americans fought a long battle to withstand and ultimately confound the power and expansionist urges of an ideological system—communism—which subordinated individuals to the state and threatened to destroy societies like those of Switzerland and the United States. Now, in the late 1990s, communism is discredited everywhere and defeated in most places. However, many in the US—especially in Washington and among a US media unschooled in history—seem to forget what it means to build and to preserve a constitutional republic that guards the rights of citizens and residents, such as Switzerland has done for generations. Forgotten also are prospective moral and geopolitical costs to the United States of abusing long-standing friendships. Superpowers which embrace the vocabulary of individual liberties and the rule of law might do well to value their friends who do likewise, for lovers of liberty are still a minority in the world, and there will always be an ample supply of those who devalue freedom. There will come a time, no doubt, perhaps not so distant, when we in America will need to count our friends again. In the meantime, friendships with stable constitutional democracies should not be squandered by those who mindlessly presume there is no cost.

What do we owe Switzerland? This is a simple question which should inform the current debate.

First, we owe Switzerland recognition and honor for what she is—a constitutional republic which has made a significant contribution to the perfection of Western democratic ideals over the centuries. Yet, today, in the US, Switzerland is treated like a pariah state. Some US local and state governments threaten Switzerland with the kinds of sanctions rightly reserved for banana republics and totalitarian regimes.* To better appreciate the incongruity of present US posture toward Switzerland consider that our government falls over itself to ensure most favored nation status to a Chinese regime that executes political prisoners and that, this very moment, persecutes political dissidents, the Tibetan people, and 60 million Christians.

Second, we owe Switzerland nothing less than fidelity to truth. Much of what is now said or written about Switzerland is simply false. Falsehood consists not only in what is said but often what is left unsaid. The current picture the US media has painted of Switzerland as Nazi collaborator is the most serious and fundamental falsehood. This falsification by omission is sustained by ignorance of the history of the wartime era. Unless Switzerland's friends in America offer a rigorously factual rebuttal of this revisionist account of history, the newly-minted image of collaboration with Nazi Germany will gain currency. Americans who care about American-Swiss friendship need to move mountains to forestall this.

In the face of this attack by influential members of the American intellectual and political class, research reveals that there is, regrettably, a dearth of serious, English-language materials on Switzerland in American libraries. The void has been filled by hastily written, sensational books with lurid titles. These have done and continue to do great harm.

We also owe Switzerland reliability in our joint undertakings. Bilateral treaties negotiated by duly elected governments and in the absence of coercion should be honored. The idea that American officials were inept in negotiating the 1946 Washington Agreement in which gold issues were settled with Switzerland should be resisted as a dangerous precedent for the US. In diplomacy, America should live by rules it has helped write and to which it would and does appeal. The United States has always stoutly resisted efforts by foreign governments to intervene in our domestic affairs. Imagine how quickly the United States Government would have reacted had some Swiss canton held American investment hostage to a real or imagined shortcoming in our history—say, American mistreatment of Native Americans. It should not surprise us if, in the face of ongoing state efforts to hold contemporary Swiss enterprise hostage to moral failings—imagined and real—of another generation, Switzerland publicly contemplates appeal to the World Trade Organization. We would, I promise you, do the same.

As for the claim that we are merely urging Switzerland to "face her history," we might consider whether we Americans are so certain of the moral soundness of our own history that we wish to establish as precedent the use of coercion to bring about a new reckoning with history on the part of another sovereign nation. Americans deserve more thoughtfulness from their leaders, and the Swiss deserve better from us.

The atrocities of this century caused by nazism and communism were horrible beyond imagining. These sins must never be forgotten, particularly the Holocaust. The story of man's inhumanity to man is sadly a continuing one. There are today massive violations of human rights occurring in many parts of the globe. I suggest that while the sins of the

past should never be forgotten, the interests of enduring peace would be better served if governments devoted scarce resources to alleviating suffering going on right now, stopping human rights abuses they could actually do something to end.

As a guiding principle of foreign policy in dealing with past human depravity, perhaps we should follow the advice of Sir Winston Churchill, who, in a speech at the University of Zürich on September 19, 1946, counseled reconciliation instead of reparations at the conclusion of World War II:

"The guilty must be punished. Germany must be deprived of the power to rearm and make another aggressive war. But when all that has been done... there must be an end to retribution. There must be what Mr. Gladstone... called a 'blessed act of oblivion.' We must turn our backs upon the horrors of the past. We must look to the future. We cannot afford to drag forward across the years that are to come the hatreds and revenges which have sprung from injuries of the past."

One only needs to look at the Balkans today to see the folly at the extreme of attempts to right old wrongs of generations past.

For too long the American picture of Switzerland has been the "Heidi" picture.

Switzerland's cheese and chocolate image has now proved detrimental to Switzerland, for it has hidden the more serious—and truer—image of Switzerland as the democracy on the European continent most similar to America in its core values and institutions. In the absence of a deep understanding of Swiss history, of Swiss democracy, it has been easy for critics to paint another sinister—though demonstrably false—picture without depth of Switzerland as Nazi collaborator. The only answer to this false image is truth—complete, not partial—for it is not only the honor of Switzerland that is at issue here, but the honor of America as well.