

HANS MORGENTHAU: THE LAST STATESMAN?

Victor C. Ferkiss

One side effect of the mobilization of the Nazi-Fascist regimes for their war against Western civilization was the *coup de grace* it gave to American intellectual isolation. The "intellectual migration" of the pre-war years brought to our shores a host of men and women who have transformed the American academic, scientific and aesthetic landscapes. Nowhere has this effect been more evident than in the field of political philosophy. Men and women such as, to name but a few, Hannah Arendt, Carl Friedrich, Arnold Brecht, Leo Strauss and Waldemar Gurian brought new historical and metaphysical depth to what had largely become a genteel, bland and decaying field of study. Among these figures Hans Morgenthau stands out because of the breadth of his interests, because of the extent of his impact on thinking outside the narrowly academic milieu, and because of his recent improbable role as intellectual fellow-traveler of the young, the disaffected and the idealistic in their struggle against the war in Vietnam. The latter role has brought him both public notoriety and journalistic excoriation and is regarded by many as being in direct conflict with the basic positions he has espoused throughout the rest of his intellectual life.

Hans Morgenthau's career is one marked by anomalies. A successful labor lawyer in his native Germany, in America he turned to the role of political philosopher, still his preferred role, though he is best known as a savant in the field of international relations. He fought his way out of the academic hinterlands to which he was consigned upon his arrival in America by means of a book, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics*, which was a frontal attack on the very illusions about man and the study of man which have since consolidated their dominance within American social science. He then seemingly deserted political philosophy for the study of international relations. *Politics Among Nations* was clearly the most influential textbook in its field during the fifties and sixties. It was influential because it was readable as a book—not simply because of its stylistic grace but because it imposed an intellectual order on the phenomena it

sought to describe and analyze. It was the work of a political philosopher seeking unchanging reality behind the changing appearances of international politics.

Politics Among Nations was a success in spite of—indeed in part because of—the fact that it was an intellectual and moral scandal. It shocked those, including many academics and practitioners in the field of foreign policy, who shared the liberal democratic dogmas of the American population about the nature of political reality. Politics, said Morgenthau, was inevitably synonymous with power rather than morality.

Some years ago, in the course of a casual conversation, a distinguished political philosopher, on learning that I had written my doctoral thesis under Morgenthau, snorted "the American Von Treitschke," as if that ended the matter. In actuality of course Morgenthau was simply giving clear expression and practical application to a tradition as old and as Christian as St. Augustine, a tradition of which Reinhold Niebuhr, especially in his earlier writings, was the great American exponent. Just as there are unchanging elements of political and social reality behind the flux of events, realities which individuals and nations ignore at their peril, so there is also an unchanging moral code. Morgenthau never accepted the fashionable belief that "values" could be ignored by the social scientist as scientist or human being, or reduced to the level of data as the "behaviorist" school would have it. "All men," he argues in attacking the corruption of Columbia instructor Charles Van Doren, "are born with a moral sense." And "human existence . . . cannot find its meaning within itself but must receive it from a transcendent source." Because of some personal or intellectual diffidence Morgenthau refrains from explicating what this source is, but of the existence, perceivability, and practical importance of morality he is never in doubt.

Yet—and this is the essence of his position as a political philosopher—politics remains an "autonomous sphere." It is not subject to morality in any simple way because of the essential duality of the social universe—because man is subject to something akin to original sin. "An unbridgeable gulf separates

Victor Ferkiss is the author of *Technological Man: The Myth and the Reality*.

the demands of Christian ethics from the way man is compelled by his natural aspirations to act," he wrote in *worldview* almost ten years ago; "it is the tragedy of man that he is incapable, by dint of his nature, to do what Christian ethics demands of him."

What is true of the individual is even more true of nations. For the essence of international politics is the struggle to protect and aggrandize the national interest. Even less than men can nations be made subject to the simple dictates of love. They operate in a world of scarce goods, a world in which the greater freedom of one is the product of the lessened freedom of another. To think otherwise is to be a fool and to court disaster.

It is on the foundation of this hard-nosed approach to the competitive struggle of nations for power and for existence itself that Morgenthau developed over the years positions well calculated to disturb the intellectual tranquillity and to rouse the moral indignation of the vast majority of intelligent, well meaning and good hearted observers of international affairs. He failed to bow down at the shrine of the United Nations or world organization in general, despite the hopes for them entertained by lay preachers and enthroned Popes alike. He took a dim view of foreign aid, insisting that it was above all a political weapon, and wrote bitinglly of the "bum and beggar nations" which were often its recipients. He has always insisted that among the counters that enter into national power, military force is a permanent and basic one. That in recent years the U.N. has proved to be a largely impotent organization and primarily a stage for the expression of conflicts of national interest, that foreign aid has proved a disappointment even to many of its advocates, that force (as in the Cuban missile crisis) has proved the necessary handmaiden of successful negotiation—all this has done little to mitigate the apparent need of many people to deny or condemn the existence of these facts.

