

National Interest and National Responsibility

By C. B. MARSHALL

MY assignment calls for me to relate the national interest to the problems of the United States in the present world situation.

THE NATIONAL INTEREST A VALID CONCEPT

Let me comment first on that phrase, "the national interest."

Only a few years ago the economic interpretation of virtually everything was in vogue. Writers of considerable repute were fobbing off the significance of the national interest as a factor in foreign policy, interpreting it as merely a façade to conceal special interests and to deceive the public.

The return of the phrase to respectable parlance, indicating the recognition of a valid national interest paramount over particular interests, is a gain for straight thinking.

Often a decision in foreign policy is inseparable from the question of the domestic consequences of the decision. It is necessary in such an instance to recognize that our national destiny in a world of many nations is more important than the domestic group interests affected by the decision. In settling questions of conflict between the necessities of national security and group interests, the idea of national interest is valid and essential.

The phrase, moreover, indicates a step away from the utopianism beclouding too much the discussion of international affairs in the sequel to both World War I and World War II.

Nations do have interests. In some instances their interests coincide with the interests of other nations. Sometimes interests of different nations har-

monize without coinciding. Sometimes they differ, but not incompatibly. Sometimes they are mutually exclusive. Out of these variations comes the real nature of international life. It is useless to try to ignore this by talk about global harmony and the universal state. Such talk, while edifying to those who like it, only hinders—it does not help—the handling of world problems.

So it is good to hear people talk about international problems again in terms of national interests rather than in the abstractions of world government and world law.

Indeed, it would be a blessed thing if all differences among nations could be translated into differences of interest alone and not differences of basic purpose and principle. It is unselfish to compromise on interests. It is unseemly to compromise on one's principles.

Here I myself stray off into utopianism of another sort. The world is nowhere near that stage of adjustment where all national differences can be dealt with as solely differences of interest, and the coming of that day is too remote for prediction.

WEAKNESSES OF NATIONAL INTEREST IDEA

I have said enough in praise of the idea of national interest; now let me say some things in criticism.

The usefulness and significance of the phrase are limited. It begs more questions than it answers.

In appraising the significance of the national interest, I must distinguish between instances in which the decision turns on weighing our world position as a nation against the claims of particu-

lar domestic interests, and instances in which the issue lies simply between different lines of action in the foreign field.

I know of no case of the latter character in which the settlement of an issue of our national policy in the line of responsibility would have been facilitated by injecting the question: Shall we or shall we not try to serve the national interest? The question in the arena of responsibility in handling an issue involving foreign policy alone is not whether, but how, to serve the national interest. That involves the question of what is the national interest in a particular situation.

Indeed, I understand that between and among Republicans and Democrats this year there are considerable differences as to what is the national interest and how to serve it. Anyway, I have never heard Republicans or Democrats argue about whether the national interest should be served.

The question of serving the national interest is always a subtle and complex one in real situations. I am sure all of the following things are clearly in our national interest: to avoid war; to preserve our institutions; to have strong allies; to avoid inflation; to have a prosperous civilian economy; to find common grounds on which to stand with the various nations which have newly come to responsibility; to preserve our access to strategic waterways and vital raw materials; to protect the property and safety of our nationals abroad. I could extend this list by dozens of items.

Now, any matter of foreign policy pertaining only to the realization of one of those items would not present an issue at all. No one would have to work his brains overtime on it. No series of exhaustive meetings would have to be held. No protracted debate about the nuances and contradictions would be necessary. In such an in-

stance the policy decision would crystallize spontaneously.

In any practical question presenting a real issue, the national interest has several aspects. Indeed, there are many national interests, not just one. The difficulties arise in the conflict of one interest with another—for example, in the clash of the interest in peace with the interest in preserving national institutions, in the clash of the interest in having a strong defense with the interest in having a strong civilian economy, or in the clash of the interest in preserving access to a waterway with the interest in eliciting the adherence of another country to one's cause.

I trust I have made my point of the inconclusiveness of the national interest as a guide in any particular policy problem.

