
Democracy and Empire

Centralization of power is of course the essential prerequisite of any dictatorship. When a governmental system already centralizes power, as did that of Czarist Russia, it is not necessary to go through democratic preliminaries in order to establish tyranny. Successful revolutionists need only adapt existing institutions to their particular purpose, as Lenin did. In his words, "bureaucrats . . . work today, obeying the capitalists; they will work even better tomorrow, obeying the armed proletariat."¹

But when governmental institutions hamper centralization, as they must in a federal republic from its very nature, then it is clearly necessary to reform those institutions before dictatorship can be established. And if those institutions are well designed, and have popular esteem, then a political tour de force becomes necessary. Some-

¹ V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 3rd prtg., International Publishers (New York 1935) p. 83.

how or other people must be made to believe that their traditional governmental machinery is out of date, incompetent to cope with new problems, a block to "Manifest Destiny," or perhaps manipulated for evil by unscrupulous men who distort the operation to the general disadvantage.

This accusation of distortion has always been the first attack of those who would reform our government, and unquestionably it has often been a justified attack. Unfortunately, those who denounce "entrenched minorities" in their zeal often give the impression that a minority is objectionable as such, whether it be composed of slave-owners or of Philadelphia Quakers. Thus deeply sincere reformers have helped to spread the wholly un-American belief that a minority is disreputable just because it is a minority, regardless of whether its concern is to protect "the interests" or to defend conscientious objectors. In this manner, reformist zeal has been of incalculable assistance to the concept of a dictatorial general will.

The initial objective of the reformer is not so much to centralize power as to prevent the abuse of power where already centralized. Yet the most admirable reformers all but invariably argue that there "oughta be a law." To prevent abuse of power, superior power should be concentrated in some government agency—an argument which strangely assumes that men become more moral when they serve the unmoral instrumentality of the state. This absurdity is compounded, but also made more difficult to discern, by calling the concentration of power "democratic." The average reformer, however, does not usually

invoke the word with the intention of making the bureaucracy all-powerful. He merely equates the general will with his own particular opinion. But the easiest way to make the particularist viewpoint dominant is to call upon the power of government, especially centralized government, in its behalf.

In the case of war, which is the perfect device for replacing federalism with centralization, the motive of the centralizers is not always innocent. There is good reason to think that Hitler wanted war, or at least was willing to risk it, precisely because the condition of war furthered his expressed objective of centralizing all power in the Nazi Party with himself as Fuehrer. In the manner of Rousseau's *Confessions*, Hitler was also a very honest man, and put his inmost thoughts, offensive though they often were, on paper. Other dictators have been as ruthless—Stalin was posthumously so revealed—but very few have been equally outspoken. Some, undoubtedly, have been merely as naive as is the small reformer when he assumes that power centralized in the state will be used more beneficially than power distributed in private hands.

Anyway, it is evident that power is most easily centralized by war, or by the expectation of war. And it is further evident that to obtain this centralization of power in a political federation, the national government must prevail on people to surrender their individual and State rights, on the plea of national necessity. Since there will always be a minority of the skeptics, perhaps even fortified by actual sympathizers with the real or alleged enemy, the

theory that the majority will should prevail becomes imperative in times of emergency. That is the theory of democracy, and that is the essential reason for the anomaly whereby the greater the centralized regimentation, the more feverish the claim of the regimenters that this is true democracy. To quote Lenin again: "Communism alone is capable of giving a really complete democracy."²

It is at least a curious coincidence that every war in which the United States has been engaged was both immediately preceded by a political flowering of democratic theory and immediately productive of centralization. That applies even to the War of 1812, which was really a continuation and affirmation of the Revolution against Great Britain. Even so, the opposition to it was strongest among the very undemocratic Federalists and as a direct result of what they called "Mr. Madison's war" we got a national debt, a national bank, a high protective tariff and certainly a great impetus for the strongly centralizing Supreme Court decisions of Chief Justice Marshall.

Desire to extend the area of slavery was unquestionably a factor in the Mexican War. There were, of course, other, and weighty, considerations in all these cases. Nevertheless, we must note the coincidence that faith in democracy surged up in the Jacksonian era, and that war with Mexico followed soon after. Centralization was of course encouraged, by government of the conquered areas as dependent territories pending their development into Statehood.

² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

This centralization was in turn a factor in bringing the Civil War, also forwarded by the democratic belief that because the majority deemed slavery an intolerable practice, it thereby became a duty of the central government to abolish it. And while the Civil War did not seem to do more than shake the federal structure severely, this political earthquake did greatly increase the subordination of the individual States to Washington, not only those ruled for years as conquered provinces, but all of them. Bureaucracy was greatly expanded to handle the problems of the emancipated slaves—through the Freedmen's Bureau and other agencies.

For a generation, after the Civil War, the American people were occupied in winning the West and filling their continental domain. The final conquest of the Indian tribal organizations can scarcely merit the name of war, as now understood, but it did provide reason for the maintenance of a national army and gave the central government experience in the direct rule of conquered and primitive subjects.

During this peaceful generation, indeed, the dynamic forces of imperial expansion were gathering strength all along the line. Secretary of State Seward was an avowed imperialist and his annexation of the Midway Islands paved the way for that of Hawaii. Soon the itch for world power was being constantly stimulated by big-Navy advocates like Admiral Mahan, by vigorous politicians like Theodore Roosevelt, and by sensational journalists like William Randolph Hearst. None of these were above using

the clichés of democracy to justify a war which would place the growing strength of the nation more firmly under the control of Washington. “Teddy” Roosevelt, indeed, was “convinced . . . that the country needs a war” and “rather hoped” it would come with Great Britain over the Venezuela dispute.³ But a much less costly conflict, with decadent Spain, served the imperial purpose just as well.

Again there was the coincidence between the flowering of democratic sentiment, under the leadership of William Jennings Bryan, and the reluctant move to war by President McKinley, who to Theodore Roosevelt seemed to have “the backbone of a chocolate éclair.”⁴ Neither Bryan nor any of his principal supporters can possibly be accused of wanting war with Spain, any more than he or Woodrow Wilson wanted it with Germany twenty years later. But Bryan, like Wilson, did desire the triumph of the general will. Theodore Roosevelt, in 1896 and in 1916, could argue plausibly that this general will demanded freedom for poor little Cuba, or poor little Belgium as the case might be. Certainly the war with Spain was generally accepted as an altruistic undertaking—merely the liberation of Cuba from the cruelties of Spanish domination, which in retrospect seem to have been no worse than those of Batista, or of Fidel Castro. In the illuminating words of the latter: “Those who want to know what democracy is, let them come to Cuba!”

But the outcome of the war with Spain was not quite

³ Beard, *Basic History*, p. 340.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

altruistic. The outcome was the annexation of Puerto Rico, Hawaii, the Philippines and lesser Pacific islands. It was the establishment of the United States as a colonial power, compelled to justify the suppression of the Filipinos which followed immediately on the liberation of the Cubans. And the deeper result was to make Washington for the first time classifiable as a world capital, governing millions of people overseas as subjects rather than as citizens. The private enslavement of Negroes was ended. The public control of alien populations had begun.

Only twelve years separated the suppression of the Philippine Insurrection and the outbreak of World War I in Europe. They were years in which the country moved simultaneously towards democracy and towards imperialism. The Income Tax Amendment provided the means whereby the central government could finance colonial operations, or any other undertaking deemed desirable for the general welfare. The Amendment for the direct election of Senators was expected to break down the recalcitrance of the undemocratic Upper House, which in its old unregenerate condition had rejected the attempted acquisition of Santo Domingo in Grant's Administration.⁵ and almost repudiated the annexation of other Spanish colonies after the war of 1898.

Simultaneously, what had traditionally been known as the "Administration" in Washington began to act as

⁵ This triumph of Senate over Administration is well told by Allan Nevins in his biography of *Hamilton Fish*, Dodd, Mead & Co. (New York 1936) Ch. XIV.

though it were what it is now inaccurately but habitually called—i.e., the “Government.” A revolt was provoked in Colombia, to facilitate the building of the Panama Canal.⁶ The Monroe Doctrine was interpreted by President Theodore Roosevelt to mean that the United States should use force to stop any Latin-American disorders. His successor, President Taft, applied this policy to establish a “protectorate” in Nicaragua. Woodrow Wilson then made the policy bi-partisan by extending the protectorate device to Santo Domingo and Haiti, and by ordering two punitive invasions of Mexico. He also reversed the traditional American policy of extending diplomatic recognition to any de facto government, regardless of its morality by our standards. This change was initiated by Wilson’s refusal to recognize the Huerta regime in Mexico and one need scarcely comment on the extraordinary inconsistencies to which it has led. It is doubtful that our foreign policy was every really assisted by withholding recognition from other governments because we deem them unreliable. But in the fledgling stages of imperialism this not too subtle form of pressure seems to have advantages.

