Is the Name *United States* Singular or Plural?*

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IT IS REMARKABLE that the name *United States*, with such a high frequency of usage, should still be unsettled in its grammatical relations. The language has many simple cases of divided usage; but this problem has multifold ramifications in American history. At the Lincoln celebration in 1958 in Galesburg, Illinois, Carl Sandburg declared, "The United States *is*, not *are*. The Civil War was fought over a verb."[1] Let us examine the background of this statement.

There can be no doubt about the usage of the Founding Fathers. John Adams was typical when he wrote in a letter of November 13, 1783, from London: "The United States are another object of debate."[2] In 1833 Richard Rush, who had been American minister in London, asked the rhetorical question: "When were the United States subdued by England?"[3] An American lawyer noted in 1848 that "The United States stretch over thousands of miles of territory."[4]

The early British usage followed the same pattern. The English attaché in Washington, D. C., in 1805 declared that the British ambassador and his wife were "bored to death with these United States."[5] In 1833 the Englishman Edward Gibbon Wakefield wrote, "The United States are still colonies, according to the sense in which the word is used here."[6] Charles Dickens, on his visit to this country in 1842, reported in a letter after leaving Pittsburgh, "And I am quite serious when I say that I do not believe there are, on the whole earth besides, so many

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[1] Reported by Herbert Mitgang in the New York *Times Magazine*, October 19, 1958, p. 27. Cf. also the New York *Post*, July 25, 1960, p. 23/3: "Carl Sandburg said last week that the Civil War was started over one word in the political platforms — whether it should be 'the United States is' or 'the United States *are*.'"

[2] *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston, 1853), VIII, 160.

[3] Richard Rush, *Memoranda of a Residence at the Court of London* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia, 1833), p. 220.

[4] Robert W. Russell, *America Compared with England* (London, 1848), p. xvii.

[5] Augustus John Foster, letter of September 2, 1805, in *Two Duchesses*, ed. Vere Foster (London, 1898), p. 238.

[6] Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *England and America* (London, 1833), II, 109.

intensified bores as in these United States."[7] In *Fraser's Magazine* in 1845 an Englishman wrote, "The United States of America are the greatest edifice ever achieved by the Anglo-Saxon race."[8]

Let us turn now to the statements of the commentators. The usage of the early period was classically established in the famous "Index Expurgatorius" of William Cullen Bryant, by which he sought to purify the journalistic writing in the New York *Post*. This list of forbidden terms had the entry, "*The United States*, as a singular noun."[9] Before the end of the century, however, a noted encyclopedist and professor of classics at Columbia University, Harry Thurston Peck, remarked on the radical change that had taken place. He wrote in 1899:

> Of late years "United States" has come to be employed in this country as a noun in the singular number, and this usage is entirely proper; for the term to most minds has ceased to have any suggestion of plurality about it, but is an expression for the nation as a whole, the unity of the thought blotting out the plurality of the form, and giving us, therefore, in two words a whole chapter of constitutional history; since fifty years ago, when particularism was in the ascendant, the plural verb was universally employed.[10]

He attributed this development, you will note, to the preceding 50 years.

When George Philip Krapp compiled his *Comprehensive Guide to Good English* in 1927, he included the succinct observation, "United States, n[oun], singular as the name of a country."[11] But four years later a doctrinaire writer recommended the exact opposite. In *Scribner's Magazine* for August, 1931, Struthers Burt made an impassioned plea for recognizing the diversity and variety of American regions. He backed this by the following linguistic suggestion:

> Perhaps the next thing we must learn to do, or rather, relearn, is to regard the United States, and speak of them, as they once regarded and spoke of themselves. . . . One should never speak of the United States as it, she or her. That is a bad habit and a psychological, historical and geographical mistake. If you have to use a pronoun, you should use these, or they.[12]

A sample of his own usage is this: "The United States are facts; you just can't argue them away or dismiss them."[13]

In 1949 a controversy on this subject broke out in the house organ of the Columbia University Press, and the editors of the *Columbia Encyclopedia* were appealed to. One of them took a straddling attitude, writing,

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[7] Letter of April 3, 1842, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Walter Dexter (London, 1938), I, 426.

[8] "England and Yankee-Land," in *Fraser's Magazine*, XXXII (October, 1845), 485.

[9] Printed by William Fraser Rae, *Columbia and Canada* (London, 1877), p. 58.

[10] Harry Thurston Peck, *What Is Good English?* (New York, 1899), p. 16.

[11] George Philip Krapp, *A Comprehensive Guide to Good English* (Chicago, 1927), p. 603.

