

MORAL CHOICES IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

"The Universal Practice is to Justify Evil Measures by Claiming They Serve Ethical Goals"

Kenneth W. Thompson

Three contemporary problems in American foreign policy illustrate in graphic terms the moral dilemmas that confront any state in the conduct of foreign relations. Every American President since George Washington has proclaimed the Republic's devotion to democracy both here and abroad. One of our greatest Presidents, Woodrow Wilson, led the country in a crusade to "make the world safe for democracy." The Eisenhower administration in 1952 rededicated itself to the liberation of subject peoples in eastern Europe from tyranny and oppression. By April 29, 1958, however, Vice President Nixon in replying to a question why the United States supported dictatorships in Latin America observed: "If we openly discriminate between one government and another in Latin America, what would we be charged with? We would be charged with interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and with trying to impose our system of government on them."

Democracy is the moral choice of the American peoples no less for Mr. Nixon than for President Eisenhower and his forerunners. In practice, however, the application of a moral principle like support of democracy confronts serious obstacles when it clashes with another principle like respect for national sovereignty. The first moral dilemma with which every state must contend arises because any policy or action in relations among states entails not the application of a single principle but the adjustment of several principles.

The second moral dilemma stems from the discrepancy between man's role as man contrasted with man's role as a responsible public official. This distinction which so often has been repugnant to Western thinking persists in the present debate over disarmament and cessation of nuclear tests. It is plainly the duty of the private citizen to declare himself with conviction and, hopefully, intelligence, on the perils of nuclear testing as he sees them. Any risk to mankind is appropriately his concern.

By contrast, the policy-maker must walk the lonely path of the responsible official who in his decision to continue or terminate the tests must place first the

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safety and security of the 172 million people for whom he speaks. The anguish of his moral dilemma rests in the peculiarities of his responsible position where whatever his private compassion over hazards to future generations, he must place first the safety of his nation—its defense against destruction and attack.

The third moral dilemma takes root in the ambiguous relationship between force and peace in international relations. This predicament is illustrated most graphically by the dilemmas of the thermonuclear age. If our leaders had occasion to learn anything from over two centuries of national experience, it was that foreign policy divorced from strength is likely to be impotent. Following two world wars, the United States dismantled its military establishment as an evidence of its peaceful intentions and goodwill. In both cases, aggressive forces bent on expansion seized on these acts to press forward into areas defenseless against their power.

Both Germany and the Soviet Union imposed their will upon helpless nations that fell within their zone of control. The lesson this taught Western leaders was that weakness could be no substitute for security, that policies harnessed to power were more likely to succeed than those drawing strength alone from high ideals and noble expectations. The Low Countries in World War I and the Baltic States in World War II succumbed not because they were lacking in morality but because they found no means of securing their national frontiers.

The West has carried this discovery into the atomic and thermonuclear age. It is possible to argue that such peace as we have known since 1945 is the outcome of a "balance of terror." There are signs that the Soviet Union more than once marched up to the brink, threatening to engulf Greece and Turkey, Iran and Berlin, only to march down again when it met resistance. Conversely, where resistance proved ambiguous, uncertain or divided, as in Egypt, Syria, and in the Far East, the spread of the Soviet sphere of influence flowed across boundaries that had long marked the limits of Russian power. Is it any wonder that in recent days faced with further Russian blandishments and technological advances,

the military regeneration of the West has become the rallying cry? Our conduct would be surprising only if, abandoning the lessons of a half-century and heedless of risks, we turned to embrace a program of unilateral disarmament or destroyed our military ramparts without counting the costs.

Today's spirit in a nation arousing itself from complacency, stirring as from a long sleep to sudden consciousness of its peril, testifies to deep and latent faith among the people that any radical change in the military and technological balance of power must be redressed. Our policies reflect the belief that history has something to teach. We have learned one lesson well, but have we learned all that the past and present have to tell us? Is there more to history than the truth that aggressors must be resisted, that we must match every advance in the destructiveness of a foe, and that this in the present world must be an end in itself?

I suspect that a great deal of our uncertainty in the reading of history stems from the divergences of two prevailing approaches to the present crisis. According to the first approach, the immediate military threat is unquestionably the gravest danger. Those who hold to this view call for ever greater urgency in the multiplication of more powerful weapons of destruction, for new strategic doctrines and for missile bases and a nuclear weapons pool. The irreconcilable conflicts and tensions of the Cold War will come to an end only when one side or the other forges decisively ahead. Power finally will arbitrate the rivalry and the foe will surrender unconditionally. This trend of thought prompts a state to bestow the most lethal and destructive weapons on its allies, and when they show reluctance at being caught in the crossfire of two atomic powers to bargain over commitments "in principle" and make concessions in order that the morality of power will prevail.