It was “to make the world safe for democracy” that the American people were at last pushed, prodded and precipitated, with the aid of German aggressiveness, into World War I. The phrase has been greatly ridiculed, but

⁶ Professor Burgess calls the enforced separation of Panama from Colombia “one of the most unqualified and arrogant violations of international law known to the modern history of man.” *Recent Changes in American Constitutional Theory*, p. 39.

if we use our political terms correctly it must be said that the aim was very largely achieved. Political democracy is actually a form of government in which the executive can successfully assert that its direction is in accord with the general will, and World War I certainly gave enormous impetus to that claim. Old forms of constitutional government were everywhere overthrown or sharply modified, in the victorious as well as in the defeated nations. Most of the new forms, like that of Soviet Russia, could be called democratic, in the sense of representing what was alleged to be the majority will, and except where counter-revolutions broke out and were sustained it was impossible to prove that more than a minority were in opposition. The great utility of Rousseau's mystical *volunté générale* to dictators is that the more recalcitrant the minority, the stronger the case for suppressing it.

In the United States, World War I brought no written Constitutional Amendment. But the enlargement of centralized power, and the new national agencies deemed necessary to win the war, were here to stay. The machinery for centralized action to cope with subsequent domestic difficulties was either already designed or foreshadowed. We shall consider later how the New Deal made use of this disposition to centralize power. But one should be careful about giving Franklin D. Roosevelt too much credit, or discredit, for exploiting a situation already made ready for him. World War I had helped to make the world safe for democracy, and in the process had done a lot to

make constitutional government unsafe in the United States.

On Armistice Day of 1918 Woodrow Wilson wrote out in longhand his announcement to the American people: "Everything for which America fought has been accomplished." In a sense that also was true. Our participation in World War I took us out of the bush league and made us a great imperial power, a molder of world destiny. It was for this, historically speaking, that America fought. The trouble is that the great majority of Americans did not contemporaneously realize for what they were fighting. And one cannot say with assurance that Woodrow Wilson ever did either. For his was the tragedy of a man of peace, an idealistic reformer, a scholar and a close student of American institutions, who in this crisis could not uphold the traditions which he revered.

Every war in which the United States has engaged since 1815 was waged in the name of democracy. Each has contributed to that centralization of power which tends to destroy that local self-government which is what most Americans have in mind when they acclaim democracy. But every war has also been followed by a reaction, in which Americans have thought soberly about the implications of the drums and trumpets and have sought, almost instinctively, to restore the upset constitutional balance. After World War I this reaction was immediate. It undermined the League of Nations, for which Woodrow Wilson had worked the more valiantly because of his passionate

desire to validate the hope that good might come out of the evil he had reluctantly endorsed.⁷ The reaction also cut expenditures by the central government severely, curtailed its swollen functions, and by the time of Herbert Hoover had done much to re-establish the federal form, modified, of course, but nevertheless true to its original principles of divided powers and maximum home rule.

Then, out of stricken Europe, came the depression, with all its tremendous stimulus to what some call democratic action and to what others can as properly term demagoguery. There is no iron curtain between the two.

The great depression unquestionably helped to promote World War II, in any case a not unnatural consequence of the injustices and stupidities committed in the name of democracy after World War I. And an unusually authentic "general will" for relief from depression hardships brought that same perennial flowering of democratic theory that seems to be a constant element in American belligerency. Consequent to World War II we certainly see a permanently increased centralization of power and a further weakening of federal theory.

World War II was, historically speaking, a ghastly aftermath of World War I. The Korean War, on the other hand, stands out separately, as something which might easily have been a prelude, and was assuredly a portent, in regard to World War III. There is still much about World War II,

⁷ The outstanding account of President Wilson's effort for the League is found in Herbert Hoover's *The Ordeal of Woodrow Wilson*, McGraw-Hill Book Co. (New York 1958).

the Korean "episode" and lesser "brush fires," on which only partial information is available. But the consequences of these events in the promotion of American imperial practice are not at all obscure.

