

Politics As Science, Not Prophecy

Paul Ramsey

It is always unnerving when someone announces that mankind is just now going through “a true watershed period” — that one generation has an essentially different vocation from that of any other. When this verdict is delivered by a leading contemporary intelligence and policy advisor such as W. W. Rostow, one’s only protection from psychological disaster is to recall Eve’s remark to Adam that their’s was a time of “great transition.”

This is not to deny that we can and must try to “make some shape out of the major experiences through which we have all passed since 1945” — or since some other date. If reason is to rule in any measure, we can and must impose some shape upon the political experiences and problems into which we seem likely to be moving for the next decades.

But watershed thinking, when valid, is always a retrospective, historical view. Taking such a long view — the longer, the better — we can perhaps discern some watershed periods in the past. Theologically speaking, we grasp something of God’s *overruling* of man’s ruling and self-ruling. To use this notion in our analysis of *present* experience, however, to introduce it into our analysis of the prospective shape of things to come or (hopefully) to be given to experiences ahead is always a category-mistake. It is an attempted escalation of man’s political wisdom, of his proper rulership in the midst of events. It is anticipatory *providential* thinking; “dispensational” thinking which claims to know the disposal “history and history’s God” will make of men’s proposals.

This is why the addition of this allegation to what may well be a proper political analysis is always a bit unnerving. We know in our hearts that it is an illusion to suppose that we modern men can discern the true lineaments of our particular age of transition when our predecessors in the human story were not

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able to discern theirs to be great or little watersheds. We know that we cannot be both the actors and the providential historians of our own times and of the events we shape and misshape.

Moreover, this tiny escalation of supposed wisdom in political agency (and, therefore, of the bases for determining the responsibilities of government) in our time seems to me to be counter-productive. Attached even to a “conservative” analysis, it is productive of a crisis mentality, of radical discontinuities in politics, and of despair when it turns out that men cannot deliver the ultimate or final determination upon their own properly political determinations.

Such an outlook is productive also of rival apprehensions of the supposed great watershed we are living through, such as that of Michael Washburn who thinks *he* is more in touch than Rostow with “world preferences and probabilities,” the “scope and intensity of violence” ahead, and with revolutionary change as the true meaning of the watershed we are upon. Men ought to be able to live and to practice government without these *cool* or *passionate* illusions, without such secular surrogates for knowing what God is doing with our doings in this period, without what Luther would have called this “godless addition” to all our political works.

Messianism describes the proper political act in terms of one or another alleged discernment of the times and the seasons. It discriminates between the aeons. Messianism asks only a few more years in which men may learn how to deal with revolutionary violence, or it expects men will learn how revolutionary violence will surely deal with “systematic” violence. Messianism proclaims that the invention of nuclear weapons voiding the nation-state changed basically the nature of politics, or that present and future technological changes in rapid sequence are killing politics, economizing and managing mankind. These are only some of the visions that are alleged to have rendered proper political action more a matter of prophetic discernment than a human science.

The general view is that we must first know the *kairos* we are in, or that is ahead. We must find the discontinuous tasks of one generation after another. We peer into forbidding abysses or into unimaginable opportunities to find breakthroughs, watersheds, sea-changes, turning-points, all signalling the historical necessities coming upon us.

Thus have modern men radicalized politics by basing it on messianic “dispensations.” While seeming to turn political wisdom into an exact science — to use Hegelian and Marxist-Leninist language — based on “consciousness of” one or another “necessity” or overruling providence, we at the same time have re-

nounced the truth that politics is a practical activity or art which rules the present and the future only to a human degree.

A more sober and wiser view of politics will emphasize the continuities through all change. The government of men must be founded first of all upon an understanding of certain perennial and essentially unchanging ingredients of political existence, not on epochal occasions or prophecy. Strangely enough, this idea that there is a perennial political philosophy illuminating and governing men's proper political agency confronts today the accusation of "absolutism," the charge that such a view claims that there are "universal views" accessible to political man. Such an indictment has simply to be dismissed by sensible men, since it was drawn by messianists who themselves in fits or moods of *hubris* claim to discern the *aeonic* distinctions — the watersheds — which God or the movement of history are making in our times.

It is not evident that a Hebrew mentality sensing what God is about to do or has done, or sensing the temporal uniquenesses of our times, is more tempted to *hubris* or to exuberance over its supposed discoveries than an Aristotle of politics who seeks only to classify and order the recurring *sorts* of things with which political wisdom and government must deal. Ours is only the very Adamic task of naming the political animals and sorting out the elements constitutive of good political society. In performing this modest task, practical wisdom need not be unmindful of the special characteristics and duties that proper acts of politics must be responsible for in this particular age.

