

The Nature of Foreign Policy

THOUGH HIS INTELLECTUAL INTERESTS MAY BE SEVERELY limited, the average American likes to be informed on what does concern him. He knows, for instance, why the fielders shift position when a left-handed batter steps to the plate. He usually understands the principles underlying radio and television. He has some idea of what is wrong when the family car refuses to operate. His folk heroes are those who have been most adept in the practical application of theoretical knowledge—the Bells, Edisons, Fords, McCormicks and Wrights.

This ability to see the implications of a principle, in work or play, is well defined as “know-how”. It was, until fairly recently, apparent in our politics, as in every other national activity. During the past twenty years, however, the ancient European practice of glamorizing government has steadily encroached upon the national critical faculty in politics. As a result comprehension is dulled, mistakes of leadership go undetected and a sense of frustration has gradually overcome a people who were once both schooled and skilled in self-government.

When there was general understanding of the principle of checks and balance, no Chief Executive ever presumptuously defined a Congress as “good” or “bad” according to the degree of its subservience to him. When

the nature of the Federal Republic was still appreciated, no Senator who opposed extension of centralized power could be termed "reactionary" for that reason alone.

The present uncritical attitude towards political problems has kept many people from realizing the magnitude of the change already effected in our institutions. Those who urge the progressive intervention of government in business were once accurately and dispassionately known as "Socialists". But most American Socialists now describe themselves as "liberals", although that designation for a believer in State planning is directly opposite to the historic meaning of the word. There is no doubt that this type of semantic duplicity, or double-talk, has been politically influential.

There is equally little doubt that much of the confusion in our political thought today stems from this conflict between the citizen's natural desire to understand governmental problems and the alien idea that people are not really citizens, but subjects whose whole duty is to do what the State commands. If the latter theory continues to triumph there will be no room, in any field of endeavor, for the questioning attitude that is basic to American "know-how". The lingering faith in the value of freedom of expression is not enough. Some comprehension of what has been happening is also essential.

While confusion of thought is now pronounced in every sphere of politics, it is particularly obvious, and especially dangerous, in that area of politics called foreign policy. This has become the area of greatest domestic political tension, in which the gap between official

direction and wholehearted public acceptance is now so wide that reconciliation has become imperative.

There are of course many reasons for the widening of this chasm between the thinking of those who lead and of those who must follow in the field of foreign policy. Its problems are, by nature, remote from the experience of the average citizen. Though habitually well-informed about their own communities, most Americans seldom even pretend to know anything about Inner Mongolia, Upper Silesia or the Outer Hebrides. There is much more curiosity than xenophobia in the national attitude towards that which is foreign. But intellectual curiosity is seldom satisfied by the so-called "experts", generally more inclined to expound than to explain.

Factors other than the plethora of inconsequential details tend to make a mystery of foreign policy, and to conceal the shape of the wood behind the foliage of countless trees. In the absence of comprehensible analysis and effective criticism, the necessarily monopolistic conduct of foreign policy can easily become a vested interest. Its practitioners tend to assume the prerogatives of a close-knit priesthood, too readily identifying their conclusions with the general welfare. The validity of that assumption, however, becomes more questionable as the number of tax dollars spent on foreign policy mounts to astronomical figures.

Actually, the foreign policy of a government is neither a gigantic bluff, developed to swindle the taxpayer, nor is it an esoteric art requiring both a special intelligence and a special wardrobe. There are certain fundamental factors common to the diplomacy of every sovereign

power, regardless of its time in history or its place in geography. There are also certain special factors, such as its type of government, or its dependence on a flow of imports, that must affect the foreign policy of any single nation continuously. Finally, there is the political objective of any particular regime at any particular time, which can be ascertained much more clearly from the actions of its leaders than from their words.

Of the importance of foreign policy to the American people there is no longer any question. During the first half of the present century the relations of the United States with other sovereignties rapidly attained a primary importance. The manner in which our foreign policy is planned and directed has now become literally a matter of life or death, to every American family.

It is therefore timely and appropriate to approach the subject of American foreign policy in an American way, by attempting to show, as simply and directly as possible, what it is all about. This effort will require some consideration of political principles and more than passing reference to historical background. It will also demand forthright consideration of contemporary events. Those who merely theorize disregard practice. Those who merely describe practice overlook the importance of theory.

The triumph of American know-how has been in its characteristic ability to blend and combine the two.

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IN SPITE OF THE LONG EFFORT to establish international law, and two great co-operative attempts to make it effective through international organization, the control of human destiny, politically speaking, is still divided among many more or less independent governments. Their relationships, one to another, may at any given moment be amicable, antagonistic, or indifferent. But they are never static.

Foreign policy is the governmental conduct of the relations of one political sovereignty with others. It is an art, in the sense that this policy is always affected by emotional, sometimes even by wholly irrational, considerations. But foreign policy is also a science, in the sense that predictable results follow from predisposing causes. Those results may be wholly unforeseen by the great mass of mankind and wholly unwelcome to them as individuals. The event that human action has made inevitable, however, is indifferent alike to the regrets and to the recriminations of men.

Sovereign states are always potentially rival or contending states. None should appreciate that truism better than Americans, from their own domestic history. Our Civil War, still known in the South as "the war between the states", was possible only because of the large degree of sovereignty retained by these quasi-independent Commonwealths when the original Constitution established "a more perfect", but still imperfect, union.

Rivalry and contention among sovereignties not subject to a common law can always lead to war, which is the final arbitrament of disputes between independent governments. The potential extent of conflict is determined by the number of sovereignties. It is readily ascertainable from the formula: $x = \frac{n(n-1)}{2}$, in which "n" represents the number of sovereign governments and "x" the number of wars which could theoretically be waged by all of them at any given time.

