

War, Power, and Supremacy: A Conservative Interpretation

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At the zenith of our commitments we were
at the nadir of our precautions....

—WALTER LIPPMANN,
*U. S. Foreign Policy:
Shield of the Republic* (1943)

IN HIS WARTIME STUDY of American foreign policy, Walter Lippmann remarked on the propensity of the United States government for entering into commitments that lie outside the scope of existing resources. Our relations in Asia from the so-called "Open Door Policy" *vis-à-vis* China in the nineteenth century to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor are rife with rhetorical over-extension in which our government delivered warnings and ultimatums that it had neither the means to back up nor any real intention of enforcing.

There is, at the same time, another propensity that, at least on the surface, seems quite different: a readiness to employ American power in its vast and lethal potential in causes that have no carefully defined or concrete "interest" or objective, where the claim to justification is an appeal to a universal or an abstract ideal such as democratization of societies not our own, world peace,

security, liberty, freedom, or a combination of these and other abstractions. The Spanish-American War of 1898 is, by and large, an example since it was the consequence of national enthusiasm for the cause of Cuban "liberty."

Americans were also mobilized for belated entry into the Great European War of 1914-18 not, as was actually the case, as England's surrogate, but to "make the world safe for democracy" and to fight a "war to end all wars." The present Iraq War is a contemporary example of the same phenomenon, having at least as one of its declared purposes the democratization of Mesopotamian society. Whether foreign policy is created out of carelessness, as in the first instance, or, as in the second, in service to a universalized ideal or wishful thinking, the consequence for the American people is always serious. Further, in both instances, lethal action is likely sooner or later and will occur with little or no prior domestic discussion, so that it is impossible to judge which of these approaches is most dangerous, particularly when they appear, at least over time, inextricably mixed.

The invocation of a humanitarian ideal can do much to overwhelm the often considerable initial domestic opposition prior to American involvement in war, enabling the hawks to overrun the doves in mobilizing sufficient support for war.

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Lincoln first invoked the cause of the "Union" to overcome the substantial reluctance in the Northern states to coerce the Confederacy into remaining in the Union. Still there remained a strong tradition of support for the principle of self-determination in a nation that had itself come into being under similar circumstances.

Eventually, Lincoln's response to events made armed confrontation inevitable, and thus did he happen upon that combination, entry by fiat coupled with an abstract cause, that suffices to initiate hostility. If there is one thing modern American leadership has learned, it is that, once war begins, it develops its own momentum and civilian support. While part of the effect is a home front drive to "support the troops," a move in itself that shuts down critical discussion of war aims, there are also other factors at play through which the conflict is transformed into a moral crusade against evil. During the Civil War, for instance, this happened by the late stages of the war as Abolition, which was at first regarded as a marginal cause promoted by a radical fringe, gradually gained credence as a humanitarian cause.

By the end of the war the process of radicalization made possible by identifying war aims with a humanitarian cause had turned the conflict into a merciless and bloody war of attrition in which the Confederacy did not figure as a real state with any legitimate humanitarian claim to existence. Southerners had become in the eyes of their opponents subhuman demons defending a reactionary order, a dark power dedicated to block the forward march of emancipatory progress. One need only read the newspaper accounts of the day to understand that this is no exaggeration. Confederate efforts to reach a settlement were thus rebuffed and "total" war had made its lethal debut.

Prior to 1917, and in response to substantial American opposition to any en-

gagement in the great European War, Woodrow Wilson had promised not to involve the United States. When he finally was able to mobilize the country and enter, more or less, as Britain's surrogate, it was only after a three-year propaganda barrage in which Germans had been vilified as vicious "Huns." Perhaps even more important was the invocation of humanitarian rhetoric about fighting a crusade to "end all wars" and to "save the world for democracy." Once again the actual results were very different from the professed objectives used to justify American engagement.

