

IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

William James used to say that temperaments determine philosophies. People who respond to international affairs divide temperamentally into two schools: those who see policies as wise or foolish, and those who see them as good or evil. One cannot presume an ultimate metaphysical antagonism here. No person can escape perceptions of good and evil—even Machiavelli counseled the Prince not to forget, when circumstances impelled him to do a bad thing, that he was doing a bad thing—and no policy can wholly divorce political from moral principles. Nor in the impenetrability of human motives can we easily know when the moral reasons are political reasons in disguise (very often the case) or when political reasons are moral reasons in disguise (more frequent than one might think).

That moral values should control foreign policy decisions was not particularly the view of the Founding Fathers, who saw international affairs in the light of the balance of power. But in the century after 1815, as Americans turned their backs on the power struggles of Europe, they stopped thinking about power as the essence of international politics. The moralization of foreign policy became a national penchant; and the subsequent return of the republic to the world power game has not much enfeebled that cherished habit. In our own day both Right and Left yield with relish to the craving for moral judgment. Ronald Reagan, Jimmy Carter, Philip Berrigan, and Noam Chomsky disagree over the substance of such judgment, but they agree that moral principles should dominate or at least pervade foreign policy decisions.

Let us not overstate the moral argument. Many foreign policy decisions are self-evidently questions of prudence and adjustment, not of good and evil. Most moralizers would readily join with their acute critic George Kennan in doubting that "it matters greatly to God whether the free trade area of the Common Market prevails in Europe, whether the British fish or do not fish in Icelandic territorial waters, or even whether Indians or Pakistanis run Kashmir. It might matter, but it is hard for us, with our limited vision, to know." The raw material of foreign affairs is, a good deal of the time, morally neutral or ambiguous. Consequently, moral principles cannot be decisive for the great majority of foreign policy transactions.

But these, it may be said, are technical transactions. On the great issues, surely, moral principles should be controlling. Yet how are right and wrong to be defined in dealings among sovereign states? Here the moralist of foreign affairs has recourse to the moral code most familiar to him: the code that governs dealings among individuals. His contention is that states should be judged by principles of individual morality. As Woodrow Wilson put it in his address to Congress on the declaration of war in 1917: "We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states." John Foster Dulles said it even more directly, in the midst of World War II: "The broad principles that should govern our international conduct are not obscure. They grow out of the practice by the nations of the simple things Christ taught."

The argument for the application of simple moral principles to questions of foreign policy is, thus, that there is, or should be, an identity between the morality of individuals and the morality of states. The issues involved here are not easy. One cannot doubt that there are cases in foreign affairs where moral judgment is possible and necessary. But one may also suggest that these are extreme cases and do not warrant the routine use of moral criteria in making foreign policy decisions. It was to expose such indiscriminate moralism that Reinhold Niebuhr wrote *Moral Man and Immoral Society* forty years ago.

Niebuhr insisted that a distinction had to be drawn between the moral behavior of individuals and that of social groups. The obligation of the individual is to obey the law of love and sacrifice; "from the viewpoint of the author of an action, unselfishness must remain the criterion of the highest morality." But nations cannot be sacrificial. Governments are not individuals. They are trustees for the happiness and interest of their nation. Niebuhr quotes Hugh Cecil's argument that unselfishness "is inappropriate to the action of a state. No one has a right to be unselfish with other people's interest." Alexander Hamilton had made the same point in the early years of the American republic:

The rule of morality...is not precisely the same between nations as between individuals. The duty of making its own welfare the guide of its actions is much stronger upon the former than upon the latter. Existing millions, and for the most part future generations, are concerned in the present measures of a gov-

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ernment; while the consequences of the private action of an individual ordinarily terminate with himself, or are circumscribed with a narrow compass.

This is not to say that might makes right. It is to say that the morality of states is inherently different from the morality of individuals. Saints can be pure, but statesmen must be responsible. As trustees for others, they must defend interests and compromise principles. In consequence, politics is a field where practical and prudential judgment must have priority over simple moral verdicts.

LIMITS AND SUBSTANCE

Against this view it may be urged that the question between individual morality and political necessity has been, to a considerable degree, bridged within national societies. This takes place when the moral sense of a community finds embodiment in positive law. But the shift of the argument from morality to law only strengthens the case against the facile intrusion of moral judgment into foreign affairs.