The application of this formula is startling. It shows that if the 48 states of our Federal Union were free to fight each other, no fewer than 1128 internecine wars could be raging simultaneously within the confines of our continental boundaries. If Alaska and Hawaii were also possessed of full sovereign statehood, the number of wars theoretically possible within these disunited states would jump to 1225.

The *Statesman's Year Book* currently lists 70 separate sovereignties, even when Australia, Canada, Eire, New Zealand and South Africa are regarded as dependencies within the British Commonwealth. Applying the formula to these 70 nations, we learn that a maximum of 2415 wars could be carried on simultaneously in the world as politically organized today. As such absolute anarchy is highly improbable, even though theoretically possible, it can at least be said that the actual political condition of a world of contending states is better than it might be.

The unlikely number of possible wars is of course reached only by assuming such seemingly fantastic conflicts as Hungary vs. Haiti; Uruguay vs. Luxemburg;

Lebanon vs. Thailand. Yet one remembers that only recently the United States was at war with Romania, and Nicaragua with Germany. As distance is cut down by improved communications, and as parochial happenings tend to have a more universal effect, the probability of disputes between any two or more sovereignties increases. This tendency is not lessened by the domination of rival Great Powers over smaller sovereignties of satellite status. Unhappily it is no longer preposterous to visualize Hungarians at war with Haitians, if the foreign policy of the former is under Russian, of the latter under American, direction.

The impact of modern invention has made proximity a relative matter and the record of history indicates that neighboring sovereignties have always been prone to resort to war. A distinguished archaeologist tells us that: "Almost the oldest legible documents . . . describe wars between the adjacent cities of Lagash and Umma [in Mesopotamia] for the possession of a strip of frontier territory."¹

Belligerency was certainly endemic among the city-states of ancient Greece. Epidaurus and Troezene, in the Peloponnesus, were only fourteen miles apart. We know that they fought each other, with periods of recuperative tranquility, for more than seven centuries. There was no enduring peace in this region until the Romans took over both the rival towns, in 146 B.C. Contemporary evidence shows a similar record of almost constant conflict between Plataea and Thebes, and other Greek

¹ V. Gordon Childe: *What Happened in History* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books; 1948), p. 100.

neighbors less far apart, and less well-known, than the two classic antagonists: Athens and Sparta.²

Conventional European history is indeed largely a gloomy compilation of the continuous and kaleidoscopic conflicts of city-states, ancient empires, feudal baronies and modern nations. This continuous belligerency has been so pronounced as to lead some European scholars to maintain that history is only the record of the relations between independent sovereignties. Spengler asserts flatly that: "domestic politics exist simply in order that foreign politics may be possible."³

Americans, proud of the domestic political experimentation that produced this Republic, are loath to accept so sweeping an interpretation. Nevertheless, it cannot be lightly dismissed. American domestic history, from the establishment of independence to the end of the Civil War, is very largely the story of not always amicable relations between quasi-independent states. After the issue of secession was decided the stronger Federal sovereignty moved very quickly, as the historian measures time, into its present commanding but exposed position on the international stage.

² Cf. Edward Lucas White: *Why Rome Fell* (New York: Harper & Brothers; 1927), Ch. 3.

³ Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 1928), Vol. II, p. 398.

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OUR FIRST STEP is to understand the theory of foreign policy as it really is, rather than as a particular government wishes its application of that theory to be visualized.

The unemotional objectivity necessary for this task is attainable in examining the relationships of Athens and Sparta; or of Carthage and Rome. It is not so easy in the case of the Crusades, where religious prejudice still enters, despite the passage of hundreds of years. The fighting between England and Spain in the Sixteenth Century, two centuries before the idea of the United States took form, receives differing interpretations from Catholic and Protestant historians. And it is utterly futile to expect a detached attitude, in either country, concerning the present bitter antagonism between the United States and Soviet Russia.

Much as a family, divided within itself, unites to resist external pressures, so—only far more so—a nation unites to defend itself against any foreign impingement. This is not merely a matter of supporting that which is familiar against the influence of that which is strange, and therefore subject to mistrust. The whole weight and power of government is also exercised, and increasingly exercised, to keep its supporters from being impartial in any serious international dispute.

This governmental characteristic is common to both democratic and totalitarian states. Indeed in the former, where freedom of expression is generally permitted, the

effort to make the official viewpoint dominant is likely to be even more intensive than in the case of a dictatorship, which can assume that few will dare to question the prevalent party line. Under representative government there is more social, and under a dictatorship more political, pressure to conform. But in both cases the pressures must be injurious, and can be fatal, to the scientific spirit.

This situation makes it essential that any candid examination of the nature of foreign policy be detached from national bias. It must concentrate on *Das Ding an sich*—the thing itself. Then, after the basic characteristics of foreign policy are understood, it is appropriate and helpful to apply the critical faculty to the manifestations of a particular case.

When a doctor diagnoses, and when a surgeon operates, they free themselves from personal prejudice towards the object of their ministrations. It is the ailment that the doctor seeks to locate, or the tumor that the surgeon seeks to excise, regardless of whether the patient is a friend or stranger. Indeed, simply to safeguard that professional objectivity, there is a generally accepted convention restraining the physician from treating those near and dear to him.

The record strongly indicates that some malignant force has always operated in the relations of all sovereign governments with each other, wholly regardless of their form and structure. If that malignancy is to be detected, as a step towards cure, the approach to the problem must be as detached and scientific as is that of the medical profession. In that spirit we proceed.