

NEO-ISOLATIONISM AND U.S. POLICIES

Donald Brandon

George Kennan, architect of America's policy of containment adopted in 1946-47, said a decade later in his Reith Lectures over the B.B.C. (subsequently published as *Russia, the Atom and the West*), that the "moral example" of this country should be its primary instrument of foreign policy. In his words, this country could best "apply the hand" (to stem Communist challenges) to "our American failings—to the things we are ashamed of in our own eyes: to the racial problem, to the conditions in our big cities, to the education and environment of our young people, to the growing gap between specialized knowledge and popular understanding." Kennan had complained earlier that both the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations misunderstood his concept of containment. And in his *Memoirs: 1925-1950* (1967), he lamented the over-militarization of containment. He wrote that he didn't think NATO or other American-led alliances were necessary in order to fulfill the call in his famous "Mr. X" essay for a "... long-term, patient, but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies." ("The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July, 1947.)

During the last several years, the war in Vietnam, together with the domestic racial crisis, the "generation gap," and other ailments, has produced another Great Debate over American foreign policy. Actors and observers have gone beyond attacking the Johnson Administration's conduct of the war, and have challenged the "globalism" allegedly afflicting this country's role in world affairs. Senator William Fulbright's *The Arrogance of Power*, Senator Eugene McCarthy's *America's Role in the World*, Edmund Stillman and William Pfaff's *Power and Impotence*, and Ronald Steel's *Pax Americana* illustrate this chorus of dissent. The well-known Dutch journalist, J. H. Huizenga, discussed and largely dismissed the themes of these books with some insight in his recent essay, "America's Lost Innocence" (*The New York Times Magazine*, January 26, 1969). While most of the authors cited above defend the American power role in Western Europe, they are uniformly critical of the United States' efforts in Asia, especially in Vietnam.

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But as Huizenga wrote, "... one can legitimately ask whether the wish is not father to the thought with those who accuse their country of a misuse of its power, whether it is not their aversion from the power game which makes them deny the need to join in it on the Asiatic front."

It is evident that McGeorge Bundy was overly optimistic in his essay, "The End of Either/Or" (*Foreign Affairs*, January, 1967). In that piece the former Special Assistant to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson assumed it was generally agreed that "we need *both* military *and* economic action" in Vietnam and elsewhere; "we are *both* an Atlantic *and* a Pacific partner"; and finally, "we have a still more sweeping double duty: to carry on *both* these wide foreign activities *and* an active program of social progress at home." Although President Nixon and his Special Assistant Henry Kissinger seem generally to agree with Bundy's analysis and prescription, it is evident that many actors and observers do not. Hans Morgenthau, both a leading academic expert on world politics and a bitter foe of this nation's role in Vietnam and Asia generally, has produced *A New Foreign Policy for the United States* (1969), a polemical work which supports the themes of Fulbright, McCarthy, Stillman and Pfaff, Steel and company. Morgenthau reiterates the point made in Kennan's Reith Lectures: "Instead of embarking upon costly and futile interventions for the purpose of building nations and viable economies abroad, the United States ought to concentrate its efforts upon creating a society at home which can again serve as a model for other nations to emulate."

Morgenthau and the other critics cited above have seized upon a statement of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams as almost scriptural authority for their neo-isolationist position. Adams said, with reference to those in this nation who championed American intervention in the Greek struggle for independence from Ottoman Turkey in the early 1820's, the United States "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own." While one can agree with the prudential wisdom of Adams' position on the issue at

hand, the contemporary critics of America's role in the world ignore the fact that there was neither an Ottoman Turkish nor other significant threat to America's interests and security in the 1820's. The world environment in the era since 1945 is hardly comparable to that of Adams' distant day. In his *Gulliver's Troubles, Or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (1968) Stanley Hoffmann recalled the situation at the time containment was adopted and implemented: "In 1947-48, the United States had to consider the collapse of British power in the Middle East, the political and economic demise of Europe, the opportunities opened by misery and civil strife for Communist success, and the skill with which Stalin played his cards. It had a simple choice between abdicating from leadership, which would have been a refusal to act as a great power, and deciding to play such a role. . ." If it would also have been folly to have intervened in Greece in the 1820's, it would also have been folly not to have intervened in Greece, Turkey, Iran, and Western Europe in the aftermath of the second world war. Moreover, "both military and economic action" were essential to American purposes in Western Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, as it can and has been argued they are now both necessary in Asia. (See, for example, Drew Middleton, *America's Stake in Asia*, 1968; and Robert Thompson, "Vietnam: Which Way Out?" *Interplay*, March, 1969.)

The dreadful possibility of nuclear war, the limited and awful war in Vietnam, and domestic problems have led the critics mentioned above to develop several basic themes in their appeal for greater concentration upon domestic affairs and a reduction in American commitments abroad. "Globalism," they argue, is simply the opposite extreme of America's historic isolationist tradition. Whereas this country improperly refused to exercise its responsibility as a great power during the 1920's and 1930's, since the second world war it has gotten involved on all the continents. It has been acting as "global policeman" and architect of a "global Great Society." America's leaders have failed to realize the truth of D. W. Brogan's concept of "The Illusions of American Omnipotence" (*Harper's*, December, 1962). Moreover, America, with all its domestic ills and injustices, has nevertheless acted as "self-righteous" guarantor of the "free world." And this pursuit of "world order," especially by the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, has developed at a time when the threat from both the Soviet Union and Communist China has declined. Polycentrism within the Communist movement and nationalism in the Third World have rendered the "global" approach of American foreign

policy both unnecessary and "unethical."

