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Report From Britain, 27 August 1949

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Memorandum to Southern Editors:

(I'm doubtful about your using this, but I think that I ought to let you know something of my personal attitude before sailing for Britain. You will probably like some of the items I send you and others you will call the work of the ax-grinding kind. I certainly don't mean to appear belligerent but I have every intention of reporting what I find, whether it pleases me or whether I think you will like it. I look forward to some hard work and a lot of excitement. Please bear with me for a while anyway.)

REPORT FROM BRITAIN

James W. Silver

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August 27, 1949

For a good many years my students and I have batted around the question as to whether scientific history can be written. Our conclusion has always been a resounding "No." Of course historians will continue to try for perfection in reporting the past. Right now a similar question comes up. Can an American report from Britain on the situation over there without bias? For my money the answer is still "No", though I see no reason for not trying.

That is exactly what I intend to do in the next twelve months. This may well be the most crucial year in British history. Maybe the people in that troubled island are on the way toward becoming inhabitants of a second-rate nation. They may come through as magnificently as they did in the war. In any case Southerners have a big stake in the turn of the cards. It's more than just a cotton market or a sympathy with the same kind of people we are. It could be that the success or failure of the democratic way of life will be determined in Britain this year.

It is natural for Americans who go to Britain to find precisely what they are looking for. I could name a few who have done just that. I plan to send back accounts of what I find there without fear and I hope without bias, and I'm not interested in pleasing any editor or in cultivating any segment of a possible reading public.

I'll be accused of considerable prejudice. At least I hope the same bunch won't jump on me every week. To keep the record straight I'd like to mention a simple preconception or two that I happen to entertain regarding our relations with Britain.

First, it seems to me that we are sending billions to the British not because we are big brothers to a people in obvious distress but because we realize that they have saved our necks twice in this century and may be of assistance again.

Secondly, I'm inclined to believe that we should be extremely wary of dictation on our part as to how the British use what we send them. Not only does it indicate poor faith but it plays right into the hands of political demagogues. Certainly a Southerner doesn't have to be reminded of the significance of the cry of Yankee interference in local politics.

Thirdly, I believe that how the British govern themselves is their own affair. It is illogical to claim that they are in their present plight because of a socialistic government. Britain could not compete with American mass production before the war. Labor wasn't running the show then. I doubt whether many Americans can imagine the devastation wrought in Britain by the Germans. Maybe we don't want their nationalization of basic industry and of medicine; it is also possible that two wars have destroyed so much of their wealth that they feel they can't afford the wastes of capitalism as we know it. I don't know the answer to this one but I do say we are lucky to have someone else do a little experimenting from which we can profit if we have the intelligence to do so.

If this indicates a slanted attitude, then I guess I have it. But I think not. At least I'm going to try my level best to give you in the next twelve months an honest picture of what's going on in Britain. I'll talk with all sorts of people, I'll read their newspapers and propaganda carefully, and I'll travel all over the place. I shall work hard to inform you as to what the British people are thinking, not what I believe they ought to be thinking.