Beyond that, I believe the concept of national interest is inadequate and misleading even as a broad concept on which to found a policy. It seems to me that a more appropriate guiding principle is the idea of responsibility. This is a very different sort of idea. I want to devote the rest of this article to the contrast between national interest and responsibility and to examination of the idea of responsibility as it enlightens our present problems.

First I want to discuss our special role in the world today.

APPROACHES TO WORLD PROBLEMS

The great political issues of our time revolve around rival approaches to the handling of the problems growing out of such circumstances peculiar to modern times as the massing of peoples—their expanded numbers and their increased concentration; the sharpening of the clash between cultures due largely to awakened consciousness of the disparities in well-being between peoples in relation to the advance or lag of production techniques; and the destruc-

tiveness of modern war due both to the concentration of industry and population and to the greater inherent efficacy of modern weapons—their huge lethal power and the capability for distance and stealth in attack.

One approach would exploit these circumstances for the purpose of widening the scope and strengthening the foundations of a monopoly of political power. The other approach seeks to compose clashes of interest and to work out patterns of accommodation. The difference between these two approaches may be expressed as the difference between organized conflict and conflict organized. The legitimate question of politics is not how to eliminate conflicts of interest—a utopian concept—but how to organize society so that conflicts can be adjusted rather than fought out.

This difference in approach is brought to bear both within and among nations. The lines of difference are intertwined and subtle, for the lines along which great issues form are never as sharp as a razor.

POSITION OF THE SOVIET UNION

In so far as the issue has crystallized among nations, however, the Soviet Union stands clearly as the champion of the first approach.

Internal political circumstances cast the Soviet Union in that role. It is ruled by tyrants, who reached the seat of power through conspiracy and, having achieved power, have not dared to risk their hold on it by resort to a valid procedure of consent. They have remained conspirators after becoming governors, combining the usages of conspiracy with the prerogatives of the state. Both at home and in the world at large, the conspiracy that walks like a state requires tension and conflict to maintain its grip. In the service of this purpose it employs a doctrine empha-

sizing the patterns of conflict—class war, subversion, and the like.

This rule is established over a great range, commanding great resources in people and materials. Huge military forces at its disposal are deployed in positions bearing on northern and central Europe, the eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, southeastern Asia, the Republic of Korea, and Japan. The Soviet Union has auxiliaries in the form of embryonic governments under the guise of domestic political groups in territories beyond its imperium. The Soviet power is such that no combination of nations adequate to cope with it is conceivable without the support and participation of the United States.

POSITION OF THE UNITED STATES

The United States thus finds itself in the position of leadership among peoples which prefer to work out a method of handling the problems of our times alternative to the pattern offered by the Soviet Union and which are impeded in this effort by Soviet opposition. A failure to exercise this leadership would almost certainly result in a world power situation endangering the survival of our constitutional values. These are the values expressed in the Preamble of our Constitution. I do not doubt that you know them all, but let me enumerate them anyway.

The first is the perfection of our Union, the concept of a nation with steadily growing public values.

Second comes the idea of justice—of power subjected to standards superior to the mere attainment of the ends of power.

Third in the enumeration is domestic tranquillity, conveying the idea of a nation at peace with itself, a nation where issues can be decided by reason, by discussion, by compromise.

Then we come to the common de-

fense—the protection of the nation from penetration from the outside.

The idea of the general welfare is another of the values set forth. It embodies the idea of a government which serves and is not master, which is accountable to all of its people as contrasted to a government which serves the exclusive interest of a dominant group.

Finally we have the blessings of liberty—the situation in which each person can make choices for himself regarding his life, the life of his children, his religion, and his thoughts.

The fundamental and enduring purpose of our foreign policy is to maintain in the world circumstances favorable to the continued vitality of these values in the United States.

I want to stress the novelty in the American consciousness of the responsibilities which the present world situation imposes.

