

THE IRRELEVANCE OF ANTI-COMMITMENT

erally sympathetic to their plight. He realizes that many of them don't actually want to go to college at all but are pressured to do so. He also realizes that after they get there, large numbers of them are victimized by the impersonality of the system. But one must go deeper and question the advisability of herding students into college immediately after high school. As the humorist Russell Baker has put it, this keeps youth imprisoned in kidhood far too long.

Two of the reasons why students fail to catch fire, why they lack what Socrates called the indispensable craving to know, is first of all because college is too much like high school. They are subjected to a similar routine of classes, note taking and memorization and have long since become bored with it. Secondly, most students lack the life-experience (not necessarily the same thing as maturity) to properly appreciate the kind of thing they are likely to be taught in the humanities and behavioral disciplines. The great themes of our liberal tradition — love, suffering, passion, critical inquiry and so forth — fall upon unhearing ears because our young people have been locked out of such experiences. I think this is the principal reason why teachers, as the charge goes, don't teach, why they flee to the graduate schools and the asylum of research. It becomes incredibly dispiriting to face a sea of indifference year after year. Paul Goodman and others have suggested that after high school, students be released for more maturing forms of activity before going to college. I think this is a creative suggestion and ought to be explored at length.

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One of Barzun's final proposals is worth pondering. The university, he says is not a democracy. The one man, one vote principle will not work there. The university "has members appointed for various tasks, not citizens voting for their governors. . . . Moreover, it is in practice extremely difficult to get from student bodies either a significant vote, or a council or committee that is representative." This is a good point. Education is exceedingly difficult work. There is no way of effectively sugaring the pill. Easy slogans like "education should be exciting" or "education is life" are not only misleading but false.

Professor Barzun is perhaps too inclined to turn the clock back and seek his solutions in the past. It is my experience that there is no effective way of solving a present problem by returning to a prior state of affairs. On the other hand, education perhaps ought to be more rooted in its history than any of our cultural enterprises, including religion. Though not often heeded, the voices of Plato, Rousseau and Newman are still highly relevant.

" . . . at this extraordinary moment of history, we just happen to be the world's strongest economy, its most durable democracy, its greatest military power, and its most creative fount of scientific discovery and technological triumph. Withdrawal and anti-commitment cannot be our 'thing.' Our problem is not to decide whether we will be involved, but how." So argued NATO Ambassador Harlan Cleveland in an address at the 1968 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in September. A portion of his speech, which appears in the Winter issue of The Atlantic Quarterly, is reprinted below.

So the mood is anti-commitment. Somebody else will have to be the granary of freedom, the arsenal of democracy, the nemesis of aggressors, the ally for progress, the builder of world order. We have problems at home; our first obligation is to succor the poor and keep the peace right here in America.

To an American politics-watcher living abroad, what is puzzling about this mood is not its undoubted righteousness but its dubious relevance. Righteous we have always been, as much when we thought we were saving the world as in that earlier time when we thought we were saving ourselves from entanglement in it. A strong case can be made that others are not pulling their weight in peacekeeping and international cooperation: the rich Europeans have drawn in on themselves, the poor in other continents are still depending too much on outsiders to do their nation-building for them. But looked at from abroad, our own performance is no longer so impressive. With the single exception of Vietnam, we are spending proportionately less on U.S. foreign policy than in any year since 1939, the date of our last Neutrality Act. And this year's Congressional and public debate reveals that influential Americans, unable to withdraw from Vietnam, are determined to withdraw from the rest of our foreign policy instead. . . .

My thesis [is] that a mood of anti-commitment is pleasantly righteous but practically irrelevant. . . .

Let us define our terms rather informally: The words "American commitment abroad" are loosely used to cover everything from treaty obligations to feelings of moral obligation; they are applied to the war in Vietnam, which we are doing quite a lot about, and to hunger in Biafra, which nobody has succeeded

in doing enough about. But for our purposes international commitment is, quite simply, something the United States thinks it has to do about an international problem.

