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Commentary on social and moral issues of the day

The America I Love

Elie Weisel

Born in Sighet, Transylvania (Romania), Elie Wiesel became a U.S. citizen in 1963. Since then, Wiesel--a Holocaust survivor, Boston University professor and the author of more than 40 books--has become one of our nation's most honored citizens. In 1985, President Ronald Reagan awarded him the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor Congress can bestow on a civilian. In 1992, President George Bush recognized Wiesel with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Wiesel, who has been an outspoken advocate of human rights around the world, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

The day I received American citizenship was a turning point in my life. I had ceased to be stateless. Until then, unprotected by any government and unwanted by any society, the Jew in me was overcome by a feeling of pride mixed with gratitude.

From that day on, I felt privileged to belong to a country which, for two centuries, has stood as a living symbol of all that is charitable and decent to victims of injustice everywhere--a country in which every person is entitled to dream of happiness, peace and liberty; where those who have are taught to give back.

In America, compassion for the refugee and respect for the other still have biblical connotations.

Grandiloquent words used for public oratory? Even now, as America is in the midst of puzzling uncertainty and understandable introspection because of tragic events in Iraq, these words reflect my personal belief. For I cannot forget another day that remains alive in my memory: April 11, 1945.

That day I encountered the first American soldiers in the Buchenwald concentration camp. I remember them well. Bewildered, disbelieving, they walked around the place, hell on earth, where our destiny had been played out. They looked at us, just liberated, and did not know what to do or say. Survivors snatched from the dark throes of death, we were empty of all hope--too weak, too emaciated to hug them or even speak to them. Like lost children, the American soldiers wept and wept with rage and sadness. And we received their tears as if they were heartrending offerings from a wounded and generous humanity.

Ever since that encounter, I cannot repress my emotion before the flag and the uniform--anything that represents American heroism in battle. That is especially true on July Fourth. I reread the Declaration of Independence, a document sanctified by the passion of a nation's thirst for justice and sovereignty, forever admiring both its moral content and majestic intonation. Opposition to oppression in all its forms, defense of all human liberties, celebration of what is right in social intercourse: All this and much more is in that text, which today has special meaning.

Granted, U.S. history has gone through severe trials, of which anti-black racism was the most

scandalous and depressing. I happened to witness it in the late Fifties, as I traveled through the South. What did I feel? Shame. Yes, shame for being white. What made it worse was the realization that, at that time, racism was the law, thus making the law itself immoral and unjust.

Still, my generation was lucky to see the downfall of prejudice in many of its forms. True, it took much pain and protest for that law to be changed, but it was. Today, while fanatically stubborn racists are still around, some of them vocal, racism as such has vanished from the American scene. That is true of anti-Semitism too. Jew-haters still exist here and there, but organized anti-Semitism does not--unlike in Europe, where it has been growing with disturbing speed.

As a great power, America has always seemed concerned with other people's welfare, especially in Europe. Twice in the 20th century, it saved the "Old World" from dictatorship and tyranny.

America understands that a nation is great not because its economy is flourishing or its army invincible but because its ideals are loftier. Hence America's desire to help those who have lost their freedom to conquer it again. America's credo might read as follows: For an individual, as for a nation, to be free is an admirable duty--but to help others become free is even more admirable.

Some skeptics may object: But what about Vietnam? And Cambodia? And the support some administrations gave to corrupt regimes in Africa or the Middle East? And the occupation of Iraq? Did we go wrong--and if so, where?

And what are we to make of the despicable, abominable "interrogation methods" used on Iraqi prisoners of war by a few soldiers (but even a few are too many) in Iraqi military prisons?

Well, one could say that no nation is composed of saints alone. None is sheltered from mistakes or misdeeds. All have their Cain and Abel. It takes vision and courage to undergo serious soul-searching and to favor moral conscience over political expediency. And America, in extreme situations, is endowed with both. America is always ready to learn from its mishaps. Self-criticism remains its second nature.

Not surprising, some Europeans do not share such views. In extreme left-wing political and intellectual circles, suspicion and distrust toward America is the order of the day. They deride America's motives for its military interventions, particularly in Iraq. They say: It's just money. As if America went to war only to please the oil-rich capitalists.

They are wrong. America went to war to liberate a population too long subjected to terror and death.

We see in newspapers and magazines and on television screens the mass graves and torture chambers imposed by Saddam Hussein and his accomplices. One cannot but feel grateful to the young Americans who leave their families, some to lose their lives, in order to bring to Iraq [and to the Middle East in general, I might add] the first rays of hope--without which no people can imagine the happiness of welcoming freedom.

Hope is a key word in the vocabulary of men and women like myself and so many others who discovered in America the strength to overcome cynicism and despair. Remember the legendary Pandora's box? It is filled with implacable, terrifying curses. But underneath, at the very bottom, there is hope. Now as before, now more than ever, it is waiting for us.