DEVELOPMENT OF OUR POWER

Our power, whence come our responsibilities, has three main foundations: position, political strength, and economic resourcefulness. The circumstances surrounding the development of each of these were such as to conceal their eventual implications.

The diffusion of power among several nations of great magnitude provided the relatively stable and protective situation which enabled the Americans to move onward from an Atlantic beachhead to become a continental nation, singular among the great powers in that it lies in both the Northern and Western Hemispheres, faces on both the Atlantic and the Pacific, and stretches from the tropics to the Arctic.

The same circumstances enabled the Americans to preserve and mature a government based on stipulated principles of accountability and freedom. Their purpose in doing this was purely

domestic. The strength of the government thus established is one of the great political facts of our time, important for all the globe.

The Americans developed a fecund agriculture and a productive industry, both without equal, through the expansion of an internal market. That circumstance concealed from them the eventual world importance that American economic strength would have.

Some sixty years ago Lord Bryce described the United States as living “in a world of peace” and as “safe from attack, safe even from menace.” Such was the national situation in the historic past, when the United States was a remote and intermittent factor in the ratios of world power and when Americans were concerned almost exclusively with the problems of their own national development. Lord Bryce added: “For the present at least—it may not always be so—America sails upon a summer sea.”

RESPONSIBILITY WITH LOSS OF FREEDOM

Within a lifetime the summer sea vanished. The world frontiers closed. Two world wars were fought. Germany and Japan were eclipsed in defeat. Other great powers suffered relative declines. Patterns of empire were sun-dered. Many erstwhile dependencies attained sovereignty. Revolutionary communism established a power base. Two nations emerged into positions of primary magnitude—the United States as one and the Soviet adversary the other.

So great an accession of responsibility in so brief a span has placed great moral tests on this nation.

One difficulty arises from the sense, as expressed recently by former Chancellor Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago, that “this country has been thrust against its will into a position of world leadership.” True, no

referendum on the issue whether or not to be a nation of such wide responsibilities was ever held. The choice was made unconsciously in many decisions of our past. We were thrust ahead not against but by our wills. The choice is none the less binding for having been made in unawareness of the consequences.

Here we have a paradox—an accession to great power accompanied by a sense of deprivation of freedom.

RESPONSIBILITY WITH LOSS OF EFFECTIVENESS

We feel that paradox in another way. In our historic past we viewed our role as that of standing normally aloof from the power balance whose benefits we enjoyed. At most, we would entertain the idea of throwing in our weight only momentarily to re-establish the balance whenever it might break down in general war. We regarded our role as like that of a pedestrian who might choose to vary his solitary walks by intermittently riding with others, without foreclosing himself from choosing to walk alone again.

Now that is changed. Our power makes our interposition essential to the preservation of the causes with which our interests lie. We must go along with others if we are to keep others with whom to go along. Our power is the basis of our essentiality, and our essentiality compels us to replace our historic sense of freedom by a new consciousness of responsibility.

While losing a sense of freedom, we lose also a sense of effectiveness. In the era when we stood normally aloof from the balance of power, our decision to become a world factor for a season had drastic and immediate results in redressing the balance. Now, by having become permanently involved in preserving the balance, we are no longer vouchsafed the opportunity to alter the

situation dramatically and radically by sudden action.

This leaves for us the exacting course of seeking a solution in the long pull through persistent effort to make the best of the situation stage by stage in the knowledge that such is the only way of making the situation better.

OUR POLICY OF CONTAINMENT

Let us look for a moment at the foreign policy which this situation imposes. It gives us no promise of arrival at some calculable moment at which we can say that all our troubles are behind us, that everything henceforth will be tidy and easy, and that we have crossed the one last river.

I said this to a group of Texans with whom I was discussing our national policy recently. One of them asked me whether I actually thought coexistence with the Soviet Union was possible. That is a curious question. It makes a matter of speculation out of something known to be true. Coexistence with the Soviet Union is not simply possible; it is a fact. Coexistence with a great power that tries to lead a double life as state and as conspiracy is vexatious, certainly, but it is preferable to the tragedy of general war and its sequel, whichever side might win.

