

*"We've interfered in regimes all over the globe. Big powers do."*

## Henry Steele Commager on U.S. Foreign Policy in the '80s

AN INTERVIEW BY JESS V. FROST

*For over half a century Henry Steele Commager has been an historian and educator of rare insight and clarity, bringing to the study of U.S. policy and international affairs both a practical eye and strong moral concerns. His thinking has often contrasted sharply with the Establishment's, today that contrast appears more distinct than ever.*

*With George Santayana, Dr. Commager believes that "To be an American is of itself almost a moral condition, an education, and a career." Few embody this definition as well as he. Dr. Commager has taught at Columbia, New York University, Cambridge, Oxford, and Amherst. Today he is Bullitt Professor of American History at the University of Washington in Seattle, where this interview was conducted.*

**FROST:** *How do you see American-Soviet relations developing during the '80s?*

**COMMAGER:** The cold war has been exacerbated under the new administration. Carter abandoned détente and SALT II. The Reaganites are apparently prepared to scrap everything. We have taken a turn toward a hot war, though I don't think we're going to get into one at this stage. So the situation is very serious.

This determination on the part of the Reagan administration to make an issue of our relations with the Soviets, to seize El Salvador, to seize on Poland, to try to manufacture crises even if they're not there, leaves one with the feeling that nothing has disappointed Secretary Haig so much as the fact that the Poles haven't gone out on general strike, haven't revolted. They have listened to reason. The Reagan administration keeps emphasizing Soviet belligerence rather than trying to cooperate with a peaceful settlement.

*If the administration believes its foreign policy hard line is effective, what does this imply for the '80s?*

I'd like to question first the assumption behind your question. Perhaps they believe it's effective for their domestic policy—as well as their foreign. The habit—it need not be a conspiracy, it need not be improper in any way—of creating foreign crises to bolster an administration is a very old one. It's almost instinctive with a man like Haig, who thinks militarily and who assumes that there are military solutions to problems. It is instinctive to strengthen the new administration...in Congress by creating this crisis in Soviet-American relations, and also one in Cuban-American relations, which is part of that general habit of double standard.

It is most improper for Cuba to aid rebels, but quite proper for the United States to aid rebels. We do it when we please. We have had a double standard in foreign policy now since the late 1940s, and it is growing on us rather than otherwise. Afghanistan was small potatoes compared to our 550,000 people in Vietnam. We didn't expect the rest of the world to be staggered and break off relations with us on Vietnam, but we think it perfectly proper to rouse all NATO and beat the drums of war over the Russians in Afghanistan.

We certainly have far less justification—if there ever is justification for intervention—going ten thousand miles to a nation with which we had no concern and over which we had no more influence than Russia has with Afghanistan on its borders and on Chinese borders. We can understand that, though we may not sympathize with it or approve it. We did the same thing in Cuba and in many parts of Latin America.

*One justification for General Haig's appointment as secretary of state is that General Marshall served his nation brilliantly in that position. Do you see the analogy as appropriate?*

It's a sound analogy constitutionally and politically; it doesn't happen to be so in the case of the personalities and philosophies. Roosevelt got the kind of man he trusted and Reagan got the kind of man he trusted. They're very different characters....

*There seems to be major disagreement within the intelligence community as to the degree of culpability of the Soviet Union relative to international terrorism. The Soviets claim our opposition to national liberation movements and our support of oppressive dictatorships is a form of terrorism. Who is closer to the truth?*

Maybe both are equally close. After all, we exercised terrorism in Vietnam. The Phoenix Operation, which

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was responsible for some 25,000 deaths, was certainly terrorism on a large scale. The CIA has been engaged in terrorism throughout the globe. It had operations in over sixty countries at one time. It reported to no one, not even to the Congress. Even the president didn't want to know what was going on. The oversight committee deliberately didn't meet, and when it did meet under Aber, it told the CIA: "Don't tell us anything we don't want to know." So it had *carte blanche*, and apparently still wants *carte blanche*.

Terrorism generally tends to be the wickedness of other nations; terror of special peoples. It is a weapon over which it is impossible to exercise control. It is one of the most dangerous features of modern life, because terrorists can now make the atomic bomb if they want to. If a freshman at Princeton can make one and if a writer for *The Progressive* magazine can describe how to put one together, a terrorist can get someone to make him bombs—and then what happens when they explode one?