Certainly the world was not secure for democracy, nor had war itself been abolished. The contrary was the case, as the peace settlements set the stage for an even more devastating conflict a mere quarter of a century later. The consequences of the Civil War fifty odd years earlier had left a vast and demoralized Southern population, both black and white, in the ruins of a devastated infrastructure and without the capital necessary to reconstitute itself, much less to deal with the new circumstances. The radical idealists in control of Congress were not surprisingly in a punitive and vengeful mood. Ultimately the war left multiple problems to fester another century while the majority section of the country distracted itself with western development and further industrialization.

In both cases, Americans had been seduced into war through the invocation of abstract causes that vastly oversimplified or completely ignored the facts, *i.e.*, actual conditions and the range of possible consequences. In either war humanitarian idealism had been invoked to generate war support that was intensified through a propaganda barrage that vilified the opponents beyond human recognition. The impact of war hysteria can be felt today when hearing the martial "Battle Hymn of the Republic." In the

apocalyptic imagery of this call to battle, the struggle is irresistibly imbued with eschatological significance, thus lifting it out of the realm of reality and common sense.

The wartime establishment of a moralizing dichotomy between Americans and their opponents deeply affects the popular mind far beyond the temporal limits of the war itself, though its effect upon the leadership during the war is devastating as well. The hysteria bred finally constricts leadership freedom to manage the war as a series of defined and limited political acts. Insofar as the opponents are made to seem archvillains inaccessible to human emotion or reason, it becomes impossible to seek any reasonable settlement with them. The pursuant radicalization leads, therefore, to a rejection of any measured policy. The war aim becomes simply to annihilate the enemy. The war becomes a war of attrition, a merciless slaughter in which neither combatant nor civilian is spared.

Except for the inhabitants of certain former states of the Confederacy, particularly Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia, Americans have no experience at the other end of the process of radicalization. They have not suffered the fate of having been demonized, followed by savage invasion where no quarter is given, communities laid waste—and that succeeded by a period of occupation replete with the usual antics of unscrupulous exploitation and further brutalizing acts. Lacking such a historical memory, finding it easy to dismiss the Southern experience, and, furthermore, being inclined by nature and education to discount history in general, Americans lack both the internalized experience of the vanquished and the inclination to suspect a political establishment that promotes such barbarism as a new principle of global supremacy.

There is more at play here than careless insensitivity or feckless arrogance, however, for the process of radicalization

that leads to an uncritical public acceptance of an openly formulated policy of global supremacy to be achieved by preemptive or total war is deeply anchored in the conceptual structures of modernity, in humanitarian idealism and the ease with which it detaches the imagination from actual conditions and the fundamental truth of our mortal limits.

The paradigm of Modernity has been cast most clearly in Hegelian terms. The world spirit or Nature is developmental; it moves forward and upward in an emancipatory trajectory that brings increasing freedom to a greater and greater number of people. Utopia awaits in the future, offering a world in which human desire can be fully developed and satisfied. Modernity is actually governed by pantheism, but it is a pantheism that requires development through time and which requires a moral definition supplied by humanitarianism. Finally it is a new view that invests all value or meaning in the unfolding and complete expression of human desire.

Prior to the advent of modernity, in a pre-modern world governed, in Europe and America, by Christian theism, a commonsense acknowledgement of the reality of actual conditions made human beings extremely reluctant to engage in lethal activity. The object of social order was not to provide a context for the full expression of human desire but rather through restraint to affect domestic tranquility, a state of relative concord that one assumed provided human beings their best hope of happiness. These traditional goals are clearly stated, for instance, in the Preamble to the Constitution and constitute the aims of government and the purpose of the state.

Princes were concerned with conserving their populations and protecting the harvests, while ordinary people never viewed warfare as beneficial to their interests, whether they were in trade, manufacture, or agriculture. As the ethical

system of Christian theism was absorbed during a period of conversion and education that lasted roughly from circa 900-1150 A.D., its effects sharply moderated the warlike impulses of the European peoples, providing a morality based on the desirability of non-injurious behavior. Warfare was circumscribed by an ethic heavily favoring mercy towards vulnerable civilians, as well as wounded, captured, or defeated combatants. Christianity's profound respect for duly constituted and existent order acted as a further deterrent to war since its fundamental optimism reflects a faith that happy opportunity can be discovered even in adversity.

