

**PLAIN WORDS FROM
AMERICA; A LETTER TO
A GERMAN PROFESSOR**

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Plain words from America; a letter to a German professor by Douglas W. Johnson

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DOUGLAS W. JOHNSON

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PLAIN WORDS FROM AMERICA

A LETTER TO
A GERMAN PROFESSOR

BY

Professor DOUGLAS W. JOHNSON

Columbia University, New York



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE.

The following letter, written by Professor Douglas W. Johnson, of Columbia University, is in reply to a letter, pleading the cause of Germany, which he received from a German correspondent. Professor Johnson's letter appeared in the "Revue de Paris" of September, 1916.

PLAIN WORDS FROM AMERICA.

February, 1916.

Your two letters, with enclosed newspaper clippings, and your postal card were duly received. I can assure you that my failure to reply more promptly was not meant as any discourtesy. The clippings were gladly received, for I am always anxious to read what prominent Germans regard as able and convincing presentations of their side of disputed matters. Your own letters, particularly the long one of July 9, were read most carefully. I appreciate your earnest endeavour to convince me of the righteousness of your country's cause, and am not unmindful of the time and trouble you spent in preparing for me so carefully worded a presentation of the German point of view touching several matters of the profoundest importance to our two Governments.

My failure to reply has been due to a doubt in my own mind as to whether good would be accomplished by any letter which I could write. I could not agree with your opinions regarding Germany's responsibility for the war, nor regarding her methods of conducting the war; and it did not seem to me that you would profit by any statement I might make as to the reasons for my own opinions on such vital matters.

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Your letters clearly showed that you wrote under the influence of an intense emotion—an emotion which I can both understand and respect, but which might well make it impossible for you to accord a dispassionate reception to a reply which controverted your own views. With your country surrounded by powerful foes, with your sons deluging alien soil in an heroic defence of your Government's decrees, with the nation you love most dearly standing in moral isolation, condemned by the entire neutral world for barbarous crimes against civilisation, you could hardly be expected to write with that scientific accuracy and care which would, in normal times, be your ideal.

For this reason I have not resented much in your letters which would otherwise call for earnest protest. I feel sure, for example, your assertion that I and my fellow-countrymen derive our opinions of German conduct wholly from corrupt and venal newspapers, or usually from a single newspaper which doles out mental poison in subservience to a single political party, was not intended to be as insulting as it really sounded. Your emotion doubtless led you to make charges which your sense of justice and courtesy would, under other circumstances, condemn. I believe also that in a calmer time you would not entertain the sweeping opinion that "the daily press has become one of the direst plagues of humanity, an ulcer in the frame of society, whose one object

it is, for private ends (wealth, political influence, and social position), to pit the races, nations, religions, and classes against one another." I realise that some of our papers are a disgrace to the high calling of journalism; I believe that some sacrifice honour for gain and that some are subservient to special interests; but the roll of American journalists is honoured by the presence of many names which command respect at home and abroad because of a long-standing reputation for honesty, fearlessness, and distinguished service in the cause of humanity. To one such name was added at our last commencement the degree representing one of the highest honours which Columbia University has to bestow upon a man of lofty ideals and honourable achievement. The paper edited by this man is among those most extensively read by myself and hundreds of thousands of other Americans who demand to know the truth. However low may be the moral plane of some newspapers, your characterisation of all newspapers as mere business concerns, founded and carried on with the purpose of enriching their owners, and supporting certain special interests, "quite regardless of their effect, beneficial or the reverse, upon the real public interests of their own country, regardless of truth and justice," is not at all true of the class of papers read by the majority of intelligent Americans. I am not sufficiently familiar with a large number of German newspapers to make

assertions as to their standards ; but, in spite of the smaller amount of freedom allowed to the press in your country, I can scarcely imagine that conditions are bad enough to justify your sweeping condemnation of all newspapers.

If you had stopped to consider the radically different relations existing between the press and the Government in Germany and in America, you would scarcely have fallen into the error of asserting that a considerable proportion of our papers, in common with those of other nations, have "laboured in the employ or at the instigation of" the Government, "with all the implements of mendacity and defamation, to spread hatred and contempt for Germany." Unlike your own, our press is wholly free from Government control. Any attempt on the part of our Government to dictate the policy of any newspaper would be hotly resented, and would be doomed to certain failure. Americans do not believe in the German doctrine that the press must be "so far controlled as is requisite for the welfare of the community," and hold that absolute freedom of speech is essential to true liberty. There is no censorship of the American press. You have a censorship which all the outside world knows has been wonderfully effective in keeping some important facts from the knowledge of the German people. No American paper can be suppressed because of what it prints. You are, of course, well aware that, on more than

one occasion, German papers have been suppressed for certain periods because your Government did not believe that what they said was for the good of the country. I enclose a message received by wireless under German control which is only one of the many announcements telling of suppression of your papers. It does not alter the situation to say that censorship and suppression are necessary for the good of the Fatherland, and that the papers in question deserved to be suppressed. The vital fact remains that your newspapers are not free to publish anything they like. Ours are thus free. Every issue of your papers must be submitted to your police, so that your rulers may control what you write and read. Not a paper in America is submitted to any official whatever. You cannot read anything which your Government believes it wise to keep from you. We can read everything, whether the Government likes it or not. Americans believe there can be no truly free press, and no real unfettered public opinion, with the possibility of punishment hanging over the press of a country. Where the police, representing the ruling power, controls the press there is no true liberty. Whatever else may be said against the American press, it must be admitted that it is free from Government control. It is not necessary, therefore, to inquire whether the American Government has employed or instigated the public press to attack Germany,