

# KOSSUTH'S CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM

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The Hungarian War of Independence was widely reported in the American press. Kossuth hoped to bring about a fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy: to convince the country that the time came for taking an active role in international affairs. Sixty-six years later, the U.S. came to act exactly along the lines advocated by Kossuth. Ninety years later the Atlantic Charter came to embody the very principles first expressed by the Hungarian leader.

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Senator Seward of New York described Kossuth in the U.S. Senate on December 8, 1851 as “a personage whose name and fame at this time fills the eye and ear of the world.”

Kossuth, like George Washington, was regarded by Hungarians as the father of the nation already in his lifetime. Probably he was the first Hungarian political leader to make it into world history. In 1849 his name was identified with Hungary and with liberty in most civilized countries. Later on, during his visits, he was admired and welcomed in England, France, the U.S. and in Italy by enthusiastic crowds. More than 100,000 turned out to greet him in New York City on Broadway. With his seven-month tour of the United States he left an indelible mark on the country, matched by few foreign politicians.<sup>1</sup> Four full-size statues and several busts, one in the Capitol bear testimony to this. “Millions of Americans came under his spell... dozens of books, hundreds of pamphlets, and thousands of articles and essays, as well as nearly two hundred poems were written to him or about him.” The names of Emerson, Longfellow, Horace Greeley, James Russel Lowell, Harriet Beecher Stowe stand out among those authors.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly the greatest person who was inspired by the exiled Hungarian leader was Abraham Lincoln. On January 9, 1852, Lincoln said in the legislature of Illinois: WE RECOGNIZE IN GOVERNOR KOSSUTH OF HUNGARY THE MOST

WORTHY AND DISTINGUISHED REPRESENTATIVE OF THE CAUSE OF CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY ON THE CONTINENT OF EUROPE.”<sup>3</sup>

How could Kossuth have such an impact on the United States? The Hungarian War of Independence was widely reported in the contemporary American press, it inspired the young nation and reminded it of its own struggle for independence 75 years earlier. Following a series of spectacular victories in the spring, when the Hungarian Parliament elected Kossuth Governor-President on April 14, 1849, the President of the U.S. sent an envoy, Mr. Dudley Mann, to Hungary with the intention of recognizing the country's independence. The bloody reprisals following the surrender of the Hungarian Army in August 1849 even increased the sympathy.

President Zachary Taylor was an enthusiastic supporter of the cause of Hungary – his reports and instructions to the Senate at the end of 1849 testify that. There were also a number of prominent members of the U.S. Congress who took a very strong interest in Hungary, most notably Senator Cass of Michigan (who in early 1850 moved to break diplomatic relations with Austria), and Senator Webster of Massachusetts. There was even a move in the House of Representatives to censure the President and the Secretary of State for having failed to recognize the independence of Hungary in due time.

The death of President Taylor was a blow to the Hungarians. His successor, President Fillmore was more reserved, but his Secretary of State became Daniel Webster, an admirer of Kossuth. In Spring 1851 Senator Foot of Mississippi moved to send a warship for Kossuth to bring him over to the States from his exile in Turkey. The Senate concurred, and the frigate Mississippi was dispatched.

Kossuth arrived in New York on December 4, 1851. He was greeted by huge crowds, just like subsequently in Philadelphia and Baltimore and at so many other places. His first speeches galvanized America. Kossuth is considered as one of the great orators of all times. He could capture his audience in Hungarian, German, Latin and English, too. C. A. Macartney, in his introduction to the definitive work of John Komlos, rightly spoke of the “inexhaustible fluency and almost magic persuasiveness” of Kossuth preaching his gospel.<sup>4</sup> The Hungarian leader was extremely well educated and widely read, as reflected in his speeches. He showed a remarkable knowledge of the history and constitution of America, too.<sup>5</sup>

The exiled former Head of the Hungarian State came to the United States with far higher aims than capitalizing on his personal popularity and raising money for the continuation of the Hungarian War of Independence. While he fully understood why the Founding Fathers of the Republic warned against entangling alliances, he hoped to bring about a fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy: to convince the country that the time came for taking an active role in international affairs, commensurate with its strength, and to make Americans realize the inter-

dependence of Europe and the U.S., that the Atlantic was no longer a barrier but rather a link, that freedom and democracy in Europe was also a vital interest for the American Republic, and, finally, that the two English-speaking countries must be allied so that they could jointly prevent tyrannical, authoritarian countries like Russia from suppressing the striving of subject nations for freedom. All that was set forth in detail at the Corporation Dinner in New York on December 11, 1851. That speech, that challenge to American isolationism, shows Kossuth's erudition as well as his forceful reasoning.

But while I acknowledge the wisdom of your attachment to fundamental doctrines, I beg leave with equal frankness to state, that, in my opinion, there can be scarcely anything more dangerous to the progressive development of a nation, than to mistake for a basis that which is none; to mistake for a principle that which is but a transitory convenience; to take for substantial that which is but accidental; or to take for constitutional doctrine that which is but a momentary exigency of administrative policy. [...] Let me suppose, gentlemen, that doctrine of non-interference was really bequeathed to you by your Washington (and that it was not, I will essay to prove afterwards), and let me even suppose that your Washington imparted to it such an interpretation, as were equivalent to the words of Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" [...] I may be entitled to ask, is the dress which suited the child, still suitable to the full grown man? Would it not be ridiculous to lay the man into the child's cradle, and to sing him to sleep by a lullaby? In the origin of the United States you were an infant people, and you had, of course, nothing to do but to grow, to grow, and to grow. But now you are so far grown that there is no foreign power on earth from which you have anything to fear for your existence or security. In fact, your growth is that of a giant. Of old, your infant frame was composed of thirteen states, and was restricted to the borders of the Atlantic: now, your massive bulk is spread to the gulf of Mexico and the Pacific, and your territory is a continent. Your right hand touches Europe over the waves; your left reaches across the Pacific to eastern Asia; and there, between two quarters of the world, there you stand, in proud immensity, a world yourselves. Then you were a small people of three millions and a half; now you are a mighty nation of twenty-four millions. [...] The very existence of your great country, the principles upon which it is founded, its geographical position, its present scale of civilization, and all its moral and material interests, would lead on your people not only to maintain, but necessarily more and more to develop your foreign intercourse. Then, being in so many respects linked to mankind at large, you cannot have the will, nor yet the power, to remain indifferent to the outward world. And if you cannot remain indifferent, you must resolve to throw your weight into that balance in which

