

Americans are unwilling to acknowledge "Reasons of State"

MACHIAVELLI IN THE NEW WORLD

by Henry Steele Commager

The fundamental problems of politics, in the modern world as in the ancient one, have been and inevitably will be moral. To the ancients the maxim that no state could long flourish without virtue was clear. Equally clear was the conclusion that no state had ever conducted itself virtuously over a long span of years. We are all familiar with the philosophical and the practical debate over this problem, one that has perplexed statesmen and philosophers from the beginnings of history. We need only think of the New Testament account of Herod's massacre of the Innocents—an issue that conjured up, or *seemed* to conjure up, Reasons of State.

This issue is very much with us today, and with greater urgency than at any previous era of history. For the first time the issue of Reasons of State directly concerns not just one people or one nation but the whole of mankind—indeed, the fate of the earth. And it is one that, historically and philosophically, American experience may illuminate.

From the beginning of their independent history Americans assumed that they could somehow escape the fate history had meted out to all other peoples; that, protected as they were by a wide ocean, aloof from the quarrels that had afflicted nations "who feel power and forget right," and with land enough for their descendants "to the thousandth and thousandth generation," they might indeed confound history and "advance to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye." Thus Tom Paine asserted that the American "was a new Adam in a new Paradise." So too the "poet of the Revolution," Philip Freneau, boasted that "Paradise anew shall flourish/By no second Adam lost."

Washington's favorite poet, David Humphreys, wrote more elaborately:

All former empires rose, the work of guilt,
On conquest, blood, or usurpation built
But we, taught wisdom by their woes and crimes
Fraught with their lore, and born in better times
Our constitutions form'd on freedom's base....

In his first inaugural address Washington made it official:

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The foundation of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality....[For] there is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness, between duty and advantage, between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity.

Though there are antecedents in the ancient and even in the early modern world, it was Machiavelli who first used the term Reason of State in the sense in which it has since been accepted and who first propounded the arguments that have ever since been used to vindicate it. With his writing—chiefly *The Discourses on Livy*—he gave it not only dignity and authority but almost official status. Machiavelli's concern was not with morals but with power, and his philosophy was secular. His logic was that embraced by most modern nations, certainly since the eighteenth century, and embraced alike by princes, aristocracies (this notwithstanding Montesquieu's conclusion that the principle of an aristocracy is *honor*), and, in modern times, by both republican-democratic and Communist-totalitarian states alike—namely, that the claims of the state take precedence over *all* competing claims and that the survival, the prosperity, and the glory of the state (or the crown, or the republic, or the soviet) is the ultimate good.

Machiavelli did not regard himself as an enemy of morality, and quite rightly by his own logic. For that logic was a secularization of religion. As formal religion insisted that the triumph of the true Church justified any conduct, including warfare, banishment, torture, or death, it followed that a secular religion could invoke the same sanctions to achieve *its* ends.

It was to the prosperity, power, and glory of Florence that Machiavelli addressed himself. That goal was a moral one because it contributed to the triumph of the House of Medici and opened the way to the absorption of lesser states and, ultimately, a unification of Italy. This, in turn, would bring peace and prosperity. Thus, on behalf not only of Florence but of Italy, the prince must be exalted, must have absolute power over his subjects.

In all this, Machiavelli anticipated the ultimate rationale for the ultimate victory of political, military, and economic nationalism—a nationalism still prepared to project its own code of ethics and morality on its own people and on other peoples and nations.

THE HOPE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Few chapters in the history of civilization are more instructive, or sobering, than that which recounts the emergence of modern nationalism in the eighteenth century and recalls the brief hope that an enlightenment, associated with both science and morality, could somehow impose itself upon that nationalism. That chapter is particularly interesting to us because it was in the New World that that goal was realized, however briefly. But it was an ideal and a hope that flickered on the horizons of the *philosophes* of every Western nation—the hope that morals and science both followed laws of nature and that these laws would somehow win the allegiance of rulers and philosophers alike.