At war with this first approach is a second, urging us to display no less vision and energy in seeking political and economic solutions than in launching expanded military programs. It points to the Soviet technical assistance program pledging 1,500,000,000 dollars to the underdeveloped areas and the evidence of successful Soviet penetration into the Middle East. The scene and tactics of Russian imperialism have shifted. Subversion, infiltration and indirect aggression defended as appeals against anti-colonialism, anti-interventionism and anti-westernism have put the West on the defensive on its weakest front.

Ultimate weapons in these areas are bound to have ambiguous effects, for their use against great numbers of agrarian peoples spread over vast areas seems doubtful at best. Crises that have passed without their deployment in Indo-China, Korea and Egypt serve to reinforce such doubts. Because they neither

possessed nor saw the relevance of these terrible weapons, the newer nations have led the movement for their outlawry.

However, the contradictory reactions in the newer states to thermonuclear devices is best seen in the effects of Sputnik. In the same countries that urge us to disarm, American prestige and virtue suffered a grievous blow when the Soviet Union launched the first satellite. Despite continuous criticism of America throughout Asia and Africa for its materialism and preoccupation with purely technological and military advance, confidence in American policy was gauged by these standards.

One is once more reminded of Europe's and Asia's response when the United States through the United Nations held the line in Korea. Then our sharpest critics, including some in India who had found us rigidly anti-Communist and obsessed with the military threat, applauded the successful deployment of American power particularly until the fateful crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel. Therefore, even in parts of the world where heaviest stress has been placed on moral and political solutions, the exercise of power by East and West has contributed to national prestige and has seemed almost to create moral valuations of its own. Perhaps a reminder is in order that it is endlessly tempting for us all to assume that the strong and successful are more virtuous. These episodes are merely symptoms of the ambiguous relation between force and peace.

All this suggests the profound nature of the moral problem in international politics. Perhaps the historian Meinecke has put the problem best: "The laws of morality, of brotherly love, of sanctity of agreements, are eternal and inviolable. But the duty of the statesman to care for the welfare and safety of the state and people entrusted to him . . . is also sacred and inviolable." He asks, as have other great writers in the Western political tradition, what happens when these two duties conflict.

In the United States, liberals and churchmen, internationalists and isolationists, Congressmen and diplomats, journalists and scholars have expressly or by implication tried to answer the question for the better part of the last half-century. Their answers comprise a capsule history of Western thought and, while they resist any convincing system of classification, I find, broadly speaking, four kinds of answers.

Cynicism is one answer, although few consistently maintain that political action can remain permanently bereft of moral content. Hitler presumably set aside all benevolence or loyalty to goals beyond race and state. Stalin's consistent deprecation of the influence of non-Communist ideals and his willingness to sacrifice the human lives of deviationists or kulaks if it served Soviet political purposes was blatantly cynical. The cynic tends to argue, if he

justifies himself at all, that politics and ethics are not cut from the same cloth. Politics are means and ethics are ends and, while the means employed may seem evil, good ends can make them good. The simple formula of the end justifying the means has for some brought about resolution of the problem.

Yet for men and for nations, the universal practice is to justify every evil measure by claiming it serves an ethical goal. For Stalin the gross brutality of liquidating the kulaks found justification as an inevitable step in the history-fulfilling Communist design; for Hitler the cremation of so-called inferior races was excused as a necessary hygienic measure if Teutonic superiority were to continue unimpaired. Since nations in the present anarchic world society tend to be repositories of their own morality, the ends-means formula has prevailed as an answer to the moral dilemma, for undeniably it is a concealed but essential truth that nations tend to create their own morality.

In its extreme form, however, this development has found nations accepting as ethical whatever redounded to their own material advantage and judging whatever was detrimental to their purposes as immoral and evil. Yet it inheres in the nature of man and politics that statesmen and nations never wholly escape the judgment of elementary ethical standards. The history of politics discloses that no people have completely divorced politics from ethics but, however grudgingly, come to see that men are required to conform to standards more objective than those of success.

There is another answer—whether it be called hypocrisy or national moralizing. Every person and every nation shares to some extent in this response. For whenever men or nations act, they make larger claims for their morality than can be warranted. If this is deception, it is apparently an almost inevitable form of self-deception since nations no less than individuals must persuade themselves that their deeds are legitimate because consistent with some larger frame of value. The parent never disciplines the child except for its own good. The powerful nation never goes to war except in the interests of peace and justice. The problem about these actions is not that they are all devoid of some residual justice nor that claims of goodness never serve to lift men and groups above the selfish and the mundane. It is rather that we are seldom as moral as we claim to be whether as righteous Jews or Christians or when we speak for the nation as a whole.