International commitments are usually justified, before or sometimes after an irrevocable act, on the basis of abstract principle—the sovereign right of independent states to defend themselves, and to ask for help in doing so; the obligation of the fortunate to help the disadvantaged; the common interest in cooperative endeavor. These abstractions are indeed the stuff of politics. Civilized peoples are moved by them to accept burdens, appropriate money, and join the Marines. And it so happens that these three abstractions stand for the three main kinds of international undertakings to which the United States is continually recommitted by word and deed: “security,” “aid,” and “technical cooperation.”

In facing each new commitment, or deciding whether to continue old ones, the question almost never seems to be whether to enlarge or extend our international obligations. Instead, the form of the policy question is nearly always the opposite: what can we effectively do to avoid getting in too deep? Most of the time the purpose of “commitment” is to avoid or minimize or economize on larger commitments that otherwise would probably have to be made. We involve ourselves in limited ways precisely in order to avoid getting involved in unlimited ways.

We help arm other countries if we perceive a U.S. national interest in their defense—that is, if we judge that not arming them might, in a pinch, require us to undertake their whole defense with our own arms. We join in international development schemes not only because some Americans think the war on poverty does not stop at the water’s edge, but also because most Americans vaguely fear the social and political and military consequences of trying to live in our wealthy manor in the midst of a global slum. We join international organizations (54 of them so far) and attend international conferences (more than 600 of them each year—16 in one recent week) because there are so many fields in which we can better serve our own interests by pooling them with those of others: like forecasting the population and the weather, allocating resources and radio frequencies, pursuing scientific truth and dope peddlers.

The explosive growth of international cooperation in the last couple of decades seems to have obscured from public view the fact that the motivation for so many commitments is commitment-avoidance. It is true that, for one reason or another, we have picked up 43 military allies—14 in NATO, 21 in the Rio Pact, and 8 in Asia. But it is worth remembering a

few of the hundreds of occasions when we did *not* get committed.

- We referred to the U.N. a 1960 Congo request for direct military intervention.

- We did not move militarily in 1956 in Hungary or (in 1938 or 1948 or 1968) in Czechoslovakia.

- We did not fight—though we tried to make peace—in two wars between India and Pakistan, and three wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

- We avoided direct involvement in confrontations between Indonesia and Malaysia, Morocco and Algeria, the north and the south in the Sudan, when these pairs fell to fighting. In all these cases—and in dozens of other small wars or near wars or civil wars—either or both sides asked for U.S. help or would have been glad to have it. But, as a committed Asian once told me bitterly, “The United States is the world’s biggest neutralist nation—it tries to be neutral on more subjects than anyone else.”

This is not, on a sober look at modern history, the record of a messianic policeman to the world. Yet the same record reveals a depth and extension of U.S. involvement that has become a primary issue in our own politics. Both for the inarticulate majority that more or less supports the Administration’s actions on Vietnam, and for the articulate minority that more or less opposes them, the slogan “No more Vietnams” has achieved a wide acceptance; and “world policeman,” an honorable term when used in the early debates about establishing the United Nations, has in a short generation become a national epithet and a summary indictment of American foreign policy.

We got into most of our postwar commitments as an incident to the cold war. What created the North Atlantic Treaty, the firmness on Berlin, the Rio and Baghdad and Bangkok Pacts, the U.N. operations in Korea and the Middle East and the Congo, the Cuba missile facedown, the Vietnam war was not of course the monolithic Communist world conspiracy of song and story. It was something more dynamic, and each year more pluralistic—a complex of Russian Communist expansionism, Chinese Communist truculence, and the overconfidence and ambition of lesser communisms, notably those of Kim and Castro and Ho Chi Minh—all related to each other by history, ideology, sentiment and military aid.

It seemed natural that the United States should lead the effort to demonstrate to the various kinds of Communists that military militancy would not pay, that history was not on their side, that peaceful change would be safer for them as well as for the rest of us. The effort was always reasonably popular with Americans, and at moments of doubt the Soviets have generally done something to illustrate for the

doubters the case for new or continued commitment—their takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948 helped pass the Marshall Plan, the invasion of 1968 helped answer the question whether we still needed U.S. troops in Europe.