the fate and condition of man is weighed. You are a power on earth. You must be a power on earth, and must therefore accept all the consequences of this position. [...]

I hope I have sufficiently shown, that should even that doctrine of non-interference have been established by the founders of your republic, that which might have been very proper to your infancy would not now be suitable to your manhood. [...] Having stated so far the difference of the situation, I beg leave now to assert that it is an error to suppose that non-interference in foreign matters has been bequeathed to the people of the United States by your great Washington as a doctrine and as a constitutional principle. Firstly, Washington never even recommended to you non-interference in the sense of *indifference* to the fate of other nations. He only recommended *neutrality*. And there is a mighty diversity between these two ideas. Neutrality has reference to a state of war between two belligerent powers, and it is this case which Washington contemplated, when he, in his Farewell Address, advised the people of the United States not to enter into entangling alliances. [...] Neutrality is a matter of convenience – not of principle. But while neutrality has reference to a state of war between belligerent powers, the principle of non-interference, on the contrary, lays down the sovereign right of nations to arrange their own domestic concerns. Therefore these two ideas of neutrality and non-interference are entirely different, having reference to two entirely different matters. The sovereign right of every nation to rule over itself, to alter its own institutions, to change the form of its own government, is a common public law of nations, common to all, and, *therefore, put under the common guarantee of all*. This sovereign right of every nation to dispose of itself, you, the people of the United States must recognize; for it is the common law of mankind, in which, because it is such, every nation is equally interested. You must recognize it, secondly, because the very existence of your great republic, as also the independence of every nation, rests upon this ground. If that sovereign right of nations were no common public law of mankind, then your own independence would be no matter of right, but only a matter of fact, which might be subject, for all future time, to all sorts of chances from foreign conspiracy and violence. [...]

Now, gentlemen, if these be principles of common law, of that law which God has given to every nation of humanity – if to organize itself is the common lawful right of every nation; then the interference with this common law of all humanity, the violent act of hindering, by armed forces, a nation from exercising that sovereign right, must be considered as a violation of that common public law upon which your very existence rests, and which, being a common law of all humanity, is, by God himself, placed under the safeguard of all humanity; for it is God himself who commands us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, and to do towards others as we desire

others to do towards us. Upon this point you cannot remain indifferent. You may well remain neutral to war between two belligerent nations, but you cannot remain indifferent to the violation of the common law of humanity. That indifference Washington has never taught you. I defy any man to show me, out of the eleven volumes of Washington's writings, a single word to that effect. He could not have recommended this indifference without ceasing to be wise as he was; for without justice there is no wisdom on earth. He could not have recommended it without becoming inconsistent; for it was this common law of mankind which your fathers invoked before God and man when they proclaimed your independence. It was he himself, your great Washington, who not only accepted, but again and again asked, foreign aid – foreign help for the support of that common law of mankind in respect to your own independence. [...]

I will go further. Even that doctrine of neutrality which Washington taught and bequeathed to you, he taught not as a constitutional *principle* – a lasting regulation for all future time, but only as a matter of temporary *policy*. I refer in that respect to the very words of his Farewell Address. There he states explicitly that “it is your *policy* to steer clear of *permanent* alliances with any portion of the foreign world.” These are his very words. Policy is the word, and you know that policy is not the science of principle, but of exigencies; and that principles are, of course, by a free and powerful nation, never to be sacrificed to exigencies. [...] Again, in the same address Washington explicitly says, in reference to his policy of neutrality, that “with him a predominant motive has been to *gain time* to your country to settle and mature its institutions, and to progress without interruption to that degree of strength and consistency which is necessary to give it the command of its own fortunes.” These are highly memorable words, gentlemen. Here I take my ground; and casting a glance of admiration over your glorious land, I confidently ask you, gentlemen, are your institutions settled and matured or are they not? Are you, or are you not, come to such a degree of strength and consistency as to be the masters of your own fortunes? Oh! how do I thank God for having given me the glorious view of this country's greatness, which answers this question for me! Yes! you *have* attained that degree of strength and consistency in which your less fortunate brethren may well claim your protecting hand.

One more word on Washington's doctrines. In one of his letters, written to Lafayette, he says: – “Let us only have twenty years of peace, and our country will come to such a degree of power and wealth that we shall be able, in a just cause, to defy any power on earth whatsoever.” “In a just cause!” Now, in the name of eternal truth, and by all that is dear and sacred to man, since the history of mankind is recorded, there has been no cause more just than the cause of Hungary. Never was there a people, without the slightest reason,

more sacrilegiously, more treacherously attacked, or by fouler means than Hungary. Never has crime, cursed ambition, despotism, and violence, united more wickedly to crush freedom, and the very life, than against Hungary. Never was a country more mortally aggrieved than Hungary is. All your sufferings – all your complaints, which, with so much right, drove your forefathers to take up arms, are but slight grievances in comparison with those immense deep wounds, out of which the heart of Hungary bleeds! If the cause of our people is not sufficiently just to insure the protection of God, and the support of right-willing men – then there is no just cause, and no justice on earth. [...]