A nation's law can set down relatively clear standards of right and wrong individual behavior because domestic law is the product of an imperfect but nonetheless authentic moral consensus. International life has no such broad or deep areas of moral consensus. It was once hoped that modern technology would create a common fund of moral imperatives transcending the concerns of particular nations—common concepts of interest, justice, and comity—either because the revolution in communications would increase mutual understanding or because the revolution in weaponry would increase mutual fear. Such expectations have been disappointed. Until nations come to adopt the same international morality, there can be no world law to regulate the behavior of states as there is law within nations to regulate the behavior of individuals. Nor can international institutions—the League of Nations or the United Nations—produce by sleight of hand a moral consensus where none exists. World law must express world community; it cannot create it.

This is not to say we cannot discern the rudiments of an international consensus. Within limits, humanity has begun to develop standards for conduct among nations—defined, for example, in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, in the Geneva Protocol of 1925 and the Geneva Conventions of 1949, in the Charter and Covenants of the United Nations, in the Charter, Judgment, and Principles of the Nuremberg Tribunal, and so on. Such documents outlaw actions that the civilized world has placed beyond the limits of permissible behavior. Within this restricted area a code emerges that makes moral judgment in international affairs possible up to a point. And within its scope this rudimentary code deserves, and must have, the most unflinching enforcement.

But these international rules deal with the limits rather than with the substance of policy. They seek to prevent abnormalities and excesses in the behavior of states, but they do not offer grounds for moral judgment on normal international transactions (including, it must be said sorrowfully, war itself, so long as war does not constitute aggression and so long as the rules of warfare are faithfully observed). These international accords may eventually promote a world moral consensus. But, for the present, national, ideological, ethical, and religious divisions remain

as bitterly intractable as ever.

Not only are simplistic moral principles of limited use in the making of foreign policy decisions, they may actually impede the intelligent conduct of foreign affairs. For many Americans the "moral" element in foreign policy consists in the application to the world of a body of abstract precepts, a process to be accompanied by lectures to others and congratulations to ourselves. The assumption is that we are the anointed custodians of the rules of international behavior, and that the function of United States policy is to mark other states up and down, according to their obedience to our rules.

Laying down the moral law to erring brethren from our seat of judgment no doubt does wonders for our own sense of virtue. But it fosters misconceptions about the nature of foreign policy. Moralizers tend to prefer symbolic to substantive politics. They tend to see foreign policy as a means of registering attitudes, not of producing hard results in a hard world. Moralistic rhetoric, moreover, often masks the pursuit of national advantage—a situation we recognize at once when other states hide their selfish objectives under a cloak of moral universalism. Should we be surprised that those other states are just as skeptical about American claims to moral disinterestedness?

The moralization of foreign policy creates still graver problems. Moral reasons offered cynically may indeed do the world less harm than moral reasons fervently believed. The compulsion to see foreign affairs in moralistic terms often has, with the noblest intentions, the most ghastly consequences, for the person who converts conflicts of interest and circumstance into conflicts of good and evil necessarily invests himself with moral superiority. Those who see foreign affairs as made up of questions of right and wrong begin by supposing they know better than other people what is right for them. The more passionately they believe they are right, the more likely they are to reject expediency and accommodation and seek the final victory of their principles. Little has been more pernicious in international politics than excessive righteousness.

The moralizing fever may, as noted, strike at any point along the political spectrum. From the standpoint of those who mistrust self-serving ethical poses, there is little difference between moralists on the Right who see the Soviet Union as the focus of all evil and moralists on the Left who ascribe all sin to the United States. They are all victims of the same malady. Both regard foreign policy as a branch of theology. They end as mirror images of each other. In the process of moral self-aggrandizement, each loses the humility that is the heart of human restraint. All nations, said Gladstone—a Christian statesman if ever there was one—are equal,

and you have no right to set up a system under which one is to be placed under moral suspicion or espionage, or made the subject of constant invective. If you do that, and especially if you claim for yourself a pharisaical superiority...you may talk about your patriotism as you please, but you are a misjudging friend of your country and are undermining the basis of esteem and respect of others for it.

Moralism in foreign policy is likely to conclude in fanaticism; and a fanatic, Mr. Dooley reminds us, "does what he thinks th' Lord wud do if he only knew th' facts in th' case." At home, moralism perceives mistakes in political

judgment as evidence of moral obliquity: The issue becomes not self-delusion or stupidity but criminality and treason; it ends in ferreting out the reprobates as traitors or war criminals. Abroad, moral absolutism leads to crusades and the extermination of the infidel. Religion, the ultimate absolutist sanction, is in the 1980s the main cause of most of the killing taking place in the world: in the Middle East, in the Persian Gulf, in Ireland, in India, in Cyprus, in the Philippines, throughout Africa—not to mention the havoc wrought by the totalitarian religions of the twentieth century. Those whose view on foreign policy arise from convictions of their own superior righteousness should recall the warning of Chekhov: "You will not become a saint through other people's sins."

