

FOREIGN POLICY: RHETORIC AND REALITY

The Question Is Not What We Say But How We Do

Charles Burton Marshall

More than other fields of public affairs, the discussion of foreign policy presents special temptations to irrelevancy, rhetoricalness, and sheer hocus pocus. Several possible explanations for this come to mind. For one thing, it is a vast and varied subject, remote from the scope of observation and sensory evidence. The relevant processes are too complex for their essences to be tangible. We reduce the complexities to label-words, then pass these around as if they contained the essences of the matters referred to.

The Cold War, thermonuclear deterrence, national self-determination, peaceful settlement, international Communism—a myriad such expressions enjoying common currency are the simple labels put on enormously complex relationships and processes in continuous flux. Even the component units are of this character. For example, none can claim to have experienced France or grasped the essence of India. Yet each of us constantly uses an array of such terms as if they had fixed and continuous meanings. It is hard to put a halter on abstraction. The temptation, rather, is toward unlimited abstraction in a field inherently abstract.

Another influence inheres in an obvious and simple circumstance. Foreign policy, by definition, relates to matters beyond the span of our fiat. This involves a temptation to loose thought. Where no idea can be conclusive—where all elements are contingent—it is easy to slip into the fallacy of regarding any idea as about as good as another, if not a little better, just as in a field where none can be truly expert there is a temptation to regard all kinds and degrees of ignorance as on a parity.

A third factor may be a tendency to regard the State as prodigious. Its purposes, especially in relation to the world external to it, are vast and indeterminate—and so what difference if one compounds the vastness and indeterminacy and inflates the purposes?

Another factor probably lies in our security sys-

Mr. Marshall, a former member of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department and author of *The Limits of Foreign Policy*, is now Visiting Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace.

tem. I refer to the growing compass of essential information monopolistically held by the Executive—with a consequence of making discussion increasingly airy as the data bearing on the substance are progressively withheld.

A fifth factor derives from the simple circumstance that the subject of foreign policy exercises a strong pull on good people—people with a high sense of responsibility and deep concern for proper causes. Such people in groups are subject to the temptations besetting all groups. They tend to become intoxicated by the things held in common, and perhaps nothing else leads to such giddiness as shared goodness.

I shall give a few illustrations of what I mean by the tendency toward airiness in foreign policy discussions. One is the vain, endless dialogue about morality and principles on the one hand and expediency on the other. Anyone fit to pass beyond the intermediate level of Sunday School ought to be able to rise above this level of argument. So it seems to be. The facts are obviously otherwise.

Now expediency is an abstract noun derived from the present participle of a French verb meaning to expedite. It conveys the notion of being on time—surely no basis for reproach. Usage has enlarged the meaning to include adequacy, advisability, appropriateness to the exigencies of circumstance. These are not reprehensible qualities.

Modern usage gives expediency a secondary meaning, implicit of cynical subordination of principle to the real or supposed conveniences of a moment. This is unfortunate, for it involves ambiguity for an otherwise clear and proper sort of idea.

To come out against expediency in its primary meaning is as nonsensical as to come out against a prudent balance between purposes and where-withal, against good sense, against effectiveness. To be against it in its secondary meaning, implicitly reprehensible as it is, involves about the same quotient of moral courage, insight, and decision as to take a stand condemnatory of the man-eating shark.

While paying respects to crusaders against expediency, I would not ignore their almost equally

numerous and vocal comrades in the good cause. I refer, of course, to the champions of principle. These have the advantage of being for something rather than against—and everyone knows the value of the positive approach, one of the watchwords of the age we live in.

It is wonderful to be for principles—and who can confess to opposition? Usually the advocate stops there and does not specify what principles he has in mind. He is for principles—which is to stop a good deal short of having a policy.

What principles? What is to be done in furtherance of them? Especially, what is to be done in view of the onerous circumstance that, in the stringency of means, one principle commanding our devotion is all too likely to come into collision with others equally worthy to be commended? These are the questions in face of which a policy takes form.

Let us pass on to the motif of realism versus idealism—veritably the gold dust twins of discussion about foreign policy. They have the same function in this field as the words *blue, true, love, above, arms, charms, moon* and *June* have in the song-writing business—old dependables to get one through to the end. They are debater's words. It does not much matter which one chooses. The important thing is to beat the other fellow to it. To choose realism or reality for one's own particular set of notions puts an adversary in the position of being for unrealism or unreality. To choose idealism as a tag for one's own hunches and preconceptions places an adversary in the role of being against the indisputably good.

Each of us has his own set of coordinates from which to recollect, to consider, and to anticipate. Each of us has his own estimate of the things that count—his own hierarchy of facts and possibilities. To each these represent reality. The question is never really whether to be for or against it. None would ever argue against taking into account the things that count. Each of us strives, or should strive, to be a realist. The testing question is: whose realities are the *real* realities?

Of any policy proposition two initial questions must be asked: Is it feasible? Is it worth doing? The first brings in the quotient of expediency; the second requires some scheme of value. The first relates to possibilities, the second to goals; the first to realities, the second to ideals. It is an arid practice to refer to these as things separate, even mutually exclusive. No sensible proposition about policy can rule out either.