The evidence here is as elaborate as the *Grand Encyclopédie* that is perhaps the most appropriate monument to the Enlightenment. Thus Joseph Banks, for forty-one years president of the Royal Society, was the patron and guardian of science everywhere. He sponsored Captain Cook, and rejoiced when Benjamin Franklin and French statesman Jacques Necker promulgated an order to their joint navies not to disturb the great captain as he was engaged in activities beneficial to mankind. It was an age when Rousseau could pay tribute to “those great cosmopolitan minds that make light of the barriers that sunder nation from nation, and embrace all mankind within their benevolence.” It was an age when George III could cherish the Philadelphia-born Benjamin West as his court artist and when all through the war West could welcome American students to his atelier—students whose paintings celebrated American victories over the British.

Much of this was the expression of individuals; much of it too was an expression of enlightened academic and governmental policy.

How illuminating is the history of the Royal Society, founded in 1642 by Charles II under the auspices of such “natural philosophers and moral philosophers” as Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke and embracing in its fold men of letters as well as men of science. It was Christopher Wren, then doubling as professor of astronomy at Oxford University and architect of St. Paul’s Cathedral, who drafted the charter: “The way to so happy a government...is in no manner more facilitated than by the promoting of useful arts which...are found to be the basis of civil communities and free government, and which gather multitudes, by an *orpeus charm*, into cities and companies....”

A century later the American Philosophical Society (of which Jefferson was to be the third president) wrote a similar provision into its charter: “Whereas nations truly civilized will never wage war with the arts and sciences and the common interests of mankind, the Society should retain cordial relations with learned societies everywhere in the world, regardless of politics and war.”

Some of the Enlightenment philosophers had already gone so far as to propose learned academies, not merely to advance knowledge but to guide the destinies of nations. That was the essence of Condorcet’s ambitious plan in *The New Atlantis*, which proposed an international society of natural philosophers, whose members would be concerned not with practical investigations but with “pure” research. It was to be sponsored by crowned heads of nations and supported by contributions from several governments, the aristocracy, and, prophetically enough, by the business and commercial community. “All the scientists,” Con-

dorcet asserted somewhat wildly, would “be animated by a passion for truth,” and governments, eager to contribute “to the happiness of the human species,” would follow its recommendations.

The philosophy that animated all these individuals was the Platonic concept of a Republic: Kings would be philosophers and philosophers would be kings. Alas, that did not work out—except in America. There alone it was the philosophers, natural and moral alike, who were in fact chosen by the people to guide the affairs of state: Franklin, president of Pennsylvania; John Adams, chief justice of Massachusetts and author of its first constitution; Jefferson, governor of Virginia and vice-president and president of the new nation; John Jay, governor of New York and the first chief justice of the new nation; James Madison, who drafted the national Bill of Rights; and, in the same company, those two English-born philosophers who found refuge in America and helped create and mold the new nation, Thomas Paine and Joseph Priestly.

The superiority of the claims of science and philosophy over those of politics was as much part of the American Enlightenment tradition as was the supremacy of the Constitution over legislation or executive conduct.



THE AMERICAN VERSION

The drama of morality in America was to be played out against two competing or alternating backgrounds—the background of nationalism (we were, after all, the first nation to be “made”) and the background of modern science. The animating drive of the first was the wealth and glory of the state; the animating impulse of the second, enlightenment and cosmopolitanism. The seminal principle of the first was power, that of the second, “the illimitable

freedom of the human mind.”

Americans have never been willing to acknowledge formally the principle of “Reasons of State.” Here as elsewhere they have preferred to find more exalted arguments for justifying their conduct: that they are “God’s children” or his “chosen people” or that their country is “the promised land” and their government “the last best hope of earth.” These are not only euphemisms but substitutes for reason. And however nature and history may have conspired to provide supporting evidence for these terms, the rationale has commonly been that which has animated all other modern states.

The American version of Reason of State was, from the start, based on religious and cultural grounds. This combined speedily to conjure up the fancy (perhaps the conceit) of “Manifest Destiny”—a destiny more manifest to the Americans who profited from it than to the native inhabitants who were its victims. The philosophy of Manifest Destiny was not, in fact, very different from that elaborated by Machiavelli: first, that God had presided over the migration from the Old World to the New; second, that God could not have intended that so vast and rich a territory be confined to a few scattered tribes but looked with favor on its occupation by an enlightened Christian people; and third—and closely connected with the second—that the native peoples were, after all, heathens and, unless prepared to be converted, destined for eternal damnation.