But Morgenthau is not a simple amoralist. Though the "counsels of perfection" exist (if at all) only for the layman and never for the statesman as such, the statesman has his own austere and sometimes tragic morality. Man cannot always act according to Christian principles, but "it is the guilt of man that he is unwilling, by dint of his corruption, to do what he could to meet the demands of Christian ethics." Men, including statesmen, ought to do the best they can. For Morgenthau, the statesman is a truly heroic figure, and he regards the role of the political philosopher to be that of counsellor to the statesman. The statesman decides as best he can in a world of contingency what

is moral in terms of what he knows (Morgenthau's attacks on "scientism" are not mere methodological quibbles but go to the heart of his political thinking). Morgenthau in effect (and quite rightly) equates prudence with what some might call "situation ethics." "For what is more or less morally evil must be determined through anticipation of the probable consequences of different courses of action," he writes. Choosing the lesser evil is the best the moral politician can do, just as it is the best the ordinary moral man can do.



Thus the great enemies of the statesman in his perception of the world are ignorance on the one hand and utopianism and moralism on the other. He must have no illusions about how far moral principles can be simply applied to any given situation and to what extent perfection is possible in human affairs. He must have no misconceptions about reality as it exists in the empirical present and at the same time no illusions about the extent to which future contingent events are knowable in advance. The decision of the statesman, Morgenthau says, has three distinctive qualities: "It is a commitment to action . . . to a particular action that precludes all other courses of action . . . [and] a decision taken in the face of the unknown and the unknowable." As if this were not problem enough, the statesman has yet another enemy besides his own intellectual capacity: the limitation placed on his power to act in a democracy. In discussing the impossible American position in Vietnam, Morgenthau has speculated on what a Bismarck or Castlereagh might have done in the same situation. For in large measure our difficulties reside in the fact that, even leaving personal capacity aside, neither a Dulles nor a Rusk could act like a Bismarck. There is "an incompatibility between the rational requirements of sound foreign policy and the emotional preferences of a democratically controlled public opinion." The statesman is helpless to do what he knows he must.

This fact as much as anything gives impetus and meaning to Hans Morgenthau's growing role as a

publicist in recent years. The statesman needs help. In a democracy a philosopher cannot simply write "Mirror of Princes" literature for rulers. He must go into the marketplace to sell his ideas to the new rulers, the populace. This is "a duty, burdensome but inescapable." The paradox of Morgenthau's career as a public critic of American foreign policy is that he, an advocate of the tradition of prudence above all in politics, should increasingly find himself on the side of those who reject American foreign policy on utopian grounds of absolute moral principle and on the basis of a worldview which is the direct opposite of his not only in its assessment of current realities but in its whole concept of the nature of political reality.

In all of his criticism of American foreign policy Morgenthau has attacked a twofold enemy—utopianism and stupidity. His attacks on the crude anti-communism that dominated our policy pronouncements and sometimes our actions in the fifties were based on the belief that such anti-communism was less a reaction to the machinations of sinister interests than it was a manifestation of the American penchant for crusades stemming from our Puritan heritage; ultimately, for Morgenthau, those who supported Chiang Kai-shek and the liberation of Eastern Europe were idealists gone wrong. Our political leaders and diplomats were not rogues plotting against the freedom of the oppressed, but naive and ignorant men in need of instruction or correction. This explains the paradox of how, during the Ike-age, Morgenthau, with his basically conservative view of man and society, could be at one with the liberal critics of our foreign policy, an alliance strengthened by the disdain which he and the liberal intellectuals shared for the capacities and life-styles of the Republican leaders. The Kennedy interlude was sufficiently short that criticism could be directed against his failing to break away completely from the mistaken commitments and policies of his predecessor, so that Morgenthau was never forced into the position of fundamental hostility that would have been inevitable had Kennedy lived to preside over the full horror of the intervention in Vietnam which he had permitted to grow to undue proportions.

Morgenthau's position on the Vietnam debacle has been a complex and in some respects a difficult one. He certainly cannot blame it on weak presidential leadership. Having, like the liberals, castigated Eisenhower for weakness, he, again like the liberals, was forced to see the other side of the coin in Lyndon Johnson, whose zest for power made a bad matter

much worse. He must instead blame our problems on misperceptions of the real relationship between power and the national interest. He is opposed to the Vietnamese war because he views the war as based on utopian illusions about an unreal Asia in which communism and democracy are in conflict, a position which fails to recognize that ideals have meaning only as they are perceived by real people, and that democracy means nothing to the Vietnamese peasant in comparison with nationalism. What is at stake in Vietnam is not warring ideals but the relative power positions of China and the United States. We fail to recognize that genuine nationalist and socialist revolutions cannot be defeated anywhere, but at best only diverted into channels which will serve our own national interests rather than those of our Communist enemies. On the mainland of Asia the situation is especially complex because of the natural fear the Chinese have of American presence in their sphere of influence. Basically, Chinese hegemony is a fact of life. We must either be prepared to destroy China—a difficult, costly and hence foolhardy enterprise—or to retreat as gracefully as possible. Vietnam must be made to take its proper subordinate place in the "hierarchy of American interest." In short, the war in Vietnam is not a crime, it is worse than a crime, it is a colossal blunder.

