

# HOW SACRED IS BIPARTISANSHIP?

## It May Represent a Rhetorical Device Rather Than a Policy

William V. Shannon

The recent accession of Senator J. William Fulbright to the chairmanship of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has provoked fresh consideration of the complexities of bipartisanship. Senator Fulbright in past years has been a frequent critic of the policies pursued by President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles. Moreover, his advance in status symbolizes the growing influence of the younger Democrats on the committee, such as Senators Mansfield, Kennedy, and Humphrey, who are more critical of prevailing orthodoxies than their senior colleagues. These shifts in personal influence direct our attention to fundamental questions about bipartisanship. How far may a democracy go in stifling debate on basic issues in the name of national unity? How far may responsible men carry criticism and dissent in times of national peril? What is the proper relationship between the two-party competition for power and the framing of foreign policy? That is, when is foreign policy properly a partisan issue?

Bipartisanship is essentially a device for arranging great issues of foreign policy between the administration and the effective leaders of the opposition party, privately and beforehand, rather than through the usual process of presidential leadership in drafting a program, committee hearings, floor debates, and general public controversy. It is decision by compromise and negotiation rather than by conflict. It presupposes that the leaders of the opposition will be kept continuously informed on major problems and impending great decisions; this enables the opposition leaders to make suggestions of their own and to participate in the decision-making process. These private consultations and negotiations to arrive at an agreed-upon decision are a substitute for the more familiar Congressional privilege of almost unlimited debate and partisan opposition. The late Senator Vandenberg used to say: "We want to be in on the takeoffs and not just the crash landings." But the privilege of being a co-pilot means surrendering the right to criticize how the plane is flown. Or does it?

Bipartisanship has diverse origins in our national experience. There is the old saying, "Politics stops at the water's edge." There is also Woodrow Wilson's

---

Mr. Shannon is Washington columnist for the New York Post.

World War I remark, "Politics is adjourned." Bipartisanship also draws upon the tradition of the "national government" in wartime. The latter tradition is more familiar to the parliamentary democracies of Britain and France that Franklin Roosevelt tried to implement in our country during World War II when he assigned the War and Navy portfolios to leading Republicans (Henry Stimson and Frank Knox).

In the sense in which the word is most commonly used, bipartisanship developed out of Roosevelt's profound determination to avoid the mistakes of Woodrow Wilson, which led to the rejection of the Versailles Treaty by the Senate. Roosevelt and Cordell Hull, his longtime Secretary of State, made intensive use of their political expertise to build a fund of trust and goodwill among ranking Republicans in the Senate on foreign policy issues. This was not an easy undertaking because the majority of Senate Republicans was deeply isolationist and had resisted the Roosevelt administration's pre-war foreign policy step by step. Hull, however, was a veteran of thirty years in Congress, he was well-connected, and he was aided by his reputation for conservatism in domestic affairs which enabled opposition leaders to disassociate him from New Deal measures. From the Republican side, Arthur Vandenberg, who cut his losses on isolationism after Pearl Harbor and became increasingly convinced of internationalist ideas as the war progressed, brought his charm and considerable political skill to the aid of the Roosevelt-Hull missionary efforts.

Bipartisanship began to run into trouble after Mr. Truman's upset victory in the 1948 election. His victory profoundly shocked and frustrated the Republican Party. "I don't care how the thing is explained," said Senator Taft; "it defies all common sense." As Herbert Agar has commented (*The Price of Power: America Since 1945*): "This can be a dangerous moment in a democracy, when proud men who think they belong by nature in the seats of power find themselves excluded once too often, and by an opponent for whom they have no respect." Mr. Truman's victory embittered Republicans in all factions of that party and made it more difficult for responsible party leaders to cooperate in a bipartisan way. If the two-party system is to function at its best, it is

probably desirable that the parties alternate in office every eight or twelve years; the opposition party would thereby always include leaders who have fresh memories of the chastening responsibilities of office and other younger leaders almost equally restrained by the reasonable expectation of assuming office themselves in the near future. Mr. Truman's victory, which extended the Republican exile to twenty years, was in this sense an expensive victory, one for which the nation has only lately stopped paying.