Now, allow me briefly to consider how your Foreign Policy has grown and enlarged itself. I will only recall to your memory the message of President Monroe, when he clearly stated that the United States would take up arms to protect the American Colonies of Spain, now free republics, should the Holy (or rather unholy) Alliance make an attempt either to aid Spain to reduce the new American republics to their ancient colonial state, or to compel them to adopt political systems more conformable to the policy and views of that alliance. I entreat you to mark this well, gentlemen. Not only the forced introduction of monarchy, but in general the interference of foreign powers in the contest, was declared sufficient motive for the United States to protect the colonies. Let me remind you that this declaration of President Monroe was not only approved and confirmed by the people of the United States, but that Great Britain itself joined the United States, in the declaration of this decision and this policy. [...] It is true, that this declaration to go even to war, to protect the independence of foreign States against foreign interference, was restricted to the continent of America; for President Monroe declares in his message that the United States can have no concern in European struggles, being distant and separated from Europe by the great Atlantic Ocean. But I would remark that this indifference to European concerns is again a matter, not of principle but of temporary exigency – the motives of which have, by the lapse of time, entirely disappeared – so much that the balance is even turned to the opposite side.

President Monroe mentions *distance* as a motive of the above-stated distinction. Well, since the prodigious development of your Fulton's glorious invention, distance is no longer calculated by miles, but by hours; and, being so, Europe is of course less distant from you than the greater part of the American continent. But, let even the word distance be taken in a nominal sense. Europe is nearer to you than the greatest part of the American continent – yea! even nearer than perhaps some part of your own territory. President Monroe's second motive is, that you are separated from the Europe *by the Atlantic*. Now, at the present time, and in the present condition of navigation, the Atlantic is no separation, but rather a link; as the means of

that commercial intercourse which brings the interest of Europe home to you, connecting you with it by every tie of moral as well as material interest.

There is immense truth in that which the French Legation in the United States expressed to your government in an able note of 27th October past: – “America is closely connected with Europe, being only separated from the latter by a distance scarcely exceeding eight days’ journey, by one of the most important of general interests – the interest of commerce. The nations of America and Europe are at this day so dependent upon one another, that the effects of any event, prosperous or otherwise, happening on one side of the Atlantic, are immediately felt on the other side. The result of this community of interests, commercial, political, and moral, between Europe and America – of this frequency and rapidity of intercourse between them, is, that it becomes as difficult to point out the geographical degree where American policy shall terminate, and European policy begin, as it is to trace out the line where American commerce begins and European commerce terminates. Where may be said to begin or terminate the ideas which are in the ascendant in Europe and in America?”

It is chiefly in New York that I feel induced to urge this, because New York is, by innumerable ties, connected with Europe – more connected than several parts of Europe itself. It is the agricultural interest of this great country which chiefly wants an outlet and a market. Now, it is far more to Europe than to the American continent that you have to look in that respect. [...]

Even in political considerations, now-a-days, you have stronger motives to feel interested in the fate of Europe than in the fate of the Central or Southern parts of America. Whatever may happen to the institutions of these parts, you are too powerful to see your own institutions affected by it. But let Europe become absolutistical (as, unless Hungary be restored to its independence, and Italy become free, be sure it will) – and your children will see these words, which your national government spoke in 1827, fulfilled on a larger scale than they were meant, that “the absolutism of Europe will not be appeased, until every vestige of human freedom has been obliterated even here.” And oh! do not rely too fondly upon your power. It is great, assuredly. You have not to fear any single power on earth. But look to history. Mighty empires have vanished. Let not the enemies of freedom grow too strong. Victorious over Europe, and then united, they would be too strong even for you! And be sure they hate you most cordially. They consider you as their most dangerous opponent. Absolutism cannot sleep tranquilly, while the republican principle has such a mighty representative as your country is. [...]

I have shown you how Washington’s policy has been gradually changed: but one mighty difference I must still commemorate. Your

population has, since Monroe's time, nearly doubled, I believe; or at least has increased by millions. And what sort of men are these millions? Are they only native-born Americans? No. European emigrants? Many are men, who though citizens of the United States are, by the most sacred ties of relationship, attached to the fate of Europe. That is a consideration worthy of reflection with your wisest men, who will, ere long agree with me, that in your president condition you are at least as much interested in the state of Europe, as twenty-eight years ago your fathers were in the fate of Central and Southern America. And really so it is. The unexampled sympathy for the cause of my country which I have met with in the United States proves that it is so. Your generous interference with the Turkish captivity of the Governor of Hungary, proves that it is so. And this progressive development in your foreign policy, is, in fact, no longer a mere instinctive ebullition of public opinion, which is about hereafter to direct your governmental policy; the opinion of the people is *already* avowed as the policy of the government. I have a most decisive authority to rely upon in saying so. It is the message of the President of the United States. His Excellency, Millard Fillmore, made a communication to Congress, a few days ago, and there I read the paragraph: – "The deep interest which we feel in the spread of liberal principles, and the establishment of free governments, and the sympathy with which we witness every struggle against oppression, *forbid that we should be indifferent* to a case in which the strong arm of a foreign power is invoked to stifle public sentiment and repress the spirit of freedom in any country."