A number of other clichés recurringly offered as substitutes for substance come easily to mind. I shall comment here on only two of them. The

first is "the national interest." The second is "power politics."

As I see it, the idea of the national interest does not have much of a cutting edge whichever way you may swing it. I cannot imagine a group of responsible policy-makers coming to a decision to jettison the national interest. Nor can I, on the other hand, imagine such a group deliberating its way to a conclusion to uphold the national interest. I doubt whether there has ever been a time or ever will be a time when the question whether to uphold the national interest will be at issue in this or any other government. The practical question is, in a given situation, not whether to serve the national interest but rather how to discover it and how to forward it.

In truth, the national interests are multiple. In the exigencies of the actual, some of them come into conflict with others. The policy-maker's job, working within the limits of what is feasible, is to work out the combination of actions best to serve these interests in their total relationship to each other. If he did otherwise, he would be a fool or a scoundrel. Men may differ as to whether one thing or another is a valid national interest. They may differ as to the relative values among the multiple interests at stake. But that they should argue whether a foreign policy should be in the national interest seems to me simply preposterous.

Actually our interests and our responsibilities are linked. That is to say, I am sure that everything expressible as an interest of the United States is expressible also as a responsibility. The two words are merely two tags for keeping track of the same thing. And though it may sound very righteous to say we should overlook our national interests, it sounds quite different to say we should overlook our responsibilities.

In a similar category comes the cliché about power politics, a phrase many good people continue to abhor. But power means the capacity to achieve intended results. It is difficult to imagine any kind of politics other than power politics. For men responsible in the line of policy not to give heed to considerations of power would be like bank managers becoming cavalier about solvency. Some of them may, but we should hardly tender them our applause.

So much for what I regard as fallacies of analysis. What of the ideas set forth as prescriptions?

A method in general vogue is to fight the problem—a phrase George Marshall used to use for the practice. Take one of the subtle, onerous, dangerous issues of foreign policy, replete with contradiction and the potential for tragedy. Respond to it by observing that such a problem has no right to exist, then proceed as if it really did not. Or

take a question of sharp and perilous division between organized portions of mankind. Shift the subject to the "community of nations" or "the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man."

A special form of the general method of fighting the problem is what I might term solution by procedure. Very often we hear people suggest in relation to some problem that the thing to do is to take it to the United Nations. The unarticulated assumption is that taking a problem to the United Nations is a way out of having to have a will to bring to bear on it. In like fashion, the return to what is called "quiet diplomacy" is suggested as an alternative to and solution for the Cold War. This is just a way of begging the question. A basic circumstance of relations between ourselves and the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc is that the bond of confidence is missing, and so is a pattern of shared general purposes—and in this situation, the methods of traditional diplomacy are largely not operable. The failure of traditional diplomacy in this situation is a result rather than a cause of the Cold War.

The easiest and most pleasant device of all is to dwell upon "goals." It costs nothing. It gives one a huge sense of efficacy. For in a capacity to project the future in terms better than things are or ever have been, each of us can escape his finiteness. Each of us, in terms of a current quasi-religious song, has the whole world in his hands.

Now I am not against goals. What I do decry is the assumption that we can so construct our ends that we shall be exempt from the hard, exacting tests in the realm of means. A lot of worrying gets done about the problem of inflation. It seems to be with us, notwithstanding. What I urge is the giving of some thought to inflation in the field of foreign policy objectives—the imbalance between the wishing of ends and the willingness of means.

In actuality so much work has been done on the goals that we have enough to reach from here to Utopia and back already. We do not have to go very far back in our history—no farther than the Atlantic Charter—to find enough of the stuff that dreams are made of to erect a perfect world, with plenty of perfection left over for export to outer space as well. Surely in this department of affairs we Americans have done our share and then some. No one can ever rightly accuse us of remissness with respect to the production of concepts and slogans for a better world. If we are losing ground today—and I think on balance we are—the trouble lies somewhere else. And the problem, as I see it, is for the United States to worry less about whether it is abstractly right and more about whether it is *effectively* right. And here, to all the existing rhetoric about foreign policy I can only add some of my own.

Foreign policy is one of the performing arts. Its goals are not susceptible of being accomplished a fact. They are purposes to be everlastingly worked at. The enduring purpose of our foreign policy, as I see it, is to strive for such conditions in the world beyond our fiat as will enable these great purpose of our State to survive as valid purposes. This in turn requires an external world to which we have access—a world system in which we partake in the leadership instead of being closed out and surrounded: a compatible world.

As to the implications of the idea that foreign policy belongs in the performing arts, I will illustrate with a metaphor—not to prove, but only to illustrate, because metaphors never prove anything

Consider the distinction between the symphony as it was in the mind of Beethoven and as it must be in the mind of an orchestra conductor. Beethoven could produce a Fifth Symphony, put it behind him, move on to a Sixth, then to a Seventh, and so on. The symphonies were moved from the conceptual to the actual—that is, produced and established. To the conductor, production of music is quite different. The discipline, the insight, the precision of time and pitch—all the determinants of the quality of the orchestra—are not susceptible of this sort of achievement. The conductor could never say that he had accomplished them and so ask himself what to do next.