The ratification of the NATO Treaty in 1949 became the last great fruit of the bipartisan understandings negotiated during World War II which matured in the immediate post-war years. Meanwhile, Senator Vandenberg, after a mortal illness of many months, died in April, 1951. Senator Taft, who had deferred in foreign affairs to Vandenberg in 1945-48 in order to concentrate on the domestic programs that interested him more, now moved forward to gather all party leadership into his own hands. Under Taft's leadership, his party broke from almost all forms of collaboration with the Truman administration. The MacArthur hearings, the so-called "great debate" in the Senate in 1951, and the vituperative attacks of Senator McCarthy were episodes in this drama. Foreign policy had become a foremost partisan issue.

The record of the 82nd Congress (1951-52) after the death of Vandenberg contrasted so markedly with the constructive record of the 80th Congress (1947-48) that it provoked the question: was bipartisanship a viable tradition or was it a transient relationship among a particular set of men?

Before anyone arrived at a definitive answer, events gave bipartisanship a new but different life. The Republican Party at its convention in 1952 rejected Senator Taft, implicitly repudiated the record he and his partisans had compiled in foreign affairs during the preceding two years, and nominated General Eisenhower, a non-party figure identified with the foreign policies of the last two Democratic administrations. Eisenhower was a symbol of bipartisanship.

This alternation within the Republican Party between the dominance of the more conservative, less internationalist Congressional bloc most of the time and the reassertion of control by the internationalist faction outside of Congress in presidential years is a recurring phenomenon in national politics. Wendell Willkie and Thomas Dewey had three times previously frustrated the conservative Congressional group. The Democratic Party's Northern and Southern wings, on the other hand, have not been disunited on basic questions of foreign policy. There is a sense, therefore, in which one can say that the fate of bipartisanship rides with the struggle for power within the Republican Party.

Once elected, President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles disappointed those observers who

expected a renaissance of the golden days of bipartisanship, with the leaders of the two parties simply exchanging lines and places in the duet. The present administration has practiced bipartisanship but it has been not with the Democrats but with the Taft wing of its own party. There were hints of this during the convention and the campaign. Mr. Dulles, for example, volunteered to write a foreign policy plank, sufficiently elastic and carefully worded that either Senator Taft or General Eisenhower could run on.

Democratic leaders early came to feel that the carrying-out of foreign policy was impaired. This impairment they attributed only in small measure to the personal failings of either President Eisenhower or Mr. Dulles and in much greater part to the fumbling efforts to appease and compromise with the Republican Old Guard. Secretary Dulles, in particular, appeared to be haunted by the memory of what had befallen Dean Acheson, his predecessor, at the hands of the McCarthyites and Old Guardists in the last two years of the Truman administration. Although the dozen or more active Republican internationalist senators combined with substantial Democratic support assured the administration of a majority for its programs, Dulles was not content. He exhibited an overriding desire to obtain and hold the nominal support and goodwill of intransigent factions within his own party.

This preoccupation intensified upon the death of Senator Taft six months after the administration took office and his replacement as Republican floor leader by Senator Knowland. Taft was a figure of such commanding prestige among his party colleagues that, if the administration negotiated with him, he could in effect speak for all of them. Knowland shared Taft's views but lacked his stature. The administration found it not always easy to do business with him and Senator Styles Bridges, his *eminence grise*.

One concession Dulles made to the Old Guard was to turn his personnel responsibilities over to R. W. Scott McLeod, a former administrative assistant to Senator Bridges. McLeod, a man of McCarthyite persuasion, conducted a drastic purge. "The effect was," in the words of J. R. Beal, Dulles's biographer, "to make a shambles of morale for several months."

Another concession was the decision not to reappoint several career diplomats identified with past Democratic administrations. Taft extracted this commitment as his price for putting through the Senate the confirmation of Charles Bohlen, one of these career men, as ambassador to Russia.

Although Dulles had strong personal views on the non-recognition of Red China, there are observers who believe that the Eisenhower administration's policy toward China has also been heavily mortgaged by extraneous commitments of a domestic political

nature. Foreign economic aid programs are another instance of the new and curious bipartisanship. Administration requests for foreign aid funds have been much influenced by a concern for conservative Congressional sentiment.

