

Was de Tocqueville's Pessimism Justified?

Donald Brandon

In his classic *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville expressed doubt that this country would be able to conduct a wise foreign policy. He argued that democracies lack the qualities necessary for such a stance in world affairs. In his words, "... a democracy can only with great difficulty regulate the details of an important undertaking, persevere in a fixed design, and work out its execution in spite of serious obstacles." Through the second world war, many students of American foreign policy felt that de Tocqueville's pessimistic expectations had been proven valid. Since 1898, this nation seemed to oscillate between extremes of adventurous activism and sullen isolationism. But after 1945, perhaps, most observers in this country have engaged in self-congratulation regarding the steadiness of American foreign policy. The United States adopted the containment policy in response to the postwar international situation, and has stuck with it in general to the present. For a generation America has adhered to the middle path, avoiding both isolationism and a Crusade to stamp out communism.

As we enter the 1970's, however, the postwar Grand Design is under serious and sustained attack by some quarters in America, as well as by Communist and some other nations abroad. Reaction among old and young to the mess in Vietnam, pressure to do more regarding domestic ills, and the emergence of a generation which doesn't remember the beginnings of the cold war, and in any event regards history as irrelevant, have combined with other factors to challenge U.S. foreign policy. Old and New Left, of course, have seized the occasion to try to undermine the institutions of America as well as to obtain "immediate withdrawal" from Vietnam. Many university students are so angry about Vietnam and racial injustice, and so ignorant of contemporary history, that they are receptive to the "revisionist" history of the cold war which portrays the United States as a "capitalist-racist-imperialist" power and as the source of the cold war. Some liberals and "doves," anxious to capture the allegiance of the young, play on these notions in order to try to foster their political ambi-

tions. Some conservatives as well as reactionaries add their emotional fuel to the cauldron in reaction to radical and liberal antics.

The Nixon Administration has responded to this situation by reducing both American defense and development appropriations. A senior official was quoted as saying, "We've been forced largely by the pressure of inflation, plus a feeling that certain domestic programs ought to have a larger share of the budget, to make a defense choice largely based on cost. The fiscal tail is wagging the strategic dog." Shades of the Eisenhower Administration! Nixon's Latin American policy statement calls for downplaying U.S. aid, and enhancing liberalized trade, thus accentuating the decline in foreign aid expenditures throughout the 1960's, the "Decade of Development." At the same time, despite the rhetoric of the Nixon Doctrine, the President continues to reaffirm American commitments around the world, and to attack neo-isolationism. It seems that Nixon wants to maintain an activist American foreign policy, while avoiding more Vietnams, but feels impelled by the pressures mentioned above to reduce the American "profile" in the Third World. He doesn't appear to be "with it" in domestic policy, but he is also trying to give more attention to this nation's urgent internal problems.

Perhaps it can be said that the President and the country are confronted with two clashing realities: continued turbulence in the world which requires a significant American presence, and the lack of comprehension of many Americans regarding this necessity. The sincere but ill-informed and emotional critics of Vietnam (as contrasted with those Old and New Left groups who want to destroy American institutions) fail to understand that the challenge from Moscow and Peking still exists, and that Western Europe and Japan are still unable and/or unwilling to make a major contribution to defense of the "free world." Critics appear more aware of the needs of the Third World, however mistaken in their notion that only development politics are required in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. In short, a sharp reduction in American foreign policy commitments would be premature given the objective world situation. But some Americans are unaware of this fact. The danger is that the efforts of a generation may be jeopardized by irrational reductions in the United States' role in the world.

There is no question but that Western Europe and Japan should do more in defense as well as development politics in the 1970's. Perhaps American pressure and some reductions in this nation's commitments and

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expenditures will in time lead to a larger role for Western Europe and Japan. America has borne a heavy and lonely burden since 1945. What is required is a rational effort to reduce the American role simultaneously with an enhanced Western European and Japanese effort, as contrasted with a premature cutback in the United States' presence. This is obviously more easily said than done, and the effort is complicated by the real domestic needs of this nation and the emotional and destructive forces referred to above. In a way it can be said that President Nixon faces the same requirement in overall American foreign policy as he does in Vietnam: a premature withdrawal would have very adverse if not disastrous consequences in both cases. And the President is confronted with Communist sophistry and American emotionalism as he attempts to handle both the general and the specific situations. Hopefully, the Administration will be able to succeed and thereby refute de Tocqueville's pessimistic prediction about the lack of democratic persistence and rationality "in spite of serious obstacles."

It should be pointed out that even if America manages these difficult feats, it is likely that nuclear pro-

liferation will accompany a reduction in the U.S. presence. And a multipolar military as well as political world could prove even more unstable and dangerous than the bipolar military system which has existed ever since the second world war. A smaller American effort may well result in a larger amount of insecurity. But this country can no more have its cake and eat it than can any other nation under the sun. In any event, this nation is going to have a large burden in foreign policy in the coming decade, barring an irrational retreat to neo-isolationism. Thomas Bailey is harshly critical of the American role in Vietnam. But he says in the epilogue of the latest edition of his text, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (1969): "Many Americans do not have the patience to sustain a long-range program in foreign affairs, and the Communists are counting on this weakness. The ordinary American wearies quickly of well doing; he is too willing to appease or to postpone the evil day. The American people must gird themselves for a long campaign and learn to live with chronic crisis." Perhaps it was premature to pat ourselves on the back for having disproved de Tocqueville's gloomy forecast. The returns aren't in yet.

THE DISCRIMINATING REALISM OF PAUL RAMSEY

Joseph L. Allen

In a revealing passage midway through this volume, Paul Ramsey offers what I believe is the key to the intent of his recent writings. In all that he has written about the morality of war, Ramsey says, he has sought "to propose an extension within the realism of Reinhold Niebuhr," that extension being the principle of discrimination in the use of military force. Ramsey implies two things here. The first is that he seeks to work *within* Niebuhr's Christian realism. He fundamentally affirms it, though in a way that goes far beyond mere repetition, but plumbs to its basic insight and expresses the insight creatively in his own way for problems about which Niebuhr never wrote.

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The second implication is that Niebuhr worked with a single principle in his moral reflection about politics — the principle of proportion, the idea that amid the ambiguous moral alternatives of politics one must always seek to produce the greater good (or the lesser evil). That principle is necessary but insufficient, Ramsey says; thus the extension.

The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility
by Paul Ramsey. Scribner's. 554 pp. \$12.50.

The chief concerns of this volume are at these two points. In both of them Ramsey today finds himself beleaguered among Christian ethicists commenting on war; not alone, certainly, but definitely in the minority of vocal Christian opinion. The articles collected here were therefore for the most part written in bat-