Our policy seeks to avoid the tragedy of war, to abate the difficulties of coexistence by correcting the circumstances affording special advantage to the adversary, and to work with other nations as best we can to guide international life toward the patterns of conduct preferable to us. This policy, often called the policy of containment, is sometimes criticized as if it aimed for a protracted, static confrontation—a sort of perpetually frozen status quo.

Such perpetual equilibrium is foreign to the processes of history. The policy is based upon no assumption of arresting change. It rests rather upon the

assumption that the factors of position, population, talents, resources, and moral values redound to the ultimate advantage of the side of our interests, and that in the long pull it will be the adversary who must adjust his purposes.

This is not a foregone conclusion. What we and our friends do will be an essential factor in determining the outcome. This is no cause for disquiet. History presents no foregone conclusions. I know of no way to formulate a policy that will absolve us from the subsequent necessity of exercising resolution and restraint and paying the costs, whatever they may be.

HOW THE POLICY WORKS

The policy works along three general lines.

The first is to make coexistence more tolerable. This calls for improving our armed strength and that of the nations standing with us and combining them more effectively through a system of alliances; for helping the depleted and dislocated economies of our friends to regain a healthy level of activity and for helping the economically lagging countries to improve their production methods; for widening the area of peace by bringing the former enemy countries, Japan and Western Germany, back into collaboration with other countries.

The second line is to prevent serious deteriorations in the conditions of coexistence by avoiding losses in areas of sharp political conflict.

The third general line relates to the development of international usages and institutions of responsibility as instruments of free collaboration among nations instead of the collaboration by intimidation offered by the adversary.

To succeed in these endeavors will require the collaboration of others. They will not work along with us solely on the basis of our national interest.

The collaboration must be founded on an identity among their interests and ours. The primary responsibility for discovering and developing that identity of interests is ours because we are in the position of greatest strength.

THE MEANING OF RESPONSIBILITY

This is not a simple responsibility. It is irksome and expensive, and contains no easy formula for complete success in a stipulated interval.

The policy of responsibility lacks the simplicity (here I use the word "simplicity" in the sense of Proverbs 1: 22) of the counsel of unlimited violence, a counsel based on the fallacy of trying to reduce all problems of power to the limits of the problems of force.

The policy lacks the utopian tidiness of the dream of solution by world government.

It lacks the traditional ring of the counsel of solution by default, by which I mean the idea of confining our security to this hemisphere—a counsel put forth by some claiming the mantle of statesmanship even though the formula on which it rests contains a fallacy recognizable to any schoolboy familiar with solid geometry. The fallacy inheres in this: Two points on the same sphere can never be farther than a hemisphere apart; hence the whole world lies in the same hemisphere with us.

The policy based on the principle of responsibility lacks the crisp appeal of a phrase like "the national interest." It involves this paradox—that we can serve our national interest in these times only by a policy which transcends our national interest. This is the meaning of responsibility.

THE BURDEN OF FREEDOM

No nation could ask more of history than the privilege of coming to great responsibility. To satisfy our American

professions of the values of competition, we have at hand one of the most exacting contests in ideas ever experienced. To test our faith in freedom, we have abundant opportunity to make choices of action that will profoundly affect the course of human affairs. To test our devotion to values, we have the opportunity not simply to proclaim them but actually to support them by gifts and deeds and perseverance.

This juncture in our experience is not comforting for those who take the utopian approach to international problems—those who remind one of Kipling's lines:

Thinking of beautiful things we know;
 Dreaming of deeds that we mean to do,
 All complete, in a minute or two—
 Something noble, and grand and good,
 Won by merely wishing we could.

I recall the words opening one of Christina Rossetti's poems:

Does the road lead uphill all the way?
 Yes, to the very end.

That is the road which a great and responsible nation must tread. It is an uphill road all the way. For Americans who do not mind walking that kind of a road, this is not a time for misgiving, but a great time in which to live.

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