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Overseas Assignment

The Ugly American and other popularized criticism of our overseas activities have given wide circulation to the notion that most Americans overseas are fools or worse. This is not true in general, and it is not true specifically of the university people who have entered this field in recent years—whether as students, teachers, research workers, technical consultants, or administrators.

This is not to say that no mistakes have been made. There are incompetents in every line, and some achieve professional rank. Some of the university contracts abroad have fizzled. Some university courses on international affairs have been out of date or unrealistic. Some of the professors who have traveled to far lands to give expert advice have been unequal to the task.

Fortunately, the mistakes to date have not been major ones, and the successes have been impressive. The people involved in the international activities of the colleges and universities are men and women committed to professional standards. They are not sentimentalists who imagine that an amiable preference for international understanding will be sufficient to achieve the goals they have in mind. They know that the tasks facing the United States in this complex and crisis-ridden world are stubborn and intricate—and are only to be solved by competence, hard work, and understanding applied to a host of specific issues. The Big Assignment breaks down into innumerable little assignments, and the little assignments are demanding: they require skill and comprehension and back-breaking effort. Academic people, as well-trained professionals, are equipped to understand such exacting assignments.

The universities are not new to the international scene. On the contrary, they have a long and distinguished record of international activity. But the scale of this activity has increased immeasurably. This is not traceable solely to an impulse on the part of the universities themselves. There is much in the world situation that makes it inevitable. There is, for example, an increasing recognition of the fact that ideas are weapons. It is ironic that the United States, whose early dynamism as a nation owed everything to the vitality of certain key ideas, had to learn again at the hands of the totalitarian nations that ideas are potent.

Another circumstance in modern world affairs that forges a role for the universities is that nations are increasingly eager to place before the world the full panoply of their intellectual, educational, and aesthetic achievements.

An even more important circumstance is the rise of technical assistance as an activity. Most technical assistance activities are carried on by professional men, and a high percentage of them have university connections.

But behind all the specific reasons for the rise of the universities in world affairs is the fact that educated talent, technical competence, and professional skills are indispensable in coping with the complexities of modern civilization. In this sense the emergence of the university as a factor in international affairs is simply a counterpart of its emergence as a central and influential institution on the domestic scene.—JOHN W. GARDNER, *Carnegie Corporation of New York*. [Reprinted, with permission, from the Annual Report of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1959]