

CRITICISMS OF U. S. POLICY

An Age of Enthusiasm Seems to Have Passed

William Pfaff

It is difficult not to see elements of desperation and despair in much that is being said about the international situation. This is a time when events seem in the saddle; when attempts to control the technology of destruction seem all but hopeless; when American policies founded largely upon good will seem failing, and a major part of the world turns from us in disillusionment and often in hatred.

The debate over our policy has deepened in recent months; and in what has been said it is possible to distinguish two kinds of comment. There is the evaluation of specific policies, often including remarks on our national temper and the fundamentals of our policy, but focussed upon issues. The Rockefeller and Gaither reports (the latter so far as it has been made known) deal with measures to be taken, rather than with the meaning of our policy itself. Then there have been statements which implicitly question our policy itself in its conception, style and execution.

The most spectacular of the latter were the Reith Lectures, delivered over the BBC by George F. Kennan and published this month in this country by Harper's. These talks by the former American ambassador to Moscow had an entirely unexpected impact on European opinion, and the positions argued by Mr. Kennan have found substantial support in this country as well as abroad. Much that he said has had currency before this, but it has not been given such an eloquent and comprehensive statement.

At about the same time that Mr. Kennan was speaking to the British public, Dr. Robert Oppenheimer was publishing in *Foreign Affairs* (January) what he called "An Inward Look." This was an analysis—not a very optimistic analysis—of the condition of our culture and the standards of our education.

Dr. Oppenheimer wrote in the context of the international crisis and his remarks raised very serious questions about the meaning of our policy, and particularly about the quality of our government's intellectual response to a profoundly changing situation. In a way, Dr. Oppenheimer went more deeply than Mr. Kennan, for he defined a cultural problem to

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which Kennan, in his lectures on the political state of the world, was implicitly responding.

Mr. Kennan's talks were quite specific. In addition to Soviet affairs, he dealt with Eastern Europe, the non-European world, the military situation, and NATO, and with general issues in the context of these concrete situations. But his proposals were tentative ("what I have tried to suggest here is not what governments should do, but what they should think about") and the weight of his comment (and the reason for its reception) was a general critique.

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The interdependence of peoples—fostered by modern communications—was once regarded as a hopeful thing, but is proving rather to be a very dangerous one. Little can happen in the relations of two states without the world feeling some repercussions. Weapons technology has so enlarged the disasters within our power to create that no one in the world can feel altogether secure. It has been argued that nuclear weapons have created a situation new in kind: "there is no alternative to peace" is the facile statement of it.

Similarly, the development of communications has created an unprecedented political situation. There are new political and intellectual as well as military dimensions. Dr. Oppenheimer says, "It seems to me that both the variety and rate of change in our lives are likely to increase, that our knowledge will keep on growing, perhaps at a faster and faster rate, and that change itself will tend to be accelerated. In describing this world, there will probably be no synopses to spare us the effort of detailed learning. I do not think it likely that we are in a brief interval of change and apparent disorder which will soon be ended. The cognitive problem seems to me unprecedented in scope, one not put in this vast form to any earlier society, and one for which only the most general rules of behavior can be found in the past."

Mr. Kennan, in his lectures, makes an instinctually conservative response: in recommending a very wide political "disengagement" he would resist a trend that tends to drive political affairs beyond rational control.

The second problem he raises is not unrelated. It is the place of non-rational elements in the creation and execution of foreign policy. "Non-rational elements" is a heavy way to put it, but I mean to include ideology, morality and sentiment. Kennan's strictures on morality in foreign policy were widely discussed at the time his *Realities of American Foreign Policy* was published. He has insisted that when he says "morality," he means precisely that; that while he is no enemy of ethics, he has the gravest doubts about founding foreign policies on anything other than the pragmatic considerations of a nation's self-interest.

Sentiment and emotion have always had a role in policy, but the size of the role has been swollen by modern communications and, of course, by democracy. Toward totalitarian ideology, which has so corrupted modern politics, we can do little other than attempt to blunt and contain its irrationality. But to have irrational, or non-rational, elements playing a very large part in our own policy formulations is disturbing to a man like Kennan, who regards reason and pragmatism as the only safe foundation for a foreign policy.

It was in the 1940s and '50s that the role of sentiment in American foreign policy reached full-tide. Those were the days of the Atlantic Charter and the creation of the United Nations; of unconditional surrender; of the liberal ascendancy in American politics.

There were many parts to the mood of those times, sober and prudent elements as well as profoundly generous ones, but the dominant note was progressivist optimism—a conviction that evil could be localized and stamped out, leaving "the good people" to live in peace.

It was in this mood that contemporary American foreign policy had its origins. The policy was versatile. It posed a hard challenge—containment—to Soviet expansionism, and in Asia and the Middle East conducted a policy of deep involvement, of economic, technical and military aid intended to assist nations in constructing or re-constructing their economies and improving the living conditions of their populations.

The policy succeeded in the first of the postwar years. Despite the American failures in dealing with the Chinese Communist revolution and the Palestinian dispute, the Asian belief in American good will and disinterestedness prevailed. We made a constructive contribution to Asian interests, our reputation was good, and our own interest in the stability of these nations was consequently served.