In any event, terrorism is part of a larger phenomenon of modern war. We chose terrorism. There was some of that in World War I, a great deal of it in World War II—the firebombing of Tokyo, the saturation bombing; and above all, the terrorist tactics in Vietnam, where we dropped something over seven million tons of bombs. That's twice as many bombs as we dropped on Germany and Japan during the whole war.

The Vietnam war cannot be described as anything but terrorism. It was official, therefore it wasn't called that, but from the point of view of the Vietnamese it worked the same way. Whether it was official or unofficial, it was destruction of villages, destruction of bridges, defoliation of forests, smashing of dams—all of these things which terrorists engage in.

*Mr. Reagan has said the Soviets will lie, cheat, and commit any crime to further their international interests, which he appears to believe is world conquest. Do you believe he's right?*

That depends on your definition of world conquest. It's absurd to think any one nation expects world conquest in a military sense. I have no doubt that the Communists everywhere believe that sooner or later their philosophy will conquer the world, just as the Americans through the nineteenth century were sure that the democratic philosophy would conquer the world. From the point of view of Europe, our conduct in the early years of the nineteenth century excited all the reprobation and vituperation that the Soviet conduct does in the world today.

Read the incredible outburst of Metternich at the time of the Monroe Doctrine. This wicked and perfidious nation (America) which was trying to throw its weight around throughout the globe had the audacity to attack all the moral standards of civilization, to try to overthrow kingdoms, to try to destroy the Church. Everything that Metternich was saying about the U.S., we say about the Soviets.

And certainly the danger from democracy proved far greater to most of Europe, as great as the danger from communism. Democracy did subvert government after government, it did destroy royalty, it did attack the

class system, it did attract forty million immigrants to the New World, it did break up empires in Latin America. It did all sorts of things.

We don't look back and say: "What a terroristic and subversive philosophy democracy was." But from the point of view of the Germans, the Italians, the Russians, the Spanish, and the Holy Alliance, that's just what it was. They had organized a Holy Alliance to stop the depredations of democracy, which was a threat that worked. It did undermine royalty, it did undermine the class system, it did undermine imperialism. Just what the Russians are threatening to do.

Once again this double standard. We take for granted that because our purposes are good and because we really think democracy is better than any other (for, of course, it really is), this is justifiable. We cannot understand that the Russians may be sincere in believing communism is better.

*But if Reagan does indeed believe that they're out to conquer the world, do you feel that his negotiations with the Soviets will serve any other purpose than to placate the allies, who take a less pessimistic view generally of Soviet intentions?*

I don't understand that question. He doesn't have any negotiations started yet.

*Well, those that promise to come, I suppose.*

Who knows what he's going to do? If he insists on carrying on hard-line negotiations, Russia may not negotiate. Russia insists on being treated as an equal, in size and population it is larger than the U.S. and militarily able. Russia is not as powerful as the Western Alliance, and even less so, considering the threat from China. It is not, however, going to be pushed around by our threats. In case of atomic war, either side could destroy the other a dozen times over, and each side knows that. So we can no longer threaten them. We tried to threaten them from '45 on with the atomic bomb. Russia got one by '49. Everytime we've made an advance, they've made an advance. No one large country's resources can ever outstrip another's. That day is gone forever. The Chinese will sooner or later be able to have all the weaponry we have.

*What role for the '80s do you see for the China card? Will it be played more vigorously by Mr. Reagan, or will his preference for Taiwan prevail?*

This whole China card phrase and concept is the most vulgar in the history of international relations. As if China is our card to play! It's like "we lost China": the arrogance and the stupidity of this notion that China was ours to lose! It's enough to make the Chinese break off relations with us and join the other side.

To talk in that language violates the most fundamental of all moral and philosophical principles, the first of the great Kantian imperatives: Never use any person as a means, always as an end. And that must apply equally to countries and societies.

The idea that China is there to be used for our purpose is as wicked as the Russian idea that America is there to be used for her purposes. You can't use countries. The sooner we stop thinking in those terms and

using that vocabulary, the better. China is not only an equal in size and four times our population, it also has an ancient civilization of three thousand years. It will have its own policy and will dominate Asia, I presume. It has a high degree of civilization and talent and is not a puppet state.

