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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# A George Melloan Sampler: A Global View Across the Decades

He joined this newspaper in 1952 and left a wealth of wisdom behind.

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Former Journal deputy editorial-page editor George Melloan died this week at 92. He joined the Journal as a reporter in 1952, retired in 2006 and continued contributing occasionally, most recently in June. These are excerpts of his work.

*“Is This Country Really in a Mess?” editorial-page feature, Oct. 6, 1968:*

FRANKLIN, Ind.—Here in this abundant-looking countryside, where the corn is tall and the autumn sun beats down, the rural charm is likely to be shattered by a discordant note.

The middle-aged man sitting in a green yard beside a comfortable house says in a troubled voice, “This country is in a hell of a mess.”

The words sum up a mood that can be found all around the American landscape, in its cities, its rich suburbs or its small towns, in the introspective period that precedes a Presidential election.

But is the country really in a mess? To a roving correspondent, returning home after two years of preoccupation with the troubles of Europe, the Middle East and Africa, this

country's condition seems far less disturbing than it looks, apparently, to many of the home folks and to critics of the U.S. abroad.

America's deep problems with an unpopular war abroad, an insurrection of sorts at home and a pervasive climate of violence hardly need reviewing. . . . But what do these problems really signify? Do they mean that American society is gripped with a sickness that must inevitably lead it to ruin? For this expatriate, who has seldom been accused of chauvinism, the answer would be no. In many ways the present climate of soul-searching and self-doubt looks healthier and more in keeping with the country's finest traditions than the smug self-content that seemed so evident two years ago.

*"The Sandinistas Tighten Their Grip," editorial-page feature, Oct. 13, 1980:*

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—At Augusto Sandino airport, a big Aeroflot Tupolev jetliner, on loan to Cubana Airlines, sits on the tarmac, symbol of a new Soviet presence in Central America. Along the airport highway, red banners draped on factories and stores proclaim that the workers inside, or milling about outside, have joined the revolution.

It has taken the world awhile to catch on, but the Sandinistas who toppled Anastasio Somoza last year and most likely played some role in his assassination last month are Marxist-Leninists. They have signed military and technical aid agreements with Russia and East Germany. They have invited in more than 4,000 Cubans to treat sore throats, teach reading and Marxist doctrine to Nicaraguan children and train and re-equip the Sandinista army.

The U.S. State Department, which played a significant role in the final transfer of power to the Sandinistas from Somoza, argues that a lot of this is mere fun and games, the youthful exuberance of successful revolutionaries. There still are powerful countervailing forces, it is insisted; for example, the business leaders who also turned against Somoza in his latter days, and the church. . . .

But anyone taking a hard look at Nicaragua today could be forgiven for thinking that the real influence is in the hands of those people who arrived on the Aeroflot jet.

*"Class Struggle Will Not End With Communism," Global View column, May 21, 1990:*

One of my companions on a group tour of the Soviet Union in 1981 was a retired New Jersey optometrist. He was 96 then and is still alive, I'm told. As a youth, under his original Russian name, he had participated in the 1905 uprising that weakened the power

of Czar Nicholas II and gave Russian democracy a precarious—and unfortunately temporary—foothold.

My friend, who prefers anonymity, was the son of the owner of a small factory that made shoe uppers in Mogilev, Byelorussia. As a teen-ager, he became involved with a Bolshevik cell in the plant and soon was serving as a Bolshevik messenger. At one stop, according to a story relayed to me by a grandson, my friend told an inquisitive Georgian waiting with him in an anteroom that he was an apprentice shoemaker. “Not a tailor?” the man mocked. “If you are Jewish, you must be a tailor.” According to the story—which seems plausible given the smallness of the Bolshevik community at that time—the anti-Semitic inquisitor was Iosif Dzhugashvili—Joe Stalin. Stalin’s coarseness would later manifest itself in far broader and crueler ways, of course.

“Are you still a Bolshevik?” I asked my elderly acquaintance. “Yes,” he replied with a twinkle. “Did you want to build communism?” “Nah, all that economic stuff came later. We just wanted to seize power.”

*“Mourning the Bomb,” editorial, June 10, 1981:*

An atom bomb for Iraq, we have learned in the last 24 hours, has become the latest great cause célèbre of world opiniondom. Various governments, including our own, and a lot of pundits have been busily condemning Israel’s raid on Iraq’s nuclear reactor. Our own reaction is that it’s nice to know that in Israel we have at least one nation left that still lives in the world of reality. . . .

The Israelis are not infallible, but their security for 33 years now has depended on making careful power judgments. They know that their best chances for avoiding bloodshed lie in frequently reminding their neighbors that they are strong and that their wishes are not to be taken lightly.

The Israeli approach to nonproliferation is limited and direct. But their outlook on the world and on what it takes to earn the world’s respect offers a few lessons we ourselves could profitably learn.

*“Journal Editorials and the Common Man,” essay for the Journal’s centennial edition, June 23, 1989:*

Thomas F. Woodlock, editor of this newspaper in its earliest years, once wrote that the first “strictly editorial” utterance of The Wall Street Journal addressed the bitter 1902 strike of 140,000 miners in Pennsylvania’s anthracite fields. To Wall Street’s shock, the Journal was sympathetic to the miners.