Now, gentlemen, here is the ground which I take for my earnest endeavours to benefit the cause of Hungary. [...] I have been charged as arrogantly attempting to change your existing policy, and since I cannot in one speech exhaust the complex and mighty whole of my mission, I choose on the present opportunity to development my views about that fundamental principle: and having shown, not theoretically, but practically, that it is a mistake to think that you had, at any time, such a principle, and having shown, that if you ever entertained such a policy, you have been forced to abandon it – so much, at least, I hope I have achieved. My humble requests to your active sympathy may be still opposed by – I know not what other motives; but the objection, that you must not interfere with European concerns – this objection is disposed of, once and for ever, I hope. It remains now to inquire, whether, since you have professed not to be indifferent to the cause of European freedom – the cause of Hungary is such as to have just claims to your active and effectual assistance and support. It is, gentlemen.

To prove this I do not now intend to enter into an explanation of the particulars of our struggle, which I had the honour to conduct, as the chosen Chief Magistrate of my native land. It is highly gratifying

to me to find that the cause of Hungary is – excepting some ridiculous misrepresentations of ill-will – correctly understood here. I will only state now one fact, and that is, that our endeavours for independence were crushed by the armed interference of a foreign despotic power – the principle of all evil on earth – Russia. And stating this fact, I will not again intrude upon you with my own views, but recall to your memory the doctrines established by your own statesmen. Firstly – I return to your great Washington. He says in one of his letters to Lafayette, “My policies are plain and simple; I think every nation has a right to establish that form of government under which it conceives it can live most happy; and that no government ought to interfere with the internal concerns of another.” Here I take my ground: – upon a principle of Washington – a *principle*, not a mere temporary policy calculated for the first twenty years of your infancy. Russia *has* interfered with the internal concerns of Hungary, and by doing so has violated the policy of the United States, established as a lasting principle by Washington himself. It is a lasting principle. I could appeal in my support to the opinion of every statesman of the United States, of every party, of every time; but to save time, I pass at once from the first President of the United States to the last, and recall to your memory this word of the present annual message of his Excellency President Fillmore: – “Let every people choose for itself, and make and alter its political institutions to suit its own condition and convenience.” I beg leave also to quote the statement of your present Secretary of State, Mr. Webster, who, in his speech on the Greek question, speaks thus: – “The law of nations maintains that in extreme cases resistance is lawful, and that one nation has no right to interfere in the affairs of another.” Well, that precisely is the ground upon which we Hungarians stand.

But I may perhaps meet the objection (I am sorry to say I have met it already) – “Well, we own that it has been violated by Russia in the case of Hungary, but after all what is Hungary to us? Let every people take care of itself, what is that to us?” So some speak: it is the old doctrine of private egotism, “Every one for himself, and God for us all.” I will answer the objection again by the words of Mr. Webster, who, in his speech on the Greek question, having professed that the internal sovereignty of every nation is a law of nations – thus goes on, “But it may be asked ‘what is all that to us?’ The question is easily answered. *We are one of the nations*, and we as a nation have precisely the same interest in international law as a private individual has in the laws of his country.” The principle which your honourable Secretary of State professes, is a principle of eternal truth. [...]

But from certain quarters it may be avowed, “Well, we acknowledge every nation’s sovereign right; we acknowledge it to be a law of nations that no foreign power interfere in the affairs of another, and we are determined to respect this common law of mankind; but

if others do not respect that law it is not ours to meddle with them.” Let me answer by an analysis: – *Every nation has the same interest in international law as a private individual has in the laws of his country.* That is an acknowledged principle with your statesmen. [...]

The duty of enforcing the observance to the common law of nations has no other limit than the power to fulfil it. Of course the republic of St. Marino, or the Prince of Monaco, cannot stop the Czar of Russia in his ambitious annoyance. It was ridiculous when the Prince of Modena refused to recognize the government of Louis Philippe – “but to whom much is given, from him will much be expected,” says the Lord. Every condition has not only its rights, but also its own duties; and whatever exists as a power on earth, is in duty a part of the executive government of mankind, called to maintain the law of nations. [...] People of the United States, humanity expects that your glorious republic will prove to the world, *that republics are founded on virtue* – it expects to see you the guardians of the laws of humanity.

I will come to the last possible objection. I may be told, “you are right in your principles, your cause is just, and you have our sympathy, but, after all, we cannot go to war for your country; we cannot furnish you armies and fleets; we cannot fight your battle for you.” There is the rub! Who can exactly tell what would have been the issue of your own struggle for independence (though your country was in a far happier geographical position than we, poor Hungarians), had France given such an answer to your forefathers in 1778 and 1781, instead of sending to your aid a fleet of thirty-eight men-of-war, and auxiliary troops, and 24,000 muskets, and a loan of nineteen millions? And what was far more than all this, did it not show that France resolved with all its power to espouse the cause of your independence? But, perhaps, I shall be told that France did this, not out of love of freedom, but out of hatred against England. Well, let it be; but let me then ask, shall the curse of olden times – hatred – be more efficient in the destinies of mankind than love of freedom, principles of justice, and the laws of humanity? And is America in the days of steam navigation more distant from Europe to-day, than France was from America seventy- three years ago? However, I must solemnly declare that it is not my intention to rely literally upon this example. It is not my wish to entangle the United States in war, or to engage your great people to send out armies and fleets to raise up and restore Hungary. Not at all, gentlemen; I most solemnly declare that I have never entertained such expectations or such hopes; and here I come to the practical point.

The principle of evil in Europe is the enervating spirit of Russian absolutism. Upon this rests the daring boldness of every petty tyrant to trample upon oppressed nations, and to crush liberty. To the Moloch of ambition has my native land fallen a victim. It is with this that

Montalembert threatens the French republicans. It was Russian intervention in Hungary which governed French intervention in Rome, and gave German tyrants hardihood to crush all the endeavours for freedom and unity in Germany. The despots of the European continent are leagued against the freedom of the world. That is A MATTER OF FACT. [...]