Last year, a bipartisan bloc in the Senate led by Senators John Sherman Cooper, Kentucky Republican, and John Kennedy, Massachusetts Democrat, sponsored moves to put Congress on record in favor of special help for India and to amend the Battle Act to make economic relations easier with the new government of Poland. Both these actions were in harmony with State Department policy and at the outset had official support. The administration, at a critical moment, withdrew its backing and both projects failed. It was generally understood that the President and the Secretary of State had withdrawn their support in deference to the views of Senators Bridges and Knowland. These developments caused strong resentment among internationalist senators in both parties.

In the light of this record, it may seem surprising that the concept of bipartisanship has continued to command so much formal support from Democratic leaders. Senator Johnson of Texas, the Senate majority leader, is largely responsible for this support. Johnson believes there is no political benefit to be reaped from partisan attacks on the handling of foreign affairs. Moreover, he has firm views about how foreign policy should be made. He believes that the President and the Secretary of State have the responsibility and must take the initiative. If they execute their responsibilities poorly, there is nothing very much Congress can do about it. The Senate cannot run a foreign policy, cannot select ambassadors, conduct negotiations, or speak in the country's name. Under the Constitution, only the President can do these things. Johnson is fond of saying in this connection, "I've read the Constitution." The most the Senate can insist upon, in Johnson's view, is that the members of the Foreign Relations Committee be kept fully informed on important problems and decisions as they develop. If the senators disagree with administration policy, they may register their opposition by a vote or a speech but they should take care not to sabotage the policy by running a concerted, prolonged guerrilla war against it. In private conversations, Johnson points to the conduct of the Taft-McCarthy bloc in the Congress of 1951-52 as a horrible example of what not to do. That political attack on the Truman-Acheson policies was, in Johnson's view, an invasion of the prerogative of the presidency and opened up questions that should not be raised at all in the context of a party fight for power. The senior members of the Foreign Relations Committee, notably the late Senator George and his successor as chairman, Senator Green, shared Johnson's outlook. Thus it was that they cooperated in putting through the Senate the administration's For-

mosa Resolution in 1955 and the Eisenhower Doctrine for the Middle East in 1957, although there were influential Democrats who had grave doubts and reservations about the wisdom of both programs.

These suppressed discontents within Democratic ranks have in the past year more and more broken to the surface. An additional source of ill feeling has been the Eisenhower administration's reluctance to appoint Democrats to policymaking positions and to ambassadorships. The Truman administration appointed Republicans to many such positions; Paul Hoffman, for example, headed the Marshall Plan program, Dwight Griswold was chief of the Greek aid program, John Foster Dulles was assigned to conduct the Japanese Peace Treaty negotiations, and Walter Gifford served as ambassador to Great Britain. These were not decorative or nominal posts; they were positions of substance and power. Throughout the first Eisenhower administration, no such appointments were offered to qualified Democrats. When backstage criticism of this partisan monopoly on appointments became dangerous, Dulles did obtain the appointment of David K. Bruce, a Democrat, as ambassador to West Germany in 1957. He also named ex-Senator George as a consultant on NATO affairs; after George's death, however, he was not replaced. The practice of appointing men and women from both parties to the American delegations that attend the annual meetings of the UN General Assembly was continued, but frequently the places allotted to Democrats were filled by figures like former Governor Byrnes of South Carolina and former Governor Shivers of Texas who had supported the Eisenhower ticket and were not in good standing with their own party.

The complaints which Democrats made on appointments were remarkably similar to the protests regularly raised in the past by the Republican Old Guard. The Taft men had felt in the 1944-53 period that Democratic administrations were practicing bipartisanship not with the true majority of the Republican Party but with only its internationalist faction. Liberal Democrats regarded with comparable disdain the appointments of such men as Byrnes and Shivers and the stifling intimacy between Secretary Dulles and Senator George. Bipartisanship, which had once been almost a sacred word among liberal Democrats and in internationalist quarters, generally now became an object for re-examination and attack. Individuals excluded from the formation of policy began to argue that bipartisanship was an unfair maneuver to present them with a *fait accompli*. Those who pushed for changes in policy chafed and grumbled when they saw prevailing policy sanctified.