As with all political terms in this study, the adjective "imperial" is not to be taken in any invidious sense, but merely descriptively. An empire is a far-flung political organization, of which all the territorial parts are not necessarily contiguous, but are subject to a centralized administration of which the head was originally called an emperor, from Latin *imperator*. The essential feature of an empire, however, is not the title of its executive, but whether the executive rules overseas or alien territories without the freely given sanction of their inhabitants, as the Romans ruled Britain, as Russia now rules Hungary, as the French rule Algeria or as we rule Okinawa.

The alien domain incorporated into an empire is almost always in the first instance seized by force and is retained either for reason of military strategy or of economic advantage, real or imaginary. The adjective "imperial" is properly used to describe practices that resemble, or point towards, those of an established empire, even if these are temporary improvisations rather than settled policy. The United States cannot as yet be correctly described as an empire. But it cannot be denied that the central government of the United States has for more than half a century been engaged in imperial practices.

There are several definite characteristics of empire, all more or less connected with the fact that empires get their

start from military conquest. This conquest leads to territorial aggrandizement, which is followed by the establishment of military alliances to secure or protect the conquered territory. Alliances, as a device of imperial policy, are as old as recorded history but they are by nature impermanent, and the ally of one empire today may always be the ally of its enemy tomorrow—an elementary political practice on which Marshal Tito has done something to inform us.

From the uncertain nature of military alliances springs a second characteristic of empire. Allies must be continuously subsidized from the imperial treasury, both with military and economic aid. Once undertaken, these subsidies can never be stopped and are more likely to require increasing outlay in order to keep the ally bought. As there is no morality in the state as such, so there is no such moral factor as loyalty in the relations between states. An English statesman summed it up neatly when he said: “Great Britain has no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, but only permanent interests.”

The need of alliances explains a third characteristic of empire, which is hostility to the theory of neutrality. Thucydides tells how, during the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians demanded a “we or they” decision from the little island of Melos, then seeking to preserve neutrality as between Athens and Sparta.⁸ That was in 420 B.C., but twenty-four centuries later it is still a characteristic of

⁸ *The Peloponnesian War* (Crowley translation) Book V, Ch. 17, The Modern Library (New York 1934) pp. 330 ff.

empire to dislike neutrality. One strong indication of the American shift to imperial thinking is the way India has been criticized for upholding a neutrality which was a cardinal point in our own foreign policy less than half a century ago. On October 10, 1955, Secretary of State Dulles told an American Legion Convention: "The United States does not believe in practicing neutrality."⁹

A fourth characteristic of empire is the argument that there should be no political debate over foreign policy. Politics, it is said, should stop at the water's edge, because the intricacies of imperial policy demand the most expert direction and it is dangerous to have them criticized and impeded by those without inside knowledge. This theory of nonpartisanship depreciates what we call democratic procedures, by suggesting that these work only in issues of secondary importance. It thereby emphasizes again that once democracy has served to centralize government, the executive will assume the right to interpret "the general will."

Still a fifth characteristic of empire is to dilate in grandiose terms about its blessings for mankind. *Pax Romana* is the classical version of this trait. After World War II the phrase was: *The American Century*. There has never been an empire, from that of the Hittites to that of Hitler, that could not and did not justify itself in terms of Manifest Destiny—more manifest to the Emperor than to anyone else.

⁹ In Miami, Fla., Dept. of State *Press Release*, Oct. 10, 1955, No. 597.

Now all these five characteristics of empire—alliances, subsidies, dislike of neutralism, impatience with domestic criticism and extreme self-righteousness—are actively promoted from Washington today. But almost equally apparent throughout the entire country is an undercurrent of popular opposition which suspects everyone of these imperial characteristics and makes a stubborn fight against them.

There has been, and is, a great deal of American support for the political objectives of the United Nations, so far as they can be understood. But, excepting State Department propaganda, it is difficult to detect any great enthusiasm for NATO and still less for that jerrybuilt structure known as SEATO. If NATO were popular there would have been more support for the British and French efforts to hold together what is left of their crumbling empires, for the essence of an imperialist alliance is mutual respect for the colonial positions of the allies. So far as one can judge, American sympathies were as much with the Greek Cypriots as with the British, and with the Algerian rebels as much as with the French. In neither case, at any rate, did the usually vociferous State Department attempt to defend the imperial viewpoint of its allies. Nor has there been any denunciation, official or otherwise, of the indigenous efforts, from Iceland to Japan, to secure evacuation of the American garrisons overseas. At Suez, in 1957, the United States actually thwarted an entirely natural imperial action by our Franco-British allies.