The second matter of fact is that the European continent is on the eve of a new revolution. It is not necessary to be initiated in the secret preparations of the European democracy to be aware of that approaching contingency. It is pointed out by the French constitution itself, prescribing a new Presidential election for the next spring. Now, suppose that the ambition of Louis Napoleon, encouraged by Russian secret aid, awaits this time (*which I scarcely believe*), and suppose that there should be a peaceful solution; such as would content the friends of the Republic in France; of course the first act of the new French President must be, at least, to recall the French troops from Rome. Nobody can doubt that a revolution in Italy will follow. Or if there is no peaceful solution in France, but a revolution, then every man knows that whenever the heart of France boils up, the pulsation is felt throughout Europe, and oppressed nations once more rise, and Russia again interferes.

Now I humbly ask, with the view of these circumstances before your eyes, can it be convenient to such a great power as this glorious republic, to await the very outbreak, and not until then to discuss and decide on your foreign policy? There may come, as under the last President, at a late hour, agents to see how matters stand in Hungary. Russian interference and treason achieved what the sacrilegious Hapsburg dynasty failed to achieve. You know the old words, "While Rome debated, Saguntum fell." So I respectfully press upon you my FIRST entreaty: it is, that your people will in good time express to your central government what course of foreign policy it wishes to be pursued in the case of the approaching events I have mentioned. And I most confidently hope that there is only one course possible, consistently with the above recorded principles. If you acknowledge that the right of every nation to alter its institutions and government is a law of nations – if you acknowledge the interference of foreign powers in that sovereign right to be a violation of the law of nations, as you really do – if you are *forbidden to remain indifferent* to this violation of international law (as your President openly professes that you are) – then there is no other course possible than neither to interfere in that sovereign right of nations, nor to allow any other powers whatever to interfere.

But you will perhaps object to me, "That amounts to going to war." I answer: no – that amounts to preventing war. What is wanted to that effect? It is wanted, that, being aware of the precarious condition of Europe, your national government should, as soon as possi-

ble, send instructions to your Minister at London, to declare to the English government that the United States, acknowledging the sovereign right of every nation to dispose of its own domestic concerns, have resolved not to interfere, but also not to let any foreign power whatever interfere with this sovereign right in order to repress the spirit of freedom in any country. Consequently, to invite the Cabinet of St. James's into this policy, and declare that the United States are resolved to act conjointly with England in that decision, in the approaching crisis of the European continent. Such is my FIRST humble request. If the citizens of the United States, instead of honouring me with the offers of their hospitality, would be pleased to pass convenient resolutions, and to ratify them to their national government – if the press would hasten to give its aid, and in consequence the national government instructed its Minister in England accordingly, and by communication to the Congress, as it is wont, give publicity to this step, I am entirely sure that you would find the people of Great Britain heartily joining this direction of policy. No power could feel peculiarly offended by it; no existing relation would be broken or injured: and still any future interference of Russia against the restoration of Hungary to that independence which was formally declared in 1849 would be prevented, Russian arrogance and preponderance would be checked, and the oppressed nations of Europe soon become free.

There may be some over-anxious men, who perhaps would say, “But if such a declaration of your government were not respected, and Russia still did interfere, then you would be obliged by this previous declaration, to go to war; and you don't desire to have a war.” [...] But your declaration *will* be respected – Russia will not interfere – you will have no occasion for war – you will have prevented war. Be sure Russia would twice, thrice consider, before provoking against itself, besides the roused judgment of nations – (to say nothing of the legions of Republican France) – the English “Lion” and the star-surrounded “Eagle” of America. Remember that you, in conjunction with England, once before declared that you would not permit European absolutism to interfere with the formerly Spanish colonies of America. Did this declaration bring you to a war? quite the contrary; it prevented war. So it would be in our case also. Let me therefore most humbly entreat you, people of the United States, to give such practical direction to your generous sympathy for Hungary, as to arrange meetings and pass such resolutions, in every possible place of this Union, as I took the liberty to mention above.

[...] The THIRD object of my wishes, gentlemen, is the recognition of the independence of Hungary when the critical moment arrives. Your own declaration of independence proclaims the right of every nation to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which “the laws of nature and nature's God”

entitle them. The political existence of your glorious republic is founded upon this principle, upon this right. Our nation stands upon the same ground: there is a striking resemblance between your cause and that of my country. On the 4th July, 1776, John Adams spoke thus in your Congress, "Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish, I am for this declaration. In the beginning we did not go so far as separation from the Crown, but 'there is a divinity which shapes our ends.'" These noble words were present to my mind on the 14th April, 1849, when I moved the forfeiture of the Crown by the Hapsburgs in the National Assembly of Hungary. Our condition was the same; and if there be any difference, I venture to say it is in favour of us. Your country, before this declaration, was not a *self-consisting independent* State. Hungary was. Through the lapse of a thousand years, through every vicissitude of this long period, while nations vanished and empires fell, *the self-consisting independence of Hungary was never disputed*, but was recognized by all powers of the earth, sanctioned by treaties made with the Hapsburg dynasty, at the era when this dynasty, by the freewill of my nation, which acted as one of two contracting parties, was invested with the kingly crown of Hungary. Even more, this independence of the kingdom was acknowledged to make a part of the international law of Europe, and was guaranteed not only by foreign European governments, such as Great Britain, but also by several of those once constitutional states which belonged formerly to the German, and after its dissolution, to the Austrian empire.