*And yet, isn't this an important element of what some analysts would call "Realpolitik" and to think otherwise would be too idealistic?*

Because they call it so doesn't mean it is real. It is misguided, of course, and indeed catastrophic in its consequences, as it proved to be in the failure to recognize China when Chiang Kai-shek was driven out. That is probably the greatest diplomatic blunder in modern history. It was a folly beyond understanding that we thought we could pretend that Taiwan was China, that the real China wasn't there.

What would we have thought if the British had stubbornly refused to recognize the reality of Yorktown and clung to Long Island for thirty years, recognizing it as the U.S.? It would've gone down as a blunder of such degree that the statesman who formulated it would have been regarded as demented.

*But isn't this basically what the Chinese are doing, in that they might be accused of playing an American card against the Soviet Union? "The enemy of my enemy is my friend" is a Chinese maxim, I believe.*

They have relatively little to offer as of yet, and I see no effort on their part to change their foreign policy. I think they're rather alarmed at the belligerency of the U.S., because they might become involved in it; and if there were any conflict, the Russians probably would attack China at the same time.

The major Russian forces are on the Chinese border, not in the Western sphere. It's China they've been quarreling with for three hundred years, not the U.S. We seem to forget that Russia was our ally in two wars. Russia never attacked us; we invaded Russia. If the Russians had invaded Oregon or Maine, we'd have been just as afraid as they were when we took Vladivostok. They haven't forgotten; they're scared of the West and of our military intentions.

*Some analysts insist that Soviet interests dictate an eventual Polish intervention. The news of the Poles calling off a strike seems to indicate that they are afraid of the same thing.*

Those analysts are so eager to have a crisis, they've decided to create one. Apparently the Poles decided not to have a strike.

*So you disagree with the statement that the question is not if but when the Soviets will invade in Poland?*

I think it's "if," but I don't know anything we can do about it. What should we do? Go to war in Poland? Much better to have a peaceful solution and help Poland economically than to create a crisis which could only conclude with the destruction of parts of Poland and might lead to a general war.

*Secretary of Defense Weinberger and others have sug-*

*gested that we do have a plan if the Soviets invade. Do you have any idea what that plan might be?*

It can't be military, unless we want to launch an atomic war, and that wouldn't be a very wise inauguration for this administration; it would be the end of it. Our plan could only be to organize NATO forces to oppose any threat to the other satellite states or any threat to further invasion—a coup in Czechoslovakia, or anything of that kind.

We forget, we forget everything. No one can justify these Russian tactics, but we forget that when we didn't like the way the election went in the Dominican Republic, we sent 22,000 Marines down there, called the election off, and put in our own man. Santo Domingo didn't seriously threaten us, but Mr. Johnson thought it did.

And if we can send 22,000 Marines for a little country like the Dominican Republic and expect the world to applaud, why should we be so alarmed at the Russians massing forces because they're scared of opposition in Poland?

Let's hope they don't use it, but we didn't go to the OAS over Santo Domingo, we just sent in the Marines—without even consulting Congress.

*Reagan has accused the Soviets of instigating rebellion and aiding the guerrillas in El Salvador, and the Soviets accuse us of the same in Afghanistan. Are both sides misperceiving reality or are both telling partial truths?*

Partial truths, depending on what you mean by aiding. If you mean with supplies of one kind or another, undoubtedly. The Russians are troublemakers, just as we were with the CIA. We overthrew Allende because we didn't like his regime, we overthrew the Guatemalan regime back in the 1950s, we controlled Nicaragua through Somoza for twenty years or so, we sent 550,000 soldiers and sailors into Vietnam. We've interfered in regimes all over the globe! Big powers do.

*Since the Russian Revolution, except for brief periods, U.S.-USSR relations have been consistently hostile. Do you foresee a time when our nations will overcome this spirit of mistrust?*

Not consistently hostile. Mr. Roosevelt made overtures to and recognized the Soviets in '33. It was one of the very first things he did. They were not friendly at the time, but how quickly that changed with the invasion of Russia! As Churchill said, "Whoever marches with Hitler, we fight. Whoever marches against Hitler, we join."

They were very good allies and ended the war as much as we did. The major German forces were tied up on the Eastern front, not the Western front. It was the Russian destruction and invasion of Berlin that was the final coup for the Hitler regime. We could work side by side with them during the war, but they thought we ended our cooperation very abruptly, as we did cut off all aid, Lend-Lease, and everything within a month or so after the war. All this was a sign of hostility.

*Is there anything we can do as individuals to promote better relations?*

Yes, I suppose. Vote for John Anderson.