THE MAGNETIC COMPASS

If moral principles have only limited application in foreign affairs, and if moral absolutism breeds intolerance and fanaticism, is the world therefore condemned to moral anarchy in international relations? Not necessarily. The argument moves, rather, to the conclusion that foreign policy decisions must generally be taken on other than moralistic grounds. It is necessary to consider what these other grounds are.

The men "who act upon the Principles of disinterestedness," wrote George Washington, "are, comparatively speaking, no more than a drop in the Ocean." He recognized, Washington continued, the power of patriotism. "But I will venture to assert that a great and lasting War can never be supported on this principle alone. It must be aided by a prospect of Interest.... We must take the passions of Men as Nature has given them." What was true for men, Washington believed, was even more true for nations. He called it "a maxim founded on the universal experience of mankind, that no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest." In short, where the embryonic international community cannot regulate dealings among

nations, the safest basis for decision in foreign policy lies not in attempts to determine right or wrong but in attempts to determine the national interest.

The idea of national interest sees international politics as, in the end, a struggle for power. The realist rejects cant and sentimentality. He is honest about his motives and takes life as history and experience reveal it to be. In reaction against soft Wilsonian righteousness, national interest seemed for a season a hard doctrine, the analytic key to the foreign policy riddle. For Washington was obviously right in saying that every nation *must* respond to some conception of national interest. No nation that abandons self-preservation as the mainspring of its policy can survive; nor, indeed, can any nation be relied upon in international dealings that acts against its national interest. Without the magnetic compass of national interest there would be no order or predictability in international affairs.

Moreover, every nation has a set of fairly definite strategic interests. One has only to recall the continuities of Russian foreign policy, whether directed by czars or by commissars. When one moves on to politics and economics, identification of national interest becomes more debatable. Still, even here nations often retain, through changes of government and ideology, an impressive amount of continuity: Consider France from De Gaulle to Mitterrand.

National interest is obviously not a fiction. But, as critics soon pointed out, neither is it a self-executing formula providing an automatic answer to every international perplexity. In practice, citizens quarrel endlessly about the content of national interest. The idea is dangerously stretchable and subject to much abuse. Almost as many follies have been committed in the name of national interest as in the name of national righteousness. The national interest, critics conclude, is not easily identified or objectively ascertained.

Hans Morgenthau, the great theoretician of national in-



terest, thus argued that German leaders had twice in one generation betrayed Germany's national interest; but that is hardly what the kaiser and Hitler thought they were doing. In the United States in the 1960s, the prominent realists—Morgenthau, Kennan, Niebuhr, Walter Lippmann—condemned American participation in the Vietnam war as wholly unwarranted in terms of national interest. The advocates of American participation argued with equal vehemence that the national interest demanded the Americanization of the war. History, it is true, has vindicated the realists; but who could *prove* at the time where the national interest truly lay? When indeed have statesmen ever supposed that they were betraying the national interest of their countries? National interest, while not an altogether phantasmagoric concept, clearly does not offer unequivocal policy guidance in specific situations.

There are still deeper objections. Moralizers consider national interest an unworthy if not a wicked idea on which to found national policy. It nourishes a nation's baser self. It becomes, they say, a license for international aggrandizement. The pursuit of exclusively national goals leads ineluctably to aggression, imperialism, war. National interest, in short, is a mandate for international amorality.

In practice, this is often so. In principle, however, national interest prescribes its own morality. After all, the order and predicability in international affairs valued by Washington constitute the precondition for international moral standards. More important, national interest, consistently construed, is a self-limiting motive. Any rigorous

defender of the idea must accept that other nations have their legitimate interests too. The recognition of equal claims sets bounds on aggression. Unless transformed by an injection of moral righteousness, the idea of national interest cannot produce ideological crusades for unlimited objectives.

This self-limiting factor does not rest only on the perception of other nations' interests. It is reinforced by self-correcting tendencies in the power equilibrium—tendencies that prevent national interest, at least when the disparity of power is not too great, from billowing up into unbridled national egoism. History has shown how often the overweening behavior of an aggressive state leads to counteraction on the part of other states determined to restore a balance of power. This means that uncontrolled national egoism generally turns out to be contrary to long-term national interest. States that throw their weight around are generally forced to revise their notions as to where national interest truly lies. This has happened to Germany and Japan. In time it may even happen to the Soviet Union and the United States.

For these reasons, it may be suggested that national interest, realistically construed, will promote enlightened rather than imperial policy. So it was that a realist like Hamilton could say that his aim was not "to recommend a policy absolutely selfish or interested in nations; but to show that a policy regulated by their own interest, as far as justice and good faith permit, is, and ought to be, their prevailing one." **WV**

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