[12] Struthers Burt, "This Subtle Land," in *Scribner's Magazine*, XC (August, 1931), 121.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

> Both are right. When we are thinking of the separate states and their varied characteristics, "these" is OK (but seems a little tritish). When we are thinking of the nation, singular. The English language is pretty flexible, e.g., "none is" or "none are."[14]

A second editor, however, offered a different solution:

> I think you should point out that in spite of your phraseology you are not an unreconstructed rebel. Now, of course, my grandpappy fought in grey — that is, he was a colonel but didn't really fight much — and naturally I approve the usage, these United States. I feel I'm offering an olive branch when I say "the United States has" instead of "the United States have." Seriously, though, the question is one of rhetoric, not one of patriotism. The proper usage is the one that would seem most normal to most Americans who speak the accepted form of the language. In this case, in which the object is to stress diversity not unity, I should think most educated Americans would expect "these." But who can say? Not the Gallup poll, certainly.[15]

It is curious how observers differ. It is especially revealing that he could say, "I should think most educated Americans would expect 'these.'"

H. W. Fowler in 1926 did not see fit to treat this problem, for no doubt it was not a problem to him. But when Margaret Nicholson revised his work in 1957 for an American audience, she included the following statement:

> In usual contexts *these United States* is not only archaic (or pompous) but also apt to lead to a wrong verb or pronoun. *These United States* must be plural; *the United States* is usually singular.[16]

In the same year her competitors Bergen Evans and his sister declared,

> But the *United States* is usually treated as a singular in English. We say *the United States is in North America.* The plural construction *these United States* is used, but it is felt to be poetic and it is avoided before a verb.[17]

A newspaper arbiter in 1959 was faced with the question: "Which is correct: the United States IS or ARE?" His answer attempted to discriminate between two meanings:

> There are a number of words that may be construed as either singular or plural; e.g., "series, species, alms, United States." In the case of U.S.A., use a singular verb when you are thinking of our combined states as a country: The United States has a population of . . . ; use a plural verb if you are thinking of our country in terms of individual states it is composed of: These United States are . . . . Ordinarily a singular verb is called for.[18]

The style manual of the United States Government Printing Office, in its latest revised edition (1959), included a model sentence with the

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[14] *The Pleasures of Publishing*, XVI, no. 1 (January 10, 1949), 1–2.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[16] Margaret Nicholson, *A Dictionary of American-English Usage* (New York, 1957), pp. 617–18.

[17] Bergen Evans and Cornelia Evans, *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (New York, 1957), p. 529.

[18] Carroll H. Jones, New York *Post*, November 12, 1959, p. 70, cols. 1–3.

clause, "if the United States is to have a stable economy."[19] The Merriam-Webster Third edition of 1961 in its entry *united states* notes, "pl[ural] but usu[ally] sing[ular] in constr[uction]."

Let us turn next to an examination of recent American usage. The usual form, "the United States is," is so well known to you that I need not cite examples of it. But the plural concord has a surprising amount of usage and deserves our consideration. It is my own feeling that most of the examples have a certain pretentiousness about them. The spirit of "now-I-take-my-pen-in-hand" leads to it, in the desire for a fine literary effect. In my less charitable moments, I regard it as arrant pedantry, on a par with *anybody's else* or *teeth-brush*. Clarence Stratton in his *Handbook of English* of 1940 expressed the situation well, saying, "Because of its archaic sound, speakers often use the phrase [in the plural] to add impressiveness to speeches."[20]

Let us now consider some sample quotations. Henry Van Dyke, in a conference of American and British professors of English at Columbia University in 1923, declared, "The native language of these United States is English."[21] Frank Lloyd Wright in his *Autobiography* of 1932 said that the Arizona desert will be "the playground for these United States some day."[22] Frank D. Graham, then president of the University of North Carolina, wrote in 1940, as war approached, "Without a British victory the world, these United States, can be, at best, but a workhouse or a prison."[23] Clyde Kluckhohn wrote in 1942, "The United States are unusual in their juxtaposition of the extreme of technological culture with groups which are still primitive."[24] A Roman Catholic prelate declared in 1943, "These men did not reflect that the Catholic Church has never been as free to prosecute her Divine Mission as in these United States."[25] A literary critic wrote in 1944, "I was given incontrovertible evidence that Seattle is really the literary center of these United States."[26] In the next year Elsa Maxwell said of President Roosevelt, "I believe him to be one of the greatest Presidents of these United States."[27] In 1947 Marya Mannes wrote, "Fifty to 70 million people in these United States read comic books regularly."[28] Max Lerner in a column in the

[19] *United States Government Printing Office Style Manual* (Revised ed.; Washington, D.C., 1959), p. 150.

[20] *Handbook of English* (New York, 1940), p. 325.

[21] Quoted in the New York *Times*, June 14, 1923, p. 7/2.

[22] Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York, 1932), p. 303.