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I hope, therefore, that *worldview* in the next decade of its journalistic existence, as in its first ten years, and also the Council on Religion and International Affairs, will continue to direct our attention to the perennial problems of political community. This is the chief business we have to discharge in the study of religion or ethics and foreign policy.

There are two areas of concern which, it seems to me, should be given top priority in the years ahead.

1. If the leaders of religious opinion manage to repress their penchant for exercises in day-by-day political decision-making, our energies could then be devoted to *studies of the international system*, its nature and limitations, and to an investigation of the *structural improvements* of international practices and institutions which by manifold efforts of thought and action might become possible of achievement. We need together to probe deeply the limits and the prospects of multilateral action and the limits and

the prospects of unilateral action in the international system; the costs and benefits of intervention and the benefits and costs of non-intervention; the weaknesses and the strengths of regional multi-national and world political organizations; ways in which the United Nations could be improved or superceded by a world political authority not so carefully erected upon the nation-state system; how we might fetch forth international decision-making competent and just enough for the world to endure having an effective U.N. peace-keeping power (if that be possible); the community insuring warrants for the nation-state and the limits of the nation-state; the responsibilities of power and of the more powerful nations and not only their temptation to arrogance; the weakness and the strength of international law, conventions and treaties and how these could be kept vital and up-to-date, and be improved; the nature and meaning of political community, of "polity," whether national or international; the nature of the "political act"; the exercise of power as the *esse* of politics and what then comprises the *bene esse* of politics (a *proper* political act, or an act of *proper* politics).



One could go on specifying in additional ways what would be included in a concern for the perennial ingredients composing the political good in the international order. This is enough to indicate where alone we can discover actual relevance to the urgent political questions confronting mankind in the present age. In contrast to these fundamental, structural questions, leapfrogging from crisis to crisis, "solution" to "solution," resolution to resolution, action to action can only be set down as a trivial and inconsequential procedure. For churchmen to inform and form the consciences of ourselves, our fellow churchmen and our contemporaries on particular policy questions is too often mistaken and more frequently too late. But to inform and form minds and consciences and the moral and political *ethos* of our times with a deeper

and clearer grasp of the requisites of viable political community and of the national and international political good in our times could prove to be of peerless importance and relevance, as against the erosions, the individualism, the utopianism that beset all of us in the modern period.

In comparison with this unfinished agenda for understanding the international system, theological extrapolations to the effect that, since God would have all His people be *one*, multilateral action is almost always better than the unilateral action of a nation-state (which was the *dictum* of the 1966 Miami meeting of the National Council of Churches) must simply be set down as a short-cut to which prophetism and messianism tempts religious people. We should instead be at work creating a body of informed opinion within our societies that could contribute to a genuine transcendence of the nation-state, so far as this is desirable. This can be done only if we are alertly looking within the international system to discover cracks in which new structures may possibly take root and grow.

Instead, we have lately conspired with the academic liberals (whom Reinhold Niebuhr fought to a standstill) to evacuate an adequate Christian understanding of political existence from the minds of men. We have done this in the name of particular prophecy — precisely in an age when a proper statecraft is most urgently needed, and in our own country where a conception of political responsibility matching our power seems most lacking.

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2. This is the case also in regard to a second set of issues to which I would give priority in the years immediately ahead. For the short or long meanwhile, we are going to have to make judgments concerning the use of armed force; and here again the emphasis should be not upon one case after another, but on *clarifying the grounds* upon which men should make judgments as to the justice of resorts to war. It is of *first* importance that Christians decide how we are going rightly to resolve dispute over the justice of war, before delivering ourselves to verdicts that particular uses of force can or cannot be justified. Until we do this, we have little business trying to inform the conscience of the nations. If our criteria are not first defended as informative for statecraft, the particular pieces of advice we give are very apt to lessen responsible resolve, or strengthen it in the wrong direction, or to be dismissed by those who bear the awesome burdens of political office.

It will surprise no one to learn that the present writer is of the opinion that for decades we have

undertaken only to administer a not-very-wet baptism to modern man's notions about the use of armed force. This view may be described as a tame version of limited war. According to this view, killing in war is intrinsically wrong, but this immorality may nevertheless be done if the acts of war are calculated to lead to a lesser available evil among the consequences. Such "lesser evil" pragmatic warrants for possible Christian participation in war locate decisions to resort to armed force among the "situational ambiguities." This is to justify the doing of evil that good may come of it — which fashion in ethics has now spread to personal behavior as well.