Our effort to cope with the cold war effort had its ups and downs; it was hard and dangerous work; its total cost in human casualties ran into the hundreds of thousands, the monetary cost amounted to something like a trillion dollars for the twenty-year period. But until now—with uncertainties still surrounding the outcome in Vietnam—it has clearly been a workable policy that served us well. That does not mean the cold war can be declared as “won”; Communists of various stripes have not yet abandoned ambitions that can only be satisfied at the expense of other people’s political self-determination. But waging the cold war (with the latent threat of hot war in the background) did frustrate expansion of Russia’s European empire, contain China short of Formosa, counter direct aggression in Korea and in Vietnam, and hold Castro to a Cuban, not a Hemispheric, revolution. And the developing nations of Asia and Africa, through insisting with Western support on their own brands of nationalism, somehow prevented Communists (whether inspired from Moscow or Peking) from coming to power in any of the half-a-hundred states that achieved nationhood during these 20 years.

After the invasion of Czechoslovakia it does not sound quite so old-fashioned to mention the cold war and the American commitment that flowed from it. Indeed, there is probably some danger just now that our public debate on foreign policy will revert to the reasoning and rhetoric of the Nineteen Fifties. Soviet behavior of the past summer certainly does not pre-empt the inevitable détente which most of us were wish-thinking was in the wind. But neither is 1969 suddenly 1949. Then the Communists thought one big war inevitable; now they (and we) regard only small wars among developing nations as inevitable. Then the Soviets were just testing “Joe One,” their first atomic bomb, and they thought they were in an arms race with us; now they (and we) find the race was really against time, and we both won it in the sense of achieving a capability time, and we both won it in the sense of achieving a capability for Assured Destruction no matter who strikes first. Then a would-be monolithic Party, run by one dictator, was promoting and presiding over world communism; now a collective leadership seems willing to sacrifice world revolution to make absolutely sure of hanging onto a dependable socialism-in-one region. Then the

Soviet empire was expanding; now its builders are trying by force to avoid its coming apart.

The result is a range of dangers and opportunities which is neither the cold war of our old fears nor the warm détente of our recent dreams. The orthodox military threat as measured by Warsaw Pact capabilities has certainly increased: the Soviets have in two weeks greatly increased and improved their ready divisions in Eastern Europe, placing some of their best-equipped troops right on the frontier of Bavaria. At the same time the political behavior that converts those capabilities into a “threat” has also jumped to a new dimension in unpredictability:

If, a neighboring ally is treated thus, what treatment can other neighbors expect—if unprotected by Alliances of their own? A government that can move troops so efficiently behind so sloppy a political plan might be capable of misreading Western determination too. . . .

It is noticeable that U.S. international commitments are less vulnerable in our domestic politics when they are more multilateral in sponsorship and support. In the past twenty years, for example, our Atlantic relationships and our U.N. policy and our arrangements in the Western Hemisphere have been consistently bipartisan and comparatively non-controversial. When there is a row about a UNESCO program, or a U.N. peacekeeping operation, or NATO troop levels, or the Alliance for Progress, it is not the depth of our treaty commitments or the character of our cooperative arrangements that is in the line of fire. Rather, the criticism is narrow-gauge, short-term, and tactical—that a booklet subverts our teachers (not that a U.N. agency shouldn’t produce booklets with our money); that the peacekeeping force should have stayed in the Middle East (not that it shouldn’t have been there in the first place); that European defense is too hard on our balance of payments (not that we should withdraw from our NATO commitments); that the Alliance for Progress has not abolished hemispheric poverty (not that it shouldn’t try).