This independent condition of Hungary is clearly defined in one of our fundamental laws of 1791, in these words: – "Hungary is a free and independent kingdom, having its own self-consistent existence and constitution, and not subject to any other nation or country in the world." This therefore was our ancient right. *We were not dependent on, nor a part of, the Austrian empire, as your country was dependent on England.* [...]

The laws which we succeeded to carry in 1848, of course, altered nothing in that old chartered condition of Hungary. We transformed the peasantry into freeholders, and abolished feudal incumbrances. We replaced the political privileges of aristocracy by the common liberty of the whole people; gave to the people at large representation in the legislature; transformed our municipalities into democratic corporations; introduced equality before the law for the whole people in rights and duties, and abolished the immunity of taxation which had been enjoyed by the class called *Noble*; secured equal religious liberty to all, secured liberty of the press and of association, provided for public gratuitous introduction of the whole people of every confession and of whatever tongue. In all this we did no wrong. All these were, as you see, internal reforms which did not at all interfere with our allegiance to the king and were carried lawfully in peaceful

legislation *with the king's own sanction*. [...] The dynasty [...] resorted to the most outrageous conspiracy, and attacked us by arms, and upon receiving a false report of a great victory this young usurper issued a proclamation that Hungary shall no more exist – that its independence, its constitution, its very existence is abolished, and it shall be absorbed, like a farm or fold, into the Austrian Empire. To all this Hungary answered, “Thou shalt not exist, tyrant, but we will;” and we banished him, and issued the declaration of the deposition of his dynasty, and of our separate independence.

So you see, gentlemen, that there is a very great difference between your declaration and ours – it is in our favour. There is another difference; you declared your independence of the English crown when it was yet very doubtful whether you would be successful. We declared our independence of the Austrian crown only after we, in legitimate defence, were already victorious; when we had actually beaten the pretender, and had thus already proved that we had strength to become an independent power. One thing more: our declaration of independence was not only overwhelmingly voted in our Congress, but every county, every municipality, solemnly declared its consent and adherence to it; so it became sanctioned, not by mere representatives, but by the whole nation positively, and by the fundamental institutions of Hungary. And so it still remains. Nothing has since happened on the part of the nation contrary to this declaration. One thing only happened, – a foreign power, Russia, came with its armed bondsmen, and, aided by treason, has overthrown us for a while. Now, I put the question before God and humanity to you, free sovereign people of America, can this violation of international law abolish the legitimate character of our declaration of independence? If not, then here I take my ground, because I am in this very manifesto entrusted with the charge of Governor of my fatherland. I have sworn, before God and my nation, to endeavour to maintain and secure this act of independence. And so may God the Almighty help me as I will – I will, until my nation is again in the condition to dispose of its government, which I confidently trust, – yea, more, I know, – will be republican. And then I retire to the humble condition of my former private life, equalling, in one thing at least, your Washington, not in merits, but in honesty. That is the only ambition of my life. Amen. Here, then, is my THIRD humble wish: that the people of the United States, would by all constitutional means of its wonted public life, declare that, acknowledging the legitimacy of our independence, it is anxious to greet Hungary amongst the independent powers of the earth, and invites the government of the United States to recognize this independence *at the earliest convenient time*. That is all.<sup>6</sup>

This speech strikes the reader 150 years later as much with its thorough knowledge and understanding of American political thinking as with its powerful rea-

soning and persuasiveness. It captured its audience and the many versions of the same arguments delivered on other occasions at other places usually also carried the day. Those reading the arguments, usually well summarized in the press, and running so much against common wisdom and accepted doctrine, were more difficult to be convinced. Undoubtedly the weakest point of the argument was that adopting the policies advocated by Kossuth would not get the United States involved in a war fought in Europe – and not for obvious American national interests, but for a noble principle. A few days later, speaking at the Bar of New York on December 19, Kossuth himself admitted that a mere declaration denouncing intervention might not be enough.

Yes, gentlemen, I confess, should Russia not respect such a declaration of your country, then you are forced to go to war, or else be degraded before mankind. But, gentlemen, you must not shrink back from the mere word war; you must consider what is the probability of its occurrence. I have already stated my certain knowledge how vulnerable Russia is; how weak she is internally. [... In Hungary] *the Czar did not dare to interfere until he was assured that he would meet no foreign power to oppose him.* Show him, free people of America – show him in a manly declaration, that he will meet your force if he dares once more to trample on the laws of nations – accompany this declaration with an augmentation of your Mediterranean fleets, and be sure he will not stir.<sup>7</sup> But you are powerful enough to defy any power on earth [...] give to humanity the glorious example of a great people going to war, not for egoistical interest, but for justice, for the law of nations [...] It will be the last war, because it will make nations contented – contented, because free.<sup>8</sup>

These last words recall the illusions of the first world war, and sound truly Wilsonian. They did not help Kossuth winning America for his foreign policy platform.

While Kossuth's first speeches in New York were received most warmly by crowded audiences, they cooled the enthusiasm of quite a few in Congress. On December 2, 1851 the President expressed his wish that Congress should decide on how to receive the Hungarian statesman. A heated debate started on the following day. Foote's move for an official reception was opposed by Southern Democrats and by radical free-soilers, who saw a contradiction between welcoming a foreign freedom-fighter while denying freedom to slaves. Conservatives denounced Kossuth as a revolutionary. The debate ran for eight days. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts called Kossuth "a living Washington," while Senator Seward of New York on December 8 gave a moving eulogy.