[23] *The Nation*, October 5, 1940, p. 311/2.

[24] *Technology Review* (Mass. Inst. Technology), XLIV (February, 1942), 178.

[25] Francis E. McMahon, in *PM*, November 22, 1943, p. 4/2.

[26] L. E. Nelson, in Chicago *Sun Book Week*, December 3, 1944, p. 48/3.

[27] New York *Post*, March 7, 1945, p. 12/1.

[28] *New Republic*, February 17, 1947, p. 20/2.

New York *Post* has asked, "How did it happen that in so many years of wanderings among these United States, I have only now discovered New Orleans?"[29] Philip Wylie wrote in 1953, "These United States, conceived in liberty and dedicated to truth, are being assailed by the idea of communism."[30] Murray Kempton has said that the seniority system of the Senate has elected a senator "*de facto* president of these United States."[31] A supporter of Mayor Wagner declared in 1957, "These United States need more men like 'our mayor' in public office throughout our country!"[32] In a majority opinion of the Eighth Federal Circuit Court of Appeals, St. Louis, Judge Marion Matthes declared, "The time has not yet come in these United States when an order of a federal court must be whittled away, watered down, or shamefully withdrawn."[33]

I could continue with examples, but I trust that these are sufficient to demonstrate their nature. Most of them have a strongly oracular, orotund, magniloquent tone. These writers chose an archaic, abnormal pattern for rhetorical effect.

We may look next at some recent British quotations. In these there is no straining for effect, but the writers are simply carrying on an older tradition. Vera Brittain wrote, "The United States, at any rate, refused to resign themselves to adverse physical conditions."[34] On the floor of the House of Commons Hore-Belisha stated, "The United States are not a mercantile shipbuilding nation."[35] A. P. Herbert wrote, "We must say no more, in view of what the United States are doing just now."[36] Commander Stephen King-Hall has asked, "Why were the United States invented?"[37] An English Commonwealth fellow has recently stated, "The European lack of understanding of the U.S.A. is due largely to the United States themselves."[38] A professor at Oxford, A. J. P. Taylor, wrote in 1959, "The United States manage virtually without a closed period for public records."[39] This form of agreement is easy for the English partly because they are accustomed to say "The government are –," "The Corporation are –," etc. But Lawrence of Arabia expressed uncertainty in a letter to an American, by asking, "How is the States: or are the States?"[40]

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[29] New York *Post*, April 28, 1952, p. 24/1.

[30] *Saturday Review*, August 29, 1953, p. 25/1.

[31] New York *Post*, February 21, 1956, p. 50/2.

[32] Leah Steinfeld, *ibid.*, February 1, 1957, p. 37/4.

[33] Quoted *ibid.*, August 20, 1958, Mag. section, p. 4/1.

[34] Vera Brittain, *Honourable Estate* (New York, 1936), p. 564.

[35] *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), November 27, 1940, in *Penguin Hansard*, IV, 87.

[36] On April 1, 1941, *ibid.*, IV, 54.

[37] *North American Diary* (London, 1949), p. 10.

[38] A. Geoffrey Woodhead, in *Cousins and Strangers*, ed. S. G. Putt (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p. 5.

[39] *Encounter*, December, 1959, p. 87.

[40] Thomas Edward Lawrence, letter of December 2, 1932, to F. N. Doubleday, in *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, ed. David Garnett (London, 1938), p. 754.

A secondary problem arises when the states are referred to separately. A well-spoken American feels that he has to say, "one of the states of the United States," while an Englishman tends to say, "one of the United States." This is an old dilemma. Even in 1838 a British traveler, David Stevenson, wrote, "These fertile valleys include nine of the United States of America."[41] Two years later James Mather, in a lecture given at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, said, "It may not appear improper to remind you, that each of the United States of America established a government for itself."[42] Even the editors of the *OED* fell into this pattern. Under *assembly*, the definition is "the name given to the legislature in some of the United States of America." And under *hamlet*, "In some of the United States, the official designation of an incorporated place smaller than a village."

Americans seldom fall into this pattern, although I did discover the following in the program at a Broadway theatre a few weeks ago, in the biography of a certain actor: "He has ... played in thirty-six of the fifty United States."[43]

A somewhat similar problem involves the term *Church of England*: an individual church must be referred to as "a church of the Church of England." The following colloquy, recorded by an Englishman, illustrates this: "'What is that church?' I asked a lady. Her reply was so unfathomably silly that I have never forgotten it. 'It is a church,' she said, 'of England.'"[44]

A rather rare eccentricity is found in the phrase *United State*. Thus, in Rome, an English correspondent of a London weekly in 1889 wrote concerning the American pilgrims there: "There were some from New York and some from Ohio, and some from Colorado, and some from Baltimore, and some from Illinois, and others from every existing United State."[45] In 1952 an Italian boy actor was quoted as saying the same sort of thing: "'The son of the Comtessa,' Vittorio reported, 'is 48 – one year for each United State.'"[46]

More surprising still is the suggestion that the country should change its name to *United State*. This indeed would solve the grammatical problem. The first glimmering of this that I have found is in an essay written in 1874 by a Scot, a cousin of the Duke of Argyle, J. F. Campbell. De-

[41] *Sketch of the Civil Engineering of North America* (London, 1838), p. 98.