The discipline of Christian ethics and the persuasive power of its authority diminished during a long period that began with general economic and social decline at the end of the High Middle Ages. By the early stirrings of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century with its accompanying intellectual ferment, Christianity had been replaced in much of Europe by a pantheistic world view and humanitarianism.

Pantheism (*pan*=the world/*theism*=god) requires a denial of transcendent significance and a corresponding investment of moral authority in the *saeculum*. This vast shift did not occur without struggle, and those opposing it did not simply vanish but continue to constitute a fragmented and much diminished social, political, and intellectual presence usually identified with the political right. In the meantime, the governing plutocracy is itself guided largely by the assumptions and beliefs of secularist humanitarianism. The warrant for acting in the world is anchored in modernity's faith in the moral authenticity of human *desire*.

The basic moral question within the context of Christian theism is the same as in pantheism, only the answer is fundamentally different. The Christian answer to the question, Why I do what I do, is that

it is God's will. Modernity's answer is that I do this because I *want* or *need* to do it, which is to say that my action derives from either my desire or my appetites, the latter implying biological needs and thus opening an opportunity for a new, strictly materialist determinism. In either case the warrant appears to be centered somewhere within the parameters of human nature rather than in a non-human divinity.

The actual consequences of this ethical shift are vast, complex, and impact both individual and corporate human behavior in ways that could not have at first been anticipated, and that are moreover still often difficult to ascertain and comprehend. There is, in fact, a fundamental moral incoherence that is most obvious in pantheism's inadequacy in resolving the problem of evil. Simply put, by sacralizing the material world, we set up a paradigm absent moral choice since the world must be either perfectly good or perfectly evil. Hegel's formulation summarizes the humanitarian version by portraying the "world spirit" as a positive developmental trajectory that leads at the end of history to absolute freedom or utopia.

Europeans and Americans accepted at some point in the century following the American Revolution what they believed was this optimistic interpretation of the pantheistic world view in which history is portrayed as a progress towards freedom, an emancipatory march to utopia where unrestrained desire will reign. Humanitarian optimism underpins not only a popular understanding of private morality but exercises a significant influence on domestic and foreign polity without any conscious acknowledgement that moral standards have been sabotaged in the process.

Humanitarianism offers no scope for moral discrimination. Human acts are actually judged not by their effects upon established and, therefore, actual human relations but in terms of the sincere inten-

sity with which desire's objects are pursued not only quite apart from networks of actual relations but most sensibly in opposition to them. In fact, existing relations, *i.e.*, actual conditions of human society, are regarded as obstructions to desire and, therefore, contemptible.

Henceforth human behavior is judged by the intensity of devotion with which one pursues satiation or satisfaction. The first dictum of Christian theism, which is concerned with whether the act has injurious or helpful consequences in shoring up or creating cordial relations and relative concord, figures nowhere in the humanitarian equation, though lip service is sometimes employed as a subterfuge. The warrant of subjective desire is the only acceptable authority or justification and the basis for humanitarianism's [a]morality.

The ethical dynamic of humanitarianism is epitomized in works like Goethe's *Faust*, in which a protagonist is portrayed violating all established relations, its restraints, traditions, and morals, in pursuit of desire's changing objects. Faust's redemption comes not because his acts have been benevolent or non-injurious but because he has striven with remarkable persistence to pursue his own subjective fancies. His all too obvious egocentrism and the damage he has wrought in the lives of many different people, including the hapless Gretchen, are justified by his ardent "striving," presumably to enlarge the scope of desire's unrestricted expression.