This is of course essentially the same position as that taken by many critics of the war such as Senator Fulbright and former ambassadors George Kennan and Edmund Reischauer, one which makes eminent sense and can be accepted by the most conservative of men. But it is not the philosophy of the brothers Berrigan, the S.D.S., or even probably most leaders—especially the young—of moratoria and other devices for manifesting opposition to our current policy. Many of the leaders of the anti-war movement believe Chinese domination of Asia to be not only inevitable but a good thing in itself, do not want revolutions abroad to be tamed so that they may serve our interest rather than those of the Soviets or Chinese but rather to succeed in their wildest aims and to spread to America itself. Other anti-war leaders are against all war among nations and all military means to social ends, save perhaps for guerrilla action against those in power. Most of these people are united behind a related set of beliefs that holds that the failures of our foreign policy are due not to utopianism or stupidity or to the personality of the president but are traceable to the fact that the United States is a racist, class-ridden, imperialist power ruled by a military-industrial clique determined to rule the world in order to repress the legitimate aspirations of suffering humanity. All these critics reject the model of

the statesman in favor of that of the prophet of moral righteousness or of the armed revolutionary—who may indeed turn out to be the same person. Morgenthau makes a strange mentor for such legions, and it is an odd sensation to read his careful, stately prose juxtaposed with that of the neo-Maoists in the columns of the *New York Review of Books*.

We live in a terrifying world where sanity and relative insanity must join forces in the struggle against the unctuous madness of our rulers. In such a world the place in history of a man such as Hans Morgenthau, whose intellectual roots lie in a more genteel past, becomes difficult to assess. Many who might agree with much of his thinking may well view it as belonging more properly to a civilized era now dead. The central concept of his theory of international relations, the national interest, may no longer be all-important at a time in which, as he himself admits, nuclear weapons have revolutionized strategy and created the possibility of wars which no one can win and which therefore can serve no nation's interest. Perhaps, too, the prudence which for Morgenthau is the central hallmark of the statesman is no longer a relevant mode of coping with a world in which total disaster threatens from so many quarters. In a recent comment on the strictures of George Kennan—a man who much resembles Morgenthau in his outlook—against the impatience and extremism of the young, Stephen Spender has noted that Kennan himself points out how little time is left to save the environment from total degeneration, thus him-

self implying that only revolution can stem the tide. We live in a world in which the threat of dying or becoming a murderer in Vietnam is imminently real to the young, in which we all are in danger of nuclear annihilation or of strangling in our own wastes, a desperate world in which the statesman may have lost his place. The Morgenthaus and the Kennans and all the civilized critics of our folly may have to yield leadership to men who say that if we are going to die anyway we might as well do it for a cause, however illusory.

No one can predict whether, teetering on the brink, we will be able to muster the sanity to pull back. If we do, it will be in some measure because of the legacy of realism which Morgenthau has striven to build up for us throughout his career as a counselor to policy makers and to educated public alike. He seems already to be on the verge of a paradoxical victory in his struggle against the shallowness and sterility of a "value-free" social science, one in which the banners of commitment and concern are carried by the New Left in every discipline. If the world ever again becomes a place in which men can reason about the difficult political choices before them, Hans Morgenthau will be remembered as one who in dark days kept faith with the central intellectual tradition of Western politics as an exemplar of a political philosophy which recognizes the need for confronting our choices rather than denying them, who knew that it was the tragic fate of the statesman to stand in a flawed world as the scapegoat for us all.

HANS MORGENTHAU: REALIST AND MORALIST

Roger L. Shinn

"He speaks, in the biblical phrase, truth to power."

Hans J. Morgenthau

In that short sentence Hans Morgenthau describes one role of the intellectual who relates himself to the political world. It is clear, from the way he states it, that he admires this vocation. It is also clear, from his own career, that he has often exercised that vocation.

Morgenthau's eminence is such that he needs no praise from me. As an analyst of international affairs he is a brilliant scholar, a shrewd observer of the

actions behind the headlines, a puncturer of pomposities, and an irritant to sluggish minds. These qualities are sufficiently well known that I shall not elaborate them.

Instead I want to point to a fascinating paradox in

Roger Shinn is dean of Union Theological Seminary, New York. He is author of *Christianity and the Problem of History*, among other books, and editor of *The Search for Identity: Essays on the American Character*.