This philosophy had the immense advantage of being impossible to refute and readily refurbished for almost any new circumstance. It applied to the territories controlled by the Spanish as well as by Indians, thus justifying the annexation of two Floridas, the Mexican War, and the acquisition of Texas and California as well as all the land between. If the Spaniards were not heathens, they were Catholics, and that was almost as bad. Manifest Destiny rationalized (and still does) American hegemony over the Caribbean—this for strategic purposes, which can always be found and were found to apply to Hawaii and the Philippines.

This philosophy could be stretched, if necessary, to justify slavery as well as conquest. The story is too familiar for repetition. Suffice it to recall that generations of civilized and virtuous Christians persuaded themselves that slavery, far from being a “necessary evil,” became quickly a positive good. And a blessing alike to slaves and to masters. It rescued millions of Africans from “certain damnation” and, by conferring on them the blessings of Christianity, assured them eternal salvation. It provided the basis for a high civilization in the South; it was essential to national and world prosperity.

We should take this long and painful chapter of our history to heart, for better than anything else in our own experience it makes clear how a highly civilized and Christian people could, for over two hundred years, persist in practicing and justifying what most of us now find inexplicable and immoral.

Some features of this American Reason of State persisted long after formal slavery was abolished and long after manifestations of racial prejudice were outlawed through constitutional amendment. Not only did that prejudice persist and flourish, but it emerged, thirty years after the Civil War, in a new form of imperialism. As the *Washington Post* put it: “The taste of empire is in the mouth of the

people even as the taste of blood in the jungle. It means an Imperial policy, the Republic, reascent, taking her place with the armed nations.” It was this “imperial policy” that dictated the three-year war against the Filipinos fighting for their independence, a war characterized by moral arrogance, the illusion of the white man’s burden, and brutality. We have forgotten (but perhaps the Filipinos have not) the once-popular soldiers’ song:

Damn, damn, damn the Filipinos
Slant-eyed kakiack ladrones
And beneath the starry flag
Civilize them with a krag
And return us to our own beloved homes.

Reason of State in the U.S. was a curious amalgam of imperialism, commercial interest, the white man’s burden, and religion—all bundled together in President McKinley’s famous explanation of how God directed him to rule the Philippines. It was a rationalization that the poet William Vaughn Moody lamented in his “Ode in Time of Hesitation”:

Lies, lies, it cannot be! The wars we wage
Are noble, and our battles still are won
By justice for us, ere we lift the gage
We have not sold our loftiest heritage.
The proud Republic hath not stooped to cheat
And scramble in the market place of war
Ah, no! We have not fallen so
Tempt not our weakness, our cupidity!...
O ye who lead, take heed
Blindness we may forgive but baseness we will smite.

Where now is our William Vaughn Moody?

It is scarcely necessary to illustrate the American propensity for justifying by Reason of State what is surely the most fateful series of decisions made in recorded history: the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945, and the decision (Truman’s also) to go ahead with the nuclear race in 1953. Neither the military nor the larger international justifications that have been proffered will, I think, be accepted by later generations—if any. But how revealing it is, in this connection, that Americans already have put out of their minds and consciences responsibility for inaugurating the age of atomic warfare. Indeed, by a process of self-induced amnesia they still talk of the threat of a “first strike” and of how such a strike is to be prevented—as if we had not already made the first strike almost forty years ago, and this though there was no danger of a counterstrike that had to be deterred.

As we contemplate this long record, we may still conclude that we are indeed God’s “chosen people,” but there is considerable evidence to the contrary. Today, every major problem has international and often worldwide ramifications, and global cooperation has become necessary to survival. It is the imperative nature of this requirement that offers ground for hope.

Certainly no nation may continue to harbor that notion which partakes of the “unpardonable sin”—that it has the right to decide on the survival of the human race and the fate of the earth. It is an arrogance that makes that of Milton’s Lucifer seem moderate. WV