Self-expression is, in the commonsense world of Christian theism, of no value *per se* and even considered an evil where it leads to the abusive arrogance so patently clear in Faust's example. Humanitarianism creates, on the other hand, a new world in which lethal acts are justified in pursuit of desire, if desire's object has anything to do with what is generally called human freedom, individual liberty, or the pursuit of happiness. The incoher-

ence of this moral paradigm lies in the circularity of its dynamics which justify the violation of actual persons and their existing relations, thereby turning lethality, so long as it can be said to serve desire and to be perpetrated with ardent devotion to its self-realization, into a virtue. When applied to state polity, this is a recipe for perpetual wars in pursuit of humanitarian ideals such as worldwide democratization.

For a people that has been indoctrinated into a humanitarian flavored pantheism, and has so little experience with the vicissitudes and sufferings of defeat at the end of a merciless war of attrition, there is nothing within its experience or understanding to summon resistance when its government pursues global supremacy couched in the rhetoric of humanitarian idealism. Invoking the specter of war in the cause of "freedom" or "democracy" appears in the new logic as a perfectly reasonable and even laudable policy if it is pursued with vigor and sincerity.

The history of the United States began in a moment of ethical ambivalence. Common sense anchored in Christian realism still retained sufficient vigor to influence much public policy, while nascent subjectivism urged revolutionary action that served an emancipatory idealism. On the one hand Americans could rally to the cause of national self-determination against the legitimate British order while, at the same time, remaining prudent in their judgments concerning U. S. relations with other powers. Washington warned against foreign entanglements. Jefferson seized the opportunity to increase American territory cheaply. And there is that classic example of commonsense diplomacy in the Monroe Doctrine.

Prompted by Canning and the British government, the Monroe administration recognized a limited but very useful congruence between British and American

interests. In spite of the recent hostilities with the British, the American leadership was not indisposed to use the British fleet to co-opt further intrusions of other great powers in the Western hemisphere. It was a moment when American statesmen still understood the relation between means and ends and, hence, the first principle of prudence: the conservation of one's resources.

The Monroe Doctrine enabled the U. S. government to achieve an important policy goal without the expenditure of American resources or lives by mere assent to Britain's pursuit of its own interests. That policy goal was the maintenance of domestic tranquility that figures so importantly in the Preamble to the U. S. Constitution and recalls the fundamental wisdom of Christian theism but is diametrically opposed to the logic of pantheism.

We have seen just how a people who once prefaced their founding documents with a statement on the importance of domestic tranquility, *i.e.*, the maintenance of existing relations, can be seduced by a contrary world view within the space of two centuries, so that they are led into a perpetual crusade to transform the world while supporting their government's internal drive to implement a reign of terror encapsulated most recently in the new state-sponsored religion of multiculturalism.

The agenda of humanitarian pantheism consists of a systematic assault upon all established relations domestic and foreign with the object of achieving a kind of "utopian" discord that presumably dismantles any obstruction to self-expression or the unimpeded realization of desire. Such a goal, so contrary to common sense, can only become convincing when Americans have been largely seduced by humanitarian anti-realism, a view that any acknowledgement of actual conditions or existing relations is tantamount to a betrayal of meaning. In

this manner humanitarian pantheism begs the question of good and evil, thereby permanently postponing moral judgment.

The history of the modern age is written largely in celebration of this disastrous shift in ethical authority. Those who oppose it are depicted as history's villains when they lose. The million young Southern men who tolerated four years of merciless deprivation and war, convinced as they felt that they were defending their homes and families, now figure in our national story as bigoted racists who devoted their efforts to the utterly unjust defense of a repressive and anti-humanitarian status quo. Their very battle flag has become a symbol of evil.

If it is arrogance to assume that we can ignore actual conditions in the pursuit of our own self-expression, then the shift from a Christian to a pantheistic anthropology has moved us there. Acknowledgement of the objective world requires nothing less than an exercise of due humility, prompted by an awareness of our own limits and the reality of prior facts and commitments that make up established relations, themselves expressing the existence of other, valid interests than our own. We have noted how humanitarianism misconstrues this reality as obstructing human destiny and makes a virtue of defying it.

The cultural establishment of Europe and the United States devoted two centuries to the misinterpretation of the great utopian and dystopian literature that has dominated the imaginative arts since the inception of modernity. Where literature