Trouble, of course, was inevitable. Involvement cannot but carry with it rather serious frictions. But

the trouble did not assume serious proportions until the 1950s. Since then it has multiplied until today the American situation in Asia and the Middle East is one which must dismay any American who visits the area.

Generalizations are always vulnerable, but they can be suggestive, and I would propose these: The liberal Asian policy of the United States succeeded in the '40s because the optimistic vision of the policy was in large measure shared by the leaders and intellectuals of Asia, and the policy was confidently executed by the United States. There was a belief in the policy, its assumptions had the sympathy of influential Asians, and in practice it met the self-interest of Asian nations. Events, however, shake any system. The primary reason for the loss of efficacy of American policy was an American loss of confidence in that policy. The critical event was the presidential election of 1952.

James Reston once remarked that the postwar American alliance with Europe was in fact an alliance between European governments and the Democratic party. The Republican party, out of office for twenty years, assumed national power with no clearly formulated alternative to existing foreign policy, but with a distrust of the assumptions of that existing policy. The party had devoted a major part of its energy for two decades to criticism of the Democratic conduct of foreign affairs. It had a profound distrust of progressivism, even though its own programs leaned heavily upon what was, in fact, the dominant American mood.

Those Republicans who enthusiastically supported international involvements made up a minority of the party, and while they sponsored and elected an "internationalist" President, they did so only through a short-lived alliance with the remainder of the party. There is little point in reviewing the battles over the Korean truce, Senator McCarthy, foreign aid and the balanced budget. The result was that a visionary policy lost its élan.

Mr. Dulles himself came from a background profoundly different from those of his Democratic predecessors. A religious man, he had little use for the clichés of progressivist optimism. A man whose life had been spent in international law and diplomacy, one of a family with a strong diplomatic tradition, he had a deep respect for the element of power in international affairs, and a distrust of programs which did not have their roots in the realities of power. A man with the sense to recognize the risks of domestic politics, he intended to maintain good relations with Congress and the public, even if, at times, this had to be done at the expense of policy. In place of the liberal vision, Mr. Dulles had a religiously-inspired

confidence in the success of the right and the true. This seems not unlike the liberal conviction, but it is not at all the same thing.

The change in the management—and in the confidence—of our policy coincided with an inevitable loss of momentum in the policy's workings. International relationships were changing, and American policy, operating within the terms established in the 1940s, failed to change with events.

The most critical changes—influencing Asia—came in East Europe and the Soviet Union. Events unsettled the pattern which had been imposed upon Europe by Stalinism and the Western response to it. With the pattern disturbed, it became possible to speculate about fundamental change. The Soviet Union gave some encouragement to this speculation while, in its actions, it attempted to control if not to suppress change. Mr. Dulles would have had an easier career had developments in the East not made liberation a real issue.

Stalin's death, followed by a limited relaxation of terror throughout the bloc, the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party and the signing of the Austrian treaty set off an intellectual and political ferment which climaxed in the 1956 "October events" in Poland and the Hungarian Revolution. The satellite peoples had regained the national consciousness and confidence which had been drained from them by the war and by Stalinist terror. They reasserted their identities against the alien forms and policies imposed by the Soviet occupation.

American policy was unprepared for this. Some rapid adjustments were made to help the Poles (\$193 million in credits and loans and a relaxation of restrictions on travel and trade). But for the Hungarians, there was nothing beyond words.

Discussion had, however, earlier begun in some Western circles of the possibility of exploiting the new situation in Eastern Europe. The principal contention was that the satellites had become, militarily and economically, more liability than advantage to the Soviet Union. Hence if the Soviet Union could be assured of their "friendly" neutrality—a territorial cushion against foreign land attack—the USSR might be willing to negotiate a kind of Finnish status for them and withdraw the Red Army. Military withdrawal is the essential first step in any kind of significant change for East Europe, and now—the proponents of this argument said—there was at least some possibility that it might be negotiated.

The plan was not given serious public recognition in Washington. The official position was that any

Western military concession in Europe would have incalculable consequences upon the security of the West. Unspoken until late 1957 was the missile argument: Soviet intercontinental missiles promised to bring the United States under danger of attack at a time when the West still would have only intermediate range missiles requiring European or African bases.

(There is, of course, a more general argument against military disengagement, voiced mainly in Great Britain—most recently by Air Marshal Sir John Slessor and G. H. Hudson. It is that the stability of the world situation depends upon clearly-drawn frontiers. The examples of Korea and Berlin are mentioned as instances of trouble beginning in places where the interests of the two great powers were not explicitly defined. This argument contends that withdrawal from Eastern and Central Europe would bring a time of instability and rivalry that easily could involve the prestige of the major powers.)

These are substantial arguments, but they failed to prove conclusive; limited military withdrawal which did not involve a complete American evacuation of the European continent, North Africa and Great Britain, remained within the area of speculation, but the United States refused to discuss it.