Journal editorials have provoked public debate ever since, vigorously supporting Teddy Roosevelt’s trust-busting, backing the Federal Reserve Act and creation of the Securities and Exchange Commission, excoriating John Maynard Keynes and the New Dealers for suggesting that government can create wealth, chiding FDR for his flirtations with the war in Europe, lambasting Harry Truman for seizing the steel mills, predicting defeat in Vietnam in 1968 when it became evident that there was no will to win that war, ripping Richard Nixon for price and wage controls and championing the supply-side tax reforms and monetary rigor that would become policy under Ronald Reagan.

Charles H. Dow’s little column, “Review & Outlook,” remains today in both name and spirit. Though often out of step with prevailing opinion, the paper’s editorials through the years have had a remarkable consistency. With rare exception, they have been firmly grounded in individualist philosophies of the 18th century, when the divine “rights” of monarchs and ruling classes were being challenged by firebrands asserting the “rights of man.”

*“Clinton’s Nature and the Nature of Politics,” Global View column, Aug. 4, 1998:*

There is a lot to be said for the British system, where the leader must endure competition and challenges in the Commons almost every week. A leader surrounded by his peers cannot afford to become too monarchical lest those peers cut him down to size. Subjecting him to questions in the Commons is also an effective way to keep him aware of his public obligations and the demands of probity.

Cutting down an American president is a more complex process and no doubt should be. He, unlike a British prime minister, is directly elected by mass vote. It must be seen that he not only has lost the confidence of his peers but also the confidence of the people themselves. It may seem when this is happening that journalists behave like jackals, but jackals do have their uses in maintaining the balance of nature. Holding the presidency of a great nation is not an entitlement; it must be earned every day. It seems that a lot of people, and presidents themselves, need to be reminded of that from time to time.

*“Some Reflections on My 32 Years With Bartley,”* *Global View column, Dec. 16, 2003:*

Before President Reagan, Jimmy Carter had named Paul Volcker Federal Reserve chairman to kill inflation. Paul invited Bob [Bartley, the Journal’s editor], features editor Tom Bray and me to lunch at the New York Fed not long after he was selected, and asked, “When there’s blood all over the floor, will you guys still support me?” I responded “yes” without waiting for Bob, which was clear breach of etiquette. There was blood indeed, as overextended Latin borrowers and American farmers were caught out by a return to a sound dollar. But we held fast.

*“Running the Fed? It’s Easy Actually,”* *Global View column, Nov. 8, 2005:*

The Fed has had only two chairmen since 1979, [Alan] Greenspan and Paul Volcker. . . . This 25-year record has shown that the once-popular Phillips Curve was largely a politically convenient myth. Because Phillips had theorized that inflation was necessary to maintain low unemployment, politicians cited his “curve” to justify their demands that central banks finance government-spending excesses. The dirty little secret was that politicians were fond of inflation less because of job creation than because it devalued the big government debts they were running up. Frugal citizens were stuck with the bill.

The Phillips concept guided the 1978 Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act. While paying lip service to sound money, it mainly tasked the Fed to finance “full employment,” code words for federal spending. It was passed during a period when U.S. economic policy was fraught with such idiocies as price controls.

The last 25 years have shown that, contrary to Phillips, firm control of monetary policy is fully consistent with economic growth and full employment.

*“Remembrance of Times Past,”* *Global View column, April 25, 2006:*

After 54 years of joy at being part of a great news organization, I am retiring at the end of this week. I will keep myself busy writing a book about the 36 years I have spent writing and editing a portion of the copy you have read on the Journal editorial pages.

Part of the pleasure of this column has been the exchanges I’ve had with readers. Let me thank again those of you who have been generous with your time in sending me your thoughts and criticisms. A tiny few readers have expressed their disagreement in barnyard terms, but, having grown up on an Indiana farm, I long ago became familiar with that kind of discourse. I can quite understand hostile reactions to the preachments of a

newspaper columnist, since I occasionally have tantrums myself when I disagree with a journo who sees the world in a different light. In America, neither side, thank goodness, can use the power of the state to suppress the other.

*“Socialism Strikes Back,” op-ed, Feb. 5, 2020:*

Having first visited the mother of socialism, the Soviet Union, in April 1967, I can extract a few historical nuggets to enlighten Sanders voters. I was on assignment for this newspaper, writing about yet another Soviet economic reform. On a Moscow subway, I asked a 30-something engineer how things were going. He shrugged and told me a classic Soviet joke: “We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us.”

That summed up nicely what happens under total socialism. The Soviet state owned everything. State enterprises compensated their workers with rubles. But people don’t work for slips of paper; they work for what the paper will buy. And those rubles bought very little, because the command economy produced very little (except weapons), and most of what it produced was shoddy.

Wherever I went, stores were short on goods. I witnessed Russians standing in a long line outside a state-owned store to buy shoes. Once inside, they were required to exchange their rubles with a cashier for a coupon, which they then used to buy something they hoped would fit. The coupon sellers, employees of the state, couldn’t have cared less about their customers or the poor workmanship of Soviet shoe factories. Black-market money changers spotted foreigners who might have dollars to exchange by looking at their shoes, which were of noticeably higher quality than those of locals.

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