A third answer is reformist and apocalyptic in nature. It concedes that at present there may be conflict between the eternal principles of which Meinecke spoke and the imperatives of statecraft. At present, men and states pursue selfish and parochial ends but, in Woodrow Wilson's phrase,

"national purposes have fallen more and more into the background and the common purpose of enlightened mankind has taken their place." The one point on which liberal and conservative utopians agree is that politics in which there are conflicts of interest is but a passing and ephemeral phase of an earlier inferior aristocratic era.

For the liberal, novel world institutions and world law can transform man. For the conservative, more business men with the homely virtues of private life—honesty, simplicity, charm and geniality—can bridge the gulf between ultimate and political morality. This last philosophy virtually destroys the well-known tension between the private and public spheres or between man *qua* man and man as citizen. It excuses a political leader for failure, irresolution and imprudence, for ignorance of the demands of politics if only he is honest, well-meaning and a good fellow.

The reformer cannot believe that in international relations even today situations arise where my nation's justice can mean your nation's injustice; my nation's security and its requirements, your nation's insecurity; and armaments, defense preparations and alliances can appear as threats to security as viewed through other eyes.

Faced with these realities, the reformist maintains that at present men may indeed pursue a double standard of conduct in their private and public lives. Privately, man is honest and ethical; publicly he covers his acts with a tissue of lies and deception. His virtue in private affairs is seen as the conquest of culture over barbarism, of a rational age over an irrational one. Once in an earlier stage in man's evolution, his private conduct was marred by brutality and violence but education, a legal order and free institutions transformed him. In the same way the cultural lag from which nations have suffered in international relations is being erased. The forward march of history is carrying nations from a retarded condition into a new and enlightened era when private standards will become public international rules.

Those who doubt are denounced as foes of progress and men of little faith. Yet this "simple rationalism pays little heed to the depth of the problem. In its zeal it ignores the distance between the two realms. Religious ethics calls self-interest into question. Man must lose himself in order to find himself. As soon as we move to the level of organized communities, the problem of legitimate self-interest arises for political ethics takes self-interest for granted. A political leader cannot ask his people to sacrifice themselves. His first duty is to preserve the Constitution and he owes allegiance to the safety and well-being of the nation and of its generations yet unborn.

Reinhold Niebuhr has distinguished between moral man and immoral society and while he has subsequently modified the sharp lines of his dichotomy, he would hold, I believe, to the "hidden truth" which this distinction lays bare. Accordingly, those virtues of gentleness, magnanimity, love and trust which enrich the dimensions of our family life at its best and are possible in our more intimate communities, must be viewed with circumspection, reserve and uncertainty on the world stage where states through power and force press their claims and counterclaims.

We may as moral beings deplore and denounce the evil portents of a massive armaments program but who among us, if responsible for the nation's security, would have persisted in meeting Soviet power through compassion and the repudiation of force? Or who, confronted by the Nazi threat to Western civilization, would have turned aside the proffered alliance of an equally oppressive Communist regime? And today who can say that we should sacrifice as the price of disarmament our anti-missile program just as the prospect of a device capable of tracking and destroying enemy missiles is within sight?

The fourth answer to the problem is the one Meinecke gave. "Every authentic tragedy is a shattering demonstration that moral life cannot be regu-

lated like clockwork and that even the purest strivings for good can be forced into the most painful choices . . . In relations between states, moreover, clashes between private morality and state interest are plainly inevitable and as old as world history itself."

What sets this outlook apart is its clear recognition of the tension between morality and politics or foreign policy. It alone among the viewpoints of cynicism, hypocrisy and reformism demands humility. It starts by accepting the persistence of self-interest in all political communities and the impossibility of persuading any community to sacrifice itself. It assumes that the best nations can do is to find the point of concurrence between their interests and purposes and the interests of others as the United States did in Europe but has failed to do up to now in the Middle East. It is reluctant to claim universal validity for national policies and hesitant to proclaim that what is good for me is good for everyone or what my group or nation views as in its interest is the interest of the whole world. It is as fearful of moral crusades and national self-righteousness as of the outright denial of moral principles.

The names of Churchill, Lincoln, John Quincy Adams and a handful of great religious leaders epitomize this view. Inescapably it has a place for the tragic element in life for it leaves for another better world the utopias and final justice that men and states so often claim for themselves.

Dominant elements in Western culture, and American culture in particular, have consistently misunderstood the nature of foreign policy, and they have done so in the name of morality. In the process, our culture has deformed its understanding of morality and corrupted its moral judgment as well. It has imagined that the tension between foreign policy and morality, given in immediate experience, could easily be made to disappear in one of two ways. Either there could be a kind of reconciliation, a compromise by which foreign policy would be made moral, at least up to the point of non-violence and harmonious cooperation, and the moral law would be adapted to the exigencies of politics . . . Or else men would have a choice between power politics, morally bad, and another kind of foreign policy not tainted with the lust for power. In any event, there was presumed to be a way out of the dilemma with which the demands of foreign policy appear to confront the moral conscience.

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