The American refusal to explore the idea of disengagement has fed the restlessness of West Europeans and the disillusionment of the people of the East. That there are substantial arguments against the plan is irrelevant so long as the world is given the impression that American policy is not open to argument. Appearance can be almost as damaging as reality. The silence on this issue has permitted the Soviet Union to reap very great propaganda advantages by ceaselessly advocating a plan that it may never have intended to fulfill.

More general questions are suggested by the American policy failures in Asia and the Middle East. It would be foolish to argue that any policy could have given us a completely satisfactory relationship with the new Asian and Middle Eastern nations. The kind of nationalism found, for example, in Egypt, is almost surely too extravagant for any real accommodation to be possible. The factors of hysteria, demagoguery and ambition are too strong here—as in the politics of some other Asian and Middle Eastern states—for anything but an uncertain and uneasy relationship, even if Communism did not complicate matters.

America's Asian policy under Mr. Dulles has been to provide military assistance and alliance against Communist military aggression. It has proved an un-

satisfactory program because Soviet, Chinese or satellite invasion is regarded as a threat only in Turkey, Iran, Formosa, South Korea and South Viet Nam. A somewhat larger number of Asian states have had experience with Communist subversion, supported from abroad, but few of these have thought it advantageous to ally themselves with the United States. I do not think that it is unfair to say that a number of those Asian and African states which are allied with us have signed primarily because economic and military aid was available for the signature, and because the American link could be useful in disputes which were essentially unrelated to the Communist issue.

There is a serious question—raised by Mr. Kennan among others—as to how deeply we prudently can involve ourselves in the affairs of Asia. However, if we are to involve ourselves at all, we must, to be effective, deal with the real concerns of these governments. Soviet invasion is not such a concern for most of the non-European world. If we define our interest in Asia as the stability of the area, we must concern ourselves with the regional and national causes of instability. An insistence upon defining problems in Cold War terms serves only to inflate problems to Cold War size, to the advantage, perhaps, of the governments involved, but to the disadvantage of the United States.

The policy of alliances has been an expression of something more general—of a tendency to insist that nations declare themselves either for us or against us, an impatience expressed in Mr. Dulles' remarks on the morality of neutralism. It has been paralleled by an exercise of power: we have made use of a policy of economic sanctions coupled with diplomatic relations of bare politeness to pressure neutrals whose neutralism inclines Eastward. This use of power has much precedent. But to work it must be consistent, and Mr. Dulles has not been able to afford consistency. While he has disapproved of neutralism, he has cared very much about what happens to the neutrals.

I think it is true to say that the instinct that animates Mr. Dulles' policy is one of moral outrage at Communism and its works, and the essence of the policy itself has been to mobilize the world against Communism. There is little room in this scheme for those who do not wish to commit themselves. The effect is to enlarge the power division of the world.

It is in this that we reach the central difference between Mr. Dulles' policy and the criticism put forward by Mr. Kennan. It is a matter of the scope of the undertaking. Mr. Dulles shares the enthusiasm

and confidence of the liberal ascendancy, and it is because he too is attempting to shape something—to make the world into something that today it is not. Mr. Kennan—the conservative—shrinks from such an undertaking, as he shrank from the liberal zeal for creating a world government a decade ago. He sees us as engaging ourselves in affairs which we cannot possibly control, at a time when the momentum of technology and propaganda works to drive events away from the rational control of governments.

Kennan's counsel, then, is disengagement: disengagement in Europe in the hope that the East Europeans will thus have some opportunity to work out their fate in an area where neither of the great powers is so significantly committed as to be compelled to interfere with force. He wants disengagement in Asia on grounds that our involvement is excessive, and is often undignified and unhelpful. He sees our engagement in Asia and the Middle East as inflaming and enlarging rather than limiting local troubles. Fundamentally, he asks a reduction of the present political polarization of the world. He would see the power blocs separated by many smaller powers, free to pursue their own interests without engaging the United States or Russia. He sees the world as a safer place when the two great powers will not be committed by prestige or alliance to a role in virtually every dispute in the political world.

This has been called neo-isolationism and it unquestionably has roots in the same instinctive distrust of visionary politics and in the same skepticism about an American ability to improve the world, that animated some of the isolationism of the '30s. To the degree that the American isolationist movement was a protest against enthusiasm in policy, it resembles the Kennan position; he wants no part of enthusiasm, whether it be liberal, reform or moral. But to call Mr. Kennan isolationist in any real definition is nonsense. If any name is to be pinned on his recommendations, it ought to be quietism, and that is, of course, a glancing definition. Mr. Kennan can be accused of the mood of quietism, not of the heresy.

The mood corresponds to a significant element in the national temper today. There is a widespread sense both of frustration at what actually is happening in the world and of disillusion with the failure of two decades of American enthusiasm to make the world measurably better than it was. This mood, however, has genuinely isolationist characteristics. Mr. Kennan makes a rationalist protest against action taken without a clear understanding of goals and implications. It would be irony indeed if his remarks were to encourage a withdrawal, a disengagement, equally innocent of understanding and comprehended goals.