I know not in the history of modern times a more sublime spectacle – than would be afforded by hearing the American Congress in

the name and behalf of the American people, give to the representative of the cause of popular government in Europe a cordial welcome, on his escape from the perils of his position and his arrival in this land, where that system of government is established and in full and successful operation. [...] I confess I am desirous, as the Congress of the United States did bring or cause Kossuth to be brought here under their authority, that his reception should be a national act, and that the two houses of Congress should not be divided, but should act together in this great proceeding. This form, also, seems to commend itself to adoption by the Senate, because it stops short of committing Congress to any action beyond the words, - beyond the simple national action of giving Kossuth a cordial welcome. What I desire is not the utterance of words: what I want to have Congress do is to tact - to extend the welcome to Kossuth which the world expects him to receive. [...]

Mr. President, in the course of human events, we see the nations of Europe struggling to throw off the despotic systems of government, and attempting to establish a government based upon the principles of republicanism or of constitutional monarchy. Whenever such efforts are made, it invariably happens that the existing despotisms of Europe endeavor to suppress the high and holy endeavor, and to subdue the people by whom it is made. The consequence is that despotism has one common cause; and it results that the cause of civil and constitutional liberty has, in all countries, become one common cause - the common cause of mankind against despotism. Now, whatever nation leads the way at any time - at any crisis - in this contest for civil liberty, it becomes, as we perceive, the representative of all the nations of the earth. We once occupied that noble and interesting position, and we engaged the sympathies of civilized men throughout the world. No one can deny that now, or recently, Hungary took that position. [...]

Hungary herself has set the seal upon his merits, and has concluded that question; and it would be as unreasonable and absurd to listen to those who should disparage the fame and character of Washington as to those who stand doubting and hesitating whether in honoring Kossuth we are really honoring the cause of liberty and the cause of his unfortunate country. [...]

I will notice a single other objection, and then I will leave this resolution to its fate. It is the apprehension that, by the adoption of this or a similar measure, the Congress of the United States would commit itself to some act of intervention in the affairs of Europe, by which the government of the United States may be embarrassed in its foreign relations. [...] If I saw in this measure a step in advance towards the bloody field of contention on the shores of Europe, I, too, would hesitate before I would vote for it. But I see no advance towards any such danger in doing a simple act of national justice and magnanimity.

I think that no man will deny the principle that a nation may do for the cause of liberty in other countries whatever the laws of nations do not forbid. I plant myself upon that principle – that what the laws of nations do not forbid any nation, may do for the cause of civil liberty in any other nation and country. Now, the laws of nations do not forbid hospitality, the laws of nations do not forbid sympathy with the exile – sympathy with the overthrown champion of freedom. [...] The laws of nature require, and the laws of nations demand hospitality to those who flee from oppression and despair. This is all that we have done, and all that we propose to do.<sup>9</sup>

Stephen Douglas called attention to the fact that Kossuth challenged European absolutism, the antipode of the basic principles the U.S. were built upon, and that he was a representative of world freedom. But even those showing the greatest sympathy and warmth towards Kossuth did not accept any suggestion of intervention for the cause of Hungary. Senator Cass said that while denouncing Russia's intervention was morally imperative, it did not mean that the U.S. would send a fleet to European waters. Senator Charles Sumner's maiden speech was perhaps the best expression of the feelings of the majority.

He deserves it [the invitation] as the early, constant, and incorruptible champion of the liberal cause in Hungary, who, while yet young, with unconscious power, girded himself for the contest, and by a series of masterly labors, with voice and pen, in parliamentary debates and in the discussions of the press, breathed into his country the breath of life. [...] Without equivocation, amidst the supporters of monarchy, in the shadow of a lofty throne, he proclaimed himself a republican, and proclaimed the republic as his cherished aspiration for Hungary. [...]

But an appeal has been made against the resolution on grounds which seem to me extraneous and irrelevant. It has been attempted to involve it with the critical question of intervention by our country in European affairs; and recent speeches in England and New York have been adduced to show that such intervention is sought by our guest. It is sufficient to say in reply to this suggestion, introduced by the senator from Georgia (Mr. Dawson) with a skill which all might envy – that no such intervention is promised or implied by the resolution. But I feel strongly on this point, and desire to go further.

While thus warmly joining in this tribute, let me be understood as in no respect encouraging any idea of armed intervention in European affairs. Such a system would open phials of perplexities and ills, which I trust our country will never be called to affront. In the wisdom of Washington we may find perpetual counsel. Like Washington, in his eloquent words to the minister of the French Directory, I would offer sympathy and God-speed to all, in every land, who struggle for human rights; but, sternly as Washington on another oc-

casion, against every pressure, against all popular appeals, against all solicitations, against all blandishments, I would uphold with steady hand the peaceful neutrality of the country. Could I now approach our mighty guest, I would say to him with the respectful frankness of a friend: "Be content with the out-gushing sympathy which you now so marvelously inspire everywhere throughout this wide-spread land, and may it strengthen your soul! Trust in God, in the inspiration of your cause, and in the great future, pregnant with freedom for all mankind. But respect our ideas, as we respect yours. Do not seek to reverse our traditional, established policy of peace. Do not, under the too plausible sophism of upholding non-intervention, provoke American intervention on distant European soil. Leave us to tread where Washington points the way."<sup>10</sup>

Finally on December 12 the Senate adopted Seward's motion with Shield's (Ill.) modification: Kossuth was to be received exactly like Lafayette had been. There was 36 vote for that and 6 – from the South – against. The House of Representatives concurred on December 15: 181 for and 16 against, with Rep. Smith from Alabama saying that if Kossuth continued to agitate against friendly Austria he should be arrested! All that shows that while the country came under the spell of the Hungarian leader, Congress overwhelmingly concurring, sectional interests and ideological concerns acted as a brake even in what was hardly more than a gesture.