Now in the performing arts—and foreign policy, I repeat, is one of them—the determining question is never: what do you think you are doing, or what would you like to do? It is: what are you doing, and how well are you doing it? It is not: what are you, or what would you like to be? It is: what are you becoming? This view enables us to get beyond a good deal of fallacy about means and ends. Surely one of the main sources of hypocrisy in foreign policy is the habit—manifest widely and at high levels—of treating them separately. They are not things apart. They are integral to each other. They are simply two ways of looking at the same actuality. Our ends are the measure of what we intend to do. So are our means.

A second point is the obvious idea that what we do in one span of time will greatly affect what we can do in a subsequent span of time. I use the phrase "greatly affect" and avoid the more conclusive verb "determine." I think a people exercises some franchise in its destiny but never fully controls it. Precision in this matter is impossible and unimportant. What is important is that we learn to do our best in every phase with whatever fraction of control is vouchsafed us—see what options we have and then try to exercise them rightly.

Obviously—so much so that it is banal to say it—

the way in which what we do in one phase leads into what we can do in the next can apply to a downhill as well as to an uphill course. Bad decisions father bad decisions just as good ones give rise to opportunity for further good ones.

The past few years have presented an object lesson in this. I think it is no secret that they have, on balance, gone badly with us. It also is apparent that many of the factors which enter into our present growing predicament were actually beyond our control. The things to regret—the lessons to learn—concern the adverse developments that we ourselves thought up and brought about. These are the things that we made to happen rather than those that just happened to us, but they bear a close causal relation to many of the things that have seemed to happen beyond the span of our control.

I think we did have an option in the Korean War. It was not a clear, unmistakable option, because the myths of the MacArthur episode did so much to obscure it by inculcating among the public the false notion of an easy answer to the strategic problem available if we had just had gumption enough to seize it.

There was no easy answer. The alternative to what we did was a hard course. We could have followed it. We had manpower enough to supply the margin by which to make four or five more divisions available in Korea. We had wealth enough to provision the effort. It was all a question of the rate at which we were willing to draft manpower, to accept new taxes, and to divert resources. We did not do these things in adequate degree. We let the war settle out ambiguously, permitted the Chinese to get away with a slackening of the hostilities at a juncture of high advantage to themselves and to avoid carrying them on to a point of diminishing returns to them. Then we cut back our ground forces in the sequel to the Korean fighting. This robbed us of strategic flexibility.

As a substitute our Government turned to the massive retaliation doctrine—a doctrine as fearsome and intimidating to our friends and even to ourselves as to our adversaries, perhaps more so. It was a deplorable doctrine, mistaken in conception and hugely harmful in its consequences—and all the Government's attempts to allay the consequences have not availed.

Having chosen to place our reliance on prodigious weapons, and having assigned to them not only the strategic burdens for which they are appropriate but also strategic burdens for which they are not, we slackened the pace and reduced the scope of development with respect to these techniques. The results are that now we face a prospect of becoming second to our adversary in these respects as well as in conventional forces.

I recall these things in no partisan spirit. They should concern us in terms not of party rivalry but of national destiny, even of survival. The point I would make is that nobody forced all these ventures in inadequacy upon us. They came not from our stars but from ourselves. The cumulative effect of inadequate choices has been a reduction in our power to choose.

As for the future? The obvious requirement is to restore, as we can, our power to choose—a power we have suffered to decline through dereliction—so that in the longer run we shall be able to make the better choices that will be foreclosed to us if we go on letting things run along as we have. If we are not able or willing to marshal our wills to make the hard choices of the short run, then, of course, we shall have to discount drastically our policy for the longer run.

Nikita Khrushchev has made his predictions about what we shall do. Speaking to Walter Lippmann recently, he referred to the period just ahead as “the last years of greatness” for the United States, indicating that we shall fail to resolve our wills for the short-run choices necessary to restore our range of choice in the longer run.

Commenting on the great issue here presented, Hans Morgenthau has written: “Our government appears to act upon the assumption, which the people are pleased to accept as self-evident, that our greatness is a kind of inherited, if not natural, quality owing to certain traditional ways of thought and action and to be perpetuated through the perpetuation of these ways.”

He continues: “. . . Our actions belie our knowledge. We know that we are fighting for our lives, but we act as though it could not be quite as serious as that. This contrast between our knowledge and action distinguishes the new isolationism from the old. The old isolationism did not know what the score was and acted as though the score did not exist. The new isolationism knows the score, but hankers back to when we could afford to ignore it.”

It is, of course, precisely with respect to our purpose to maintain a compatible world that we find ourselves in contest with the Soviet Union and the Communist system, where purposes about the world quite antithetic to ours prevail.

But we must put behind us the notion of somehow finding salvation in our good purposes alone. We shall have to learn anew—and to make effective again before it is fatefully too late—the wisdom of William James, who said that it is “when we touch our upper limit and live in our own highest center of energy” that “we can call ourselves saved.”