The limited-war doctrine prevails in the churches because it is modern man's only view of the morality of war. This form of it (unlike the more realistic versions of Kissinger and others) has proved irrelevant to the responsibilities of statesmen on one side or the other, or both, of most of the crises and conflicts going on in our lifetime. The counsel it yields is on all occasions, Stop, Do Less, Let Peace Prevail. It is fruitful of many an explanation that the enemy is always reconcilable and that his paranoia was due to our containment (Nazi Germany or Red China), of attempted corrections of our supposed excessive confidence in the use of force, of ever renewed searches for lesser evil alternatives that are not there. It seeks always to frustrate unilateral national initiative in the use of force, and in doing so may let worse befall. It provides no grounds for supposing (as now seems likely to have been true) that only U.S. initiative in sending a ship to challenge the Egyptian blockade of the gulf of Aquaba might have loosed Jordan from its bonds with Nasser, or could have forestalled Israel's six-day war, or prevented the increase of garrison states and Russian presence in that region of the world for our lifetime.

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If these limited-war teachings are correct, then there need be only one more issue of *worldview* in which we would deplore the scandal of all the conflicts now going on and likely to arise in the next ten years. Each, we would have good reason to believe, is in a nuclear age likely to do more harm than the evil it seeks to prevent, or may involve too grave a risk of wider war.

But this is *not* the world in which statesmen live, or citizens discharge their present political responsibilities. I do not believe that statesmen or citizens, insofar as they are influenced by Christian opinion, should be left in such a vacuum, or bombarded by such abstract, irrelevant advice. We need to have more than this to say in the years ahead. A nuclear non-prolifera-

The Challenge of the Future

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tion treaty, for example, will (if it is a good thing) require *more*, not fewer, far-flung commitments of the U.S. to guarantee the security of non-nuclear powers against direct nuclear blackmail and against even conventional or insurgency assaults that are backed by nuclear threat. It simply will not be sufficient for us to say that since war is evil the less of it the less threat of it or commitment to it the better, or that since God wills the unity of mankind unilateral national action resorting to armed force or to the threat of force should always be frowned upon. We had better begin re-educating ourselves, and the greater or lesser magistrates who will listen to us, in the elements of Christian political realism.

This includes, I believe, a great work of practical reason removing the limited-war doctrine from the minds of men and replacing it with the just-war doctrine on the use of force. It is increasingly clear that any overlap or resemblance between these two views is more or less coincidental. The teachings about *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* (when is war right? and what is right in war?) do not simply locate decisions to resort to armed force among the situational ambiguities, or suggest that such judgments are solely to be determined by a choice of a lesser evil that a less evil may come. This teaching does not set forth some sort of circumstantial "exception" in political ethics.

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On the contrary, the "just-war" theory seeks and believes that it finds "moral permissions," moral obligations to use force, a charitable and just determination of the "moral laws of war." It defines *right* doing that good may come of it, not wrong doing quixotically alleged to be warranted solely by consequences expected to follow. It is a theory of statecraft, marking out the place of force in politics. It, then, attempts to define the justice of and the moral limits upon this activity of the nation-state in the international system.

He who cannot grasp the nettle of the fact that there are *moral permissions* in regard to war — indeed, responsibilities to be discharged in this regard — should retire from offering advice to Princes (which means all citizens and their political leaders in a democratic state).

If we are going to deepen our common understanding of ethics and foreign policy, the fostering of this understanding must have at least secondary priority, while we also and primarily seek to inculcate in ourselves and among men generally and in the culture at large an understanding of how new practices and institutions may be planted and take root and flourish in the international system.

No task in political science or diplomatic analysis is more baffling and uncertain than that of political prediction. To say that we are at a watershed in the unfolding of contemporary international relations is to postulate the existence of deep running social and political forces so powerful that they will carry international society into a new era. That important forces exist affecting international politics is beyond dispute; that these aspects of the present day world are capable of transforming the relations among men and nations is far less susceptible of proof.

It is sobering to look back to the dominant views concerning international society which were prevalent two decades ago. First, many saw in the establishment of the United Nations the possibility of removing power politics and rivalries among states from the international scene. It was widely hoped and believed that a new organization dedicated to the maintenance of security and peace would usher in a reign of international law and order. The main debate centered on whether the powers of this institution, which many considered an advance over the League of Nations, should not have been hammered out in the mold of a genuine world government. Forgotten or overlooked was the persistent character of national ambition and the quest for national security. The struggle for peace and order still took place in a nation-centered world. Moreover nations, like individuals, tended for the most part to put their own interests or conceptions of their interests first, thus moving along a fateful collision course with others proceeding on the same tack.

There have been, if anything, a larger number of well-publicized conflicts involving ambitious and insecure nations than had been the case in an earlier era. Far from being a shrine for memorializing international peace, the United Nations has become the cockpit of worldwide conflict and strife. Those who saw in the U.N. the means of transforming the world have, with each passing year, grown more skeptical if not cynical about its role. Had the political predictions concerning the United Nations emphasized its

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