Kossuth's train arrived in Washington on December 30. He was received by Senators Shield and Seward. Secretary Webster immediately visited him in his hotel, followed by the mayor and a large number of politicians and various associations, delegations. The House was still debating about the details of his reception. On the next day, December 31, Kossuth called upon President Fillmore. In a masterly speech he presented the case of Hungary, calling for help. The President expected only a courtesy call, so in his answer he told that he personally sympathized with Hungarian independence, but the policy of the Union would not abandon its traditions. This should not have been a surprise, but still it was a cold shower for Kossuth.

On January 7 Cass, Shields and Seward presented him to the Senate, and on the same day the House appointed three members to show him to the House. Kossuth's answer to the welcoming words of the Speaker was brief and non-controversial.

Sir: It is a remarkable fact in the history of mankind that while, through all the past, honors were bestowed upon glory, and glory was attached only to success. The legislative authorities of this great republic bestow the highest honors upon a persecuted exile, not conspicuous by glory, not favored by success, but engaged in a just cause. There is a triumph of republican principles of this fact.

Sir, in my own and my country's name, I thank the House of Representatives of the United States for the honor of this cordial welcome.<sup>11</sup>

On that evening a banquet was given by both Houses in Kossuth's honor, with 250 attending, including Webster and two other members of the cabinet. Kossuth's address was again non-controversial, extolling the virtues of self-government.

Happy is your great country, Sir, that it was selected by the blessing of the Lord to prove the glorious practicability of a federative union of many sovereign state, all preserving their state-rights and their self-government, and yet united in one.

Despite a few dissenting voices Kossuth's reception in Congress was exceptional in both form and substance. Nevertheless the political aims of the Hungarian leader were not met by the legislature, so he took his message to the country, embarking on a tour that took him as far as St. Louis in the West, New Orleans in the South and Boston in the North. There were moving outpourings of sympathy, and occasionally even the idea of intervention was endorsed. Much of the financial contributions were, however, spent by the local hosts on lavish hospitality – to the grief of Governor Kossuth.

Kossuth failed to accomplish any of his objectives in the United States: American foreign policy was not altered; the independence of Hungary was not recognized; the Anglo-American alliance did not become a reality; and the financial contributions did not meet his expectations. [...] Although the first three weeks of his visit were encouraging, the public did not respond to Kossuth's sustained efforts with sustained aid. [...]

Kossuth's goals were not always realistic, and often leant themselves to justifiable skepticism from the American public. Even if the public had been more receptive, however, America could not pursue the objectives Kossuth had desired. She was not prepared – either militarily, financially, or psychologically – for such a fundamental change in foreign policy. In essence, Kossuth was defeated both by the enormity of his task and by the factional opposition to his goals.<sup>12</sup>

John Komlos' judgement is valid only for the short run. The effort to bring about a fundamental change in U.S. foreign policy, to abandon neutrality and isolationism was bound to fail in 1852 – but wasn't Kossuth's only a premature but sound idea? Sixty-six years later, in 1917, the U.S. came to act exactly along the lines advocated by Kossuth, and President Wilson's principles echoed much of what Kossuth advocated in 1851 and 1852. Ninety years later the Atlantic Charter came

to embody the very principles first expressed by the Hungarian leader. When the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance was established in 1949, its basic principle and underlying philosophy, the idea to stand up jointly to aggression and to maintain the rule of law in international life, is also very close to the tenets proposed by Kossuth in the United States.

*Today the dreams of Kossuth have been realized: Hungary is a fully independent democracy, closely allied to a democratic Europe and to the United States, the country which inspired Kossuth and in his footsteps generations of Hungarians.*

### Notes

1. Joseph Széplaki, *Louis Kossuth, "The Nation's Guest"* (Ligonier, PA: Bethlen Press, 1976). The most complete account of Kossuth's tour is Dénes Jánossy, *A Kossuth-emigráció Angliában és Amerikában, 1851–1852* [The Story of the Hungarian Exiles Led by Kossuth in England and America, 1851–1852], 3 vols. (Budapest, 1940–1948); Donald S. Spencer, *Louis Kossuth and Young America. A Study in Sectionalism and Foreign Policy, 1848–1852* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1977); John H. Komlós, *Kossuth in America, 1851–1852* (Buffalo: East European Institute, 1973).
2. Steven Béla Várdy, "Epilogue" in *The Life of Governor Louis Kossuth with his Public Speeches in the United States* (New York, 1852). Reprinted by Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2001.
3. Mario M. Cuomo and Harold Holzer, eds, *Lincoln on Democracy* (New York, 1990).
4. Komlós, 7.
5. As the editor of the first popular daily newspaper in Hungary Kossuth established the reputation of the United States as a most successful country and as a political model. György Szabad, "On the Political System of the United States" in *Kossuth politikai pályája* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1977).
6. Newman, Francis W., ed., *Select Speeches of Kossuth. Condensed and Abridged, with Kossuth's Express Sanction* (New York: C. S. Francis & Co./Boston: Crosby, Nichols & Co., 1854), 45–74. This volume is now available on the Internet: <http://www.hrfa.org/kossuth/index.html> Cf. Komlós, 84–86.
7. Newman, 114–116.
8. Komlós, 87. Strangely these last words were left out from the Newman edition – most likely deliberately, because of the stir they caused.
9. Jánossy, vol. 2, 146–153.
10. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 154–158.
11. Dedication by the Congress of a Bust of Lajos (Louis) Kossuth. Proceedings in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda, March 15, 1990. 101st Congress, 2nd Session. House Doc. 101–168, 54–55.
12. Komlós, 139.