Hans Morgenthau puts the main thrust of the neo-isolationist position as follows in his new book: "The United States has one primary national interest in its relations with other nations: the security of its territory and institutions." America also "has a number of secondary interests in the world, such as peace and security everywhere, the protection and promotion of democratic governments, the containment of Communist governments and movements, the relief of poverty and disease." But the pursuit of secondary interests is "subject to two limitations. They are not to be pursued at the expense of the primary interest of national security, and they can be pursued only within the rather narrow limits of available wisdom and power." Morgenthau, like the other critics mentioned above, believes that in the 1960's the United States has become overcommitted in regard to the pursuit of "secondary" interests. One can agree that at times both the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations became rhetorically inebriated, but it is more difficult to pinpoint specific examples of overcommitment. It is of course widely thought that the Johnson Administration over-escalated in Vietnam. But even if one agrees, it does not follow that the United States should not have attempted to meet its commitment there, and none of the critical actors and observers have called for abrupt withdrawal from Vietnam.

Apart from Vietnam, exactly where is the United States acting like a "global policeman" and so on? This country did not intervene in the Indonesian upheaval; in the Six Day war in the Middle East; in the Nigerian civil war; and in various other internal and international crises in the 1960's. As for foreign aid, the American contribution unhappily has been sharply reduced during the present decade, as well as more focused on a limited number of recipient nations. In his *Nation or Empire? The Debate Over American Foreign Policy* (1968), Robert W. Tucker points out that the informed and responsible dissenters in this country actually have a conception of American involvement in the world which is not, apart from controversy over Vietnam, markedly different from that of the United States Government. They support "preservation of a favorable balance of power in Europe and Asia and continued hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. . ." The critics generally agree with Morgenthau's category of "secondary interests." As Tucker says, "the critical issue in the debate is not so much the issue of what comprises the nation's vital interests as the nature of the threat

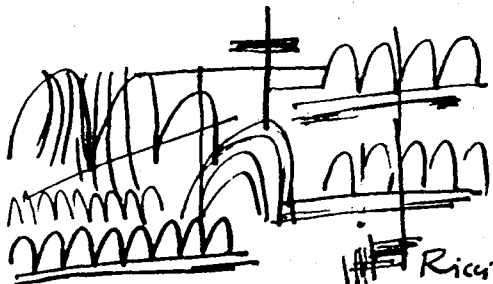
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HOLY DAYS IN HABANA

plausible, reason for believing that it would somehow resolve the problem of maintaining a world order in which American interests would be preserved. Why should the example we set at home affect Chinese aspirations in Asia? Why should the example we set at home affect the prospects of nuclear proliferation? How would a benign example on our part resolve the conflict between the Arab states and Israel? There is something touching in the belief for which history, including our own, provides little basis, that we can do by example what we cannot do by precept."

One can agree in part with those critics who attack the "globalist" and Messianic aspects of postwar American foreign policy, even if one thinks that they often mistake rhetoric for action. But reflection suggests that their understandable fear of nuclear war and their fury over America's Vietnam involvement vitiates both their analysis and their prescription of neo-isolationism. It is past time for "The End of Either/Or." America has no choice between power and development politics abroad, and it has no choice between concentrating primarily on domestic or foreign policy. The world environment will continue to be turbulent for the remainder of this century. Carleton concludes his discussion of the question cited above, "Were Americans Prepared for World Leadership?" with the following questions: "Would the Americans see the world crisis through? Would they dare to do otherwise? How successful would their leadership be?" He is, like all other students of American foreign policy, critical of various aspects of this nation's effort over the last quarter of a century. But he concludes his book by predicting "... the American Presence (in world affairs) would likely increase rather than diminish during the closing decades of the twentieth century." It remains to be seen, of course. But rational analysis suggests that if the emotional backlash to Vietnam and legitimate concern with pressing domestic problems combine to produce a significant decline in America's presence, neither this country's "primary" nor "secondary" interests would be served. Hopefully, the Nixon Administration and public opinion will not be heavily influenced by the arguments of the neo-isolationists.



Few accounts of the post-revolutionary religious situation in Cuba have included the state of the much-diminished Jewish community on the island. Last fall, Rabbi Everett Gendler, formerly of the Jewish Center in Princeton and who has served congregations in Latin America, spent the "Holy Days in Habana." A record of his trip, which first appeared in the Winter issue of Conservative Judaism, is reprinted in part below.

"Tell me, Rabbi: before, when there was crime, corruption, prostitution, killings, our Jews seemed content to be here; now that there is a decent government which is doing something for *all* the people, most of our Jews leave. Is that right, Rabbi? Is that what our religion teaches?"

I had been in Cuba only four days when this question was asked me, just after services the second morning of Rosh Hashanah, by the *baal tefilah* of the Sephardic congregation in the Vedado section of Habana, a gentle-voiced man whose *kavanah* had impressed me during the services and whose question now sharply challenged me. Its challenge was due partly to the man who posed it, obviously a dedicated and involved Jew, and partly to what I had already seen and felt in and around Habana: a vitality of spirit, a dedication to the welfare and education of youth, and a cooperation and sharing which I had felt elsewhere only in Israel.

The question was, on reflection, somewhat surprising as well. Cuba, after all, purports to be a Communist experiment, and we all associate communism with an anti-religious orientation which is sometimes, as in the case of the Soviet Union, anti-Jewish as well. I had heard that Cuba was different, as indeed it turned out to be, but at that point I had not yet fully grasped to what an extent it is its own independent social experiment, with special features and particular qualities not found elsewhere. As I was quickly to discover, however, these directly affect the Jewish situation and make of it also something quite unusual.

There are, for example, still functioning in Habana, despite the departure of nearly 9,000 of its pre-revolutionary 10,000 Jews, the five congregations which existed in 1958; three in Vedado, a coastal section of Habana with some luxury hotels, quite a few high-rise apartments and many fine homes; and two in Old Habana, the port and commercial section of the city