Walter Lippmann epitomized this growing restlessness in his syndicated column (February 3, 1959): "His [Fulbright's] advent as chairman of the com-

mittee marks a turning point for the better in the conduct of our foreign policy. For the first time since the new era which began with World War II, the administration will have a responsible and loyal opposition. Until the conversion of Senator Vandenberg at the end of the war, the opposition was sullen and destructive. The Vandenberg arrangement was an emergency device for getting indispensable things done. But for the long run it was not a good method of governing. For instead of promoting debate, which educates the people and refines the policy of the administration, the Vandenberg bipartisan system avoided and evaded debate. The same must be said for the so-called bipartisan arrangement with Senator Walter George, who suppressed debate when the country would have been much better served by a thorough debate."

Lippmann makes the qualifying observation that Senator Fulbright, although a critic of Eisenhower-Dulles policy, has always spoken as "one of the pioneers and early supporters of the global policies which have replaced the old isolationism . . . The weight of his criticism has been directed not against the great purposes of foreign policy but against mistakes and distortions in their application."

This seems like a reasonable formulation, but the phrase "great purposes of foreign policy" is obviously open to many different subjective interpretations. No major candidate in either party is likely to campaign for a return to "Fortress America"; everyone is for peace, resistance to the spread of Communism, and the winning of friends abroad. When one gets beyond these broad generalities into hard, specific problems like German re-unification or China policy, one is likely to find that one man's "great purposes" are another man's "mistakes and distortions."

Dulles grappled with this problem at one of his press conferences early in the election year of 1956 and tried to define what he considered "constructive discussion" of foreign policy within the limits of bipartisanship. Dulles said:

"There is a danger point which I think all patriotic citizens should observe, and that is not to shake confidence abroad in the solidity of the United States position on basic matters. We do have a basically bipartisan position which has evolved over the last ten years, which involves the committal of United States prestige and honor to various other countries and various places in the world. *If there should grow up any doubt about our determination to stand on those commitments, it would be a very sad day for the United States and in my opinion would greatly increase the risk of war*" (italics added).

Again, this seems like a reasonable formulation, but it is not really a very helpful guide to the limits of bipartisanship. When Chairman Fulbright, for example, says that it is "ridiculous" to think that the U. S. will never recognize Red China, does this not

weaken the existing policy of quarantining Red China? If Senator Fulbright freely articulates his views on China, it is more than likely that serious doubts will indeed grow up about the determination of the U. S. to stand on its present commitment to Chiang Kai-shek to defend Quemoy and Matsu. But, to revert to Lippmann's usage, is the quarantining of Red China one of the "great purposes" of our foreign policy or are existing policies of no recognition, no admission to the UN, and no trade "mistakes and distortions"?

When one examines this question of what is bipartisanship and how has it actually worked over the last fifteen years, one has the sense of wrestling with a phantom.

Bipartisanship, one must conclude, is not an entity in itself. To speak of it is about the same as to speak of "the forces of history" or of "human tendencies"; like those vague phrases which suggest but do not describe or explain, bipartisanship is a rhetorical device, a catch-all for what cannot otherwise be explained except in many cumbersome words. Nor does bipartisanship have a viable intellectual tradition that commands assent; that tradition has been repeatedly violated by the Taftites in 1951-52, by the Eisenhower administration in its early years, and more latterly by liberal Democratic critics of the administration.

The term has become shapeless and suspect because it does not reflect reality; since divisions on foreign policy in our country are not along neat party lines, "bipartisanship" does not reflect the real basis for action. Bipartisanship has not in practice resisted any severe strains put upon it. Moreover, if there is a reason for doing something, it ought to be a better reason than that both party leaderships have decided to be for it. Great decisions of state in a democracy should arise from the facts made available to the whole people. Support for such decisions should rest upon assent freely given after full debate, and that assent must needs be renewed periodically. A German policy or a China policy or a disarmament policy, to single out three areas of present controversy, which does not retain the informed support of a majority in Congress and the country is, sooner or later, going to fall. Its bipartisan origins cannot save it.

Bipartisanship was an ingenious and temporarily useful device to prolong the national unity of wartime in certain critical areas of government policymaking after peace returned. The device served its immediate purposes and has now broken down. It would now seem the wiser course to make the long-delayed adjustment of democracy's basic device for conducting public business—responsible open debate with no limits except those set by each participant's conscience—to the age of chronic crisis in which we live.