In spite of the turn towards empire, Americans are par-

adoxically highly critical of colonialism. Alliance with colonial powers is officially defended on the negative grounds that Soviet oppression is much the worse of two evils and that the colonialism of Western Europe is in any case on the way out. NATO is explained and excused on grounds of immediate necessity, and seldom defended by assertions that it has any permanent intrinsic merit. This attitude makes the organization seem particularly impermanent, and likely to weaken further if a *modus vivendi* with Soviet Russia can be found. Indeed, NATO's chief asset for us is perhaps discernible in the economic importance of defense spending to the American economy.

Even so, there is growing opposition to the cost and waste of the subsidies necessary to maintain our imperial alliances. The historic pattern is that such subsidies continuously grow larger, yet analysis of Congressional voting indicates that opposition to them continuously grows stronger. Much semantic ingenuity has been used to gloss these military subsidies as "economic cooperation," "technical assistance" or "mutual security." This propaganda has not been very successful. In the minds of most Americans it is all classified as "foreign aid" and is all unpopular as such. That is one reason why effort to obtain bi-partisan foreign policy has failed. It is too obvious that politics should stop at the water's edge only if policies stop there also. When policy becomes imperial, involved in every quarter of the globe, the American tradition demands its continuous critical scrutiny by Congress. It is only the theory of democracy which revealingly maintains

that matters of supreme importance to the people should not be investigated by the elected spokesmen of the people.

The attempt to condemn all governments that would be neutral between our alliances and those of Soviet Russia has also failed. When Secretary of State Dulles attacked the concept of neutrality as "immoral" he was disowned by President Eisenhower. Not even our NATO allies, still less the neutrals, could be coerced into the effort to blockade Red China. A full reacceptance for others of our own traditional doctrine of neutrality, however, has not come, partly because many former isolationists, confused and bitter, have swung to the opposite pole of collective counter-attack wherever communist conquest seems to threaten.

But, in spite of xenophobia, talk about Manifest Destiny and The American Century has now almost completely evaporated. There is widespread recognition that the national talent is not imperial and that an extremely large number of people all over the globe are more disposed to dislike than to admire our much-vaunted "American Way." As problems of every sort increase at home we realize that what happens to Israel or Ethiopia is not our first concern. And this is not to be called a rebirth of "isolationism," but rather a recognition that federalism, even if we misname it democracy, is not adapted or adaptable to the path of empire.

Acting on this recognition, we have freed the Philippines and given dominion status to Puerto Rico. The Hawaiian Islands, however, were after long hesitation finally

admitted, by the Eighty-sixth Congress, as an integral part of the Federal Union. This favorable resolution of the issue of Hawaiian Statehood may seem to indicate willingness to transform a relatively homogeneous Federal Republic into a racially heterogeneous empire. It could be compared with the unhappy French experience in making Algeria—nominally—a part of “metropolitan” France. On the other hand, if federalism is to be a factor for international political stabilization, it must demonstrate capacity to incorporate racially alien peoples into its structure. When this is done with the evident approval of the foreign stock, as in the case of Hawaii, the extension of the federal idea cannot be called imperialism. None would so characterize Switzerland because its government incorporated the purely Italian canton of Ticino into the Swiss Confederation, even though in this case the original annexation was by force.

So the set of the tide towards an American empire, though strong and sustained, may actually have reached highwater mark. At least there are many who hope this is the case. Librarians report a lively interest in Roman history, stimulated by desire to avoid the mistakes that led Rome from republic, to empire, to ruin. And the rather surprising popularity of Professor Arnold Toynbee’s tortuous writings may be due to an American disposition to heed his warnings on the broad and beckoning path of empire, perhaps especially this one:

Whatever the human faculty, or the sphere of its exercise, may be, the presumption that because a faculty has proved equal to the accomplishment of a limited task within its proper field it

may therefore be counted upon to produce some inordinate effort in a different set of circumstances, is never anything but an intellectual and a moral aberration and never leads to anything but certain disaster.¹⁰

The fiction of a general will has not yet beguiled our Federal Republic into the “intellectual and moral aberration” of an American empire. But the imperial trend has nevertheless played no small part in the demoralization of federalism.

¹⁰ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Oxford Univ. Press (London 1939) Vol. IV, p. 504.