[42] *Two Lectures, Delivered at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on the Constitutions and Republican Institutions of the United States* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1840), p. 28.

[43] *Playbill*, II, No. 2 (February, 1965), p. 34, at the Billy Rose Theatre.

[44] *Times Literary Supplement* (London), July 19, 1957, p. 436/2.

[45] The Rome correspondent of the London *Tablet*, quoted in *American Notes and Queries*, III (May 4, 1889), 12.

[46] New York *Post*, April 28, 1952, p. 33/1.

scribing American energy, especially as manifested in Oregon, he wrote, "The attractions and repulsions which drag and drive humanity ... tend to combine all men in one great future coming United State according to some philosophers here. Theirs is the 'Go-a-head' philosophy"[47]

But in 1881 a New Englander, C. H. J. Douglass, attempted to consolidate the results of the Civil War by suggesting the name *United State of America*. He wished that the founders of the country had adopted this form. As he wrote:

> It would have been more in accord with the principles of modern political science, perhaps, if the framers of the Declaration had seen fit to use the singular, *state*, instead of the plural, *states*; but they followed strictly the analogy of the "United Provinces of the Netherlands," and the "United Colonies of New England."[48]

He wished to squeeze out any hint of nullification or secession lurking in the plural *States*. He concluded his essay:

> Had the fathers of the republic chosen a specific instead of a generic name, they would have called the country the United Republic of America; but they chose instead the more comprehensive term ...; and if, as is sometimes whispered, the Republican party in the United States should at some future time ... transform the republic into an empire, their Democratic friends may derive some consolation from the assurance that our future emperor will be under no necessity of changing the national name — a name dear to every American — for it would still be the
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> UNITED STATE OF AMERICA.[49]

In 1942 an editor of *Time*, in searching for a heading to a discussion of national unity, hit upon the title, "United State."[50] In 1957 Randolph Churchill issued a *jeu d'esprit* that purported to tell of conditions in America in the year 2000. He began, "It is with pleasure that I accede to the request of *Encounter* to describe my recent visit to the United State."[51] He explained this development:

> It was as recently as 1975 that the Re-Founding Fathers, meeting in Philadelphia under the chairmanship of Mr. Adlai Stevenson, logically decided that ... the United States should cease to be plural. They were singularised by the 25th Amendment to the Constitution. In consequence, this amendment changed the name of the Flag to "Star and Stripe."[25]

Now a concluding word on form: the name *United States* developed from a description, and at first had the grammatical characteristics of a descriptive label. As it came to be accepted as a proper name, however, it developed the concord of a proper name. Probably it was vulgar at

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[47] J. F. Campbell, *My Circular Notes* (London, 1876), I, 162.

[48] C. H. J. Douglass, "Our National Name — What Does It Mean?" in the *New Englander*, XL (September, 1881), 631.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 634.

[50] *Time*, April 20, 1942, p. 8/3.

[51] "The Queendom of the United State," in *Encounter*, IX, No. 6 (December, 1957), 19/1.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 20/2.

first to say "the United States is," but my material is not close-meshed enough to have caught this stage. In the latter decades of the last century, the strengthening of the federal ties caused the singular to become accepted in ordinary use. The English have held out against it, together with some Americans who prided themselves on their literary flourish.

The final stage of becoming a proper name would occur when *United States* drops the article. On rare occasions I have heard the colloquial form, "He lives in United States" or "He came to United States many years ago"; but I have not encountered this usage in print. (An exception is the application to language, the jocular "He talks United States.")

Students of usage will want to watch the name *United States* carefully. Its grammar has been in a fluid condition for a long time, and trends are deserving of close study. We must keep tab on them.

Columbia University

ANS ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting of the American Name Society will be held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association at the New York Hilton Hotel, December 28 and 29, 1974:

Dec. 28, 8:30 a.m., Room 517: Reading of Papers

1 p.m., Room 517: Executive Committee Meeting

2 p.m., Room 517: Place-name Survey Committee Meeting

7 p.m., Surrey Room, Warwick Hotel (54th Street and Sixth Avenue): Annual Banquet

Dec. 29, 8 a.m., — 4:30 p.m., Room 529: Reading of Papers