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MADAME VIJAYA LAKSHMI PANDIT ( 1901-  
SISTER OF JAWAHARLAL NEHRU, PRESIDENT OF THE U N,  
AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED STATES

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1977

" You Americans are a bunch of dopes!" was her opening statement at an engagement which we had specially arranged for her at Columbia University in 1945. She then proceeded to detail all the things wrong with this country and the audience patiently took the tirade.

Being the sister of the Premier of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, gave her an enormous public interest and she toured for us, again and again, coast to coast, through the War years. In most of her addresses, she kept her low estimate of Americans to herself and was content to talk of Indian affairs and to flay Katherine Mayo, whose popular book on India she considered to be an outrage.

Having been educated in English schools, like her brother, she had a fine command of the language and she was, of course, in or out of a sari, very attractive. She would have made a great actress and her appearances were drama at its best.

Her father, a great and ultra-wealthy lawyer, and a supporter of the English in all their works, lavished his wealth on his children. They were not only educated in the finest English tradition, but made shopping tours to London and brought home quantities of clothes, furnishings and all the luxuries. They even sent their laundry by P & O steamers to London! Until Ghandi attacked the father, made a convert of the son, and turned the entire family and all its possessions to his movement against the British. Mrs Pandit had lost her calm in this process, had become bitter and blamed everything that was wrong in India on British rule. In the mistaken notion that the United States was pro-British ( a concept of Krishna/<sup>Menon</sup>who railed at us from the U N, ) she denounced us for being anti- India, thus compounding the mistake.

When her tours took her into the Deep South, where some people confused her color with that of the Africans, and where she had hotel and other problems, she exploded. Here was just what she was looking for: American bigotry and prejudice, especially anti- Indian. Thus, she began bringing the Civil Rights struggle into her lectures, another mistake which proved to be unpalatable everywhere. She never managed to separate her diplomatic and her personal ideas and she gave the impression of being a demagogue and a firebrand, which she did not deserve. It became more and more difficult

to find engagements for her and she was rarely asked to come again.

Eleanor Roosevelt provided a useful friendship for her, genuine enough I am sure, but also useful to Madame Pandit diplomatically. It was a comfort for her to be able to go to the White House frequently and to have the encouragement of the President and the family. However, when New Deal politics crept into the lectures, there was trouble. What Madame needed most was the advice of some master-diplomat at the State Department.

She enjoyed coming to the Waldorf Astoria for lunch and there we were able to get at her real judgments of Americans, which were favorable, and to bore into the frustrations and disappointments about her own country, which caused her so much agony. Basically, she acknowledged the vast problems of poverty and ignorance in India and conceded that correcting them was too big a job for anybody ( which was, of course, the Katherine Mayo position which so infuriated Madame Pandit.)

Enroute to Cleveland, one day, she had the train held while she telephoned me that she had lost her omnibus-ticket and what should she do? After giving her directions, I reflected on what it must be like for a mere woman in a strange country and without a staff of aides to command, to be lost on the New York Central.

She gave <sup>a</sup> magnificent reception <sup>at the Waldorf</sup> for Ambassador Chester Bowles as he took off for her country, and asked me to come. It was a formal and rather stiff affair, with no apparent direction, but there I met an old friend ( Rakhit ) whom I had not seen since he was one of our waiters at the University Club at Madison Wisconsin, where he had arrived entirely bewildered and homeless and whom I invited to share my apartment; now a well-to-do merchant of Indian goods in Rockefeller Plaza.

The Madame had no illusions about Russia and the Communists, and their intentions toward India. " We will best them," she said, " we have as good an Intelligence Service as Hitler or the British ever had. And, we have uncovered documents proving that the Reds mean to strike us, splitting India and paralyzing us, so we are now prepared. The Russians are contemptible, but more powerful than bright."

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Madame Pandit had the supreme test of her courage and her faith in democracy, in 1977, when her niece, Indira Ghandi was riding an authoritarian state and persuading the Congress Party, founded by her father, to go along. Madame Pandit had remained out of the fight ( she had nothing to gain, but her family and all its power to lose ) as a matter of prudence, although her mail had been opened and her house placed under police surveillance. At last, she could take no more and denounced the government for abandoning the very principles for which she and the other rebels had fought against the British. She tipped the scales and the government fell.

" I was in British jails three times," she said, "but when they came for us, it was with a warrant and in daytime; not in the middle of the night, the way it has recently been done in India."

" The essence of democracy has always been the right to dissent," she said. " This was working in India, though slowly and perhaps awkwardly. One cant govern by clapping into jail everyone who disagrees with him."

" Ghandi made us Indians into a big people, but when a man loses his right to speak out, he becomes a littler person and we are now becoming a little people."

Thus, the lady who came on stage at Columbia University to call the American people " a bunch of dopes," conceded at last that our concept of liberty and freedom was something precious, and even worth fighting and dying for.

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