Even when the essence of an international operation is the U.S. input—the Korean War, the Lebanon and Dominican Republic crises, the Children’s Fund, the World Weather Watch—dependable domestic political support requires the operation to have an international character—and international governance. President Truman ordered General MacArthur to start resisting in Korea even before the U.N. Security Council could meet and make that resistance a U.N. operation—but it was a U.N. command constitutionally related to the Charter and the Organization. President Eisenhower sent troops to Lebanon, but announced they were intended merely to hold

the line for U.N. peacekeeping and mediation; the U.N. came into the picture considerably later, and after the imminent crisis was resolved, but the U.N. involvement was crucial for the general opinion, of Americans as well as of mankind. The Dominican record is even fuzzier: it started as a rescue operation in the middle of the week, and became by the weekend a peacekeeping operation; but the President's early announcement that the U.S. force was holding the line for what we hoped would become a responsibility of O.A.S. peacekeepers enabled order and politics to be restored—after a year of skillful mediation by an O.A.S. commission headed by an American diplomat.

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When the Congo blew up in 1960, during the first week of its independence, the government appealed to President Eisenhower to intervene; instead he encouraged the U.N. to act on a similar request Dag Hammarskjöld had from the Congo; then the President and his two successors backed the U.N. operation to the hilt. Each time the Congo erupted again those of us involved found ourselves once again in President Kennedy's office; he always seemed to ask the same question: Is it still true, as you told me last time, that if the U.N. has to withdraw, the U.S. might have to go in? Each time he got an affirmative answer to that question, and each time he told us to go back and help the U.N. keep the peace in the Congo.

In international development it has also been true that spending our money through world banks and funds is comparatively popular, while spending it by ourselves is increasingly unpopular. There is something to be said for and against both bilateral and multilateral development aid. But measured by political reactions in the United States, the choice is not even close. The World Bank, the U.N. Development Program and the aid efforts of the international technical agencies, keep rising as a proportion of all U.S. foreign aid, because people sense we can thereby insure that a fair share is put up by other rich countries, and that the administrative and political troubles any aid program experiences will also be widely shared rather than come home to roost in Washington. In the five years that I was presenting these programs to hard-nosed Appropriations Committees, I was astonished to find we almost never lost a dime from the President's request to Congress.

The same is true of the money we pay for international technical cooperation—to study fisheries, control the air waves, to combat illiteracy, to set up a global weather forecasting system, to develop the Mekong Valley, and the Indus and the Volta. U.S.

support for international development is increasingly impressive; we are still the largest contributor to international development assistance, which now outranks the U.S. bilateral program as the world's largest aid effort.

To the extent that an operation looks unilateral, its domestic political support seems to suffer. Without suggesting that this aspect of the Vietnam ordeal is its only controversial feature, it is surely the sense of loneliness, as well as the substance of our commitment to defend South Vietnam, that has activated such articulate opposition to the war, and this is true even though in practice there are more non-U.S. troops helping South Vietnam than there were in the U.N. command that helped South Korea in the early 1950's. (It should not be forgotten that we have explored every avenue toward peace in Southeast Asia, including the U.N.)

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The case for internationalizing the work we have to do in the world is therefore very strong. It stems from practical observation that cooperative arrangements "work" better in sharing burdens with smaller nations (i.e., nearly all nations where the United States is involved); this is as true of the use of armed force as it is of development aid and technical cooperation. To change the context in mid-effort is often impossible; the U.S. did not directly associate itself with what has come to be called the Geneva agreements about Vietnam, whereas it had participated in the early U.N. guarantees to South Korea. But from now on, each new commitment will likely be tested to see if its sponsorship is international enough to justify a U.S. effort. Have we maximized the community of the concerned? Who else is in the act? And how will the enterprise be governed? These are the questions our experience and the need for broad support at home will bring to the surface as new peacekeeping crises erupt, new aid needs appear, and new opportunities are created by science to master man's increasingly international environment.

"No more Vietnams," is a popular exhortation these days; what does it mean? "No more Vietnams" cannot in the nature of things mean "no more foreign policy," nor even "no more resistance to direct or indirect aggression." But if the phrase can be read as a restatement of the American people's continuing interest in sharing with as many partners as possible the responsibility for international peacekeeping and development—and (what is more difficult) share through consultation the decisions as well—this new slogan may yet achieve an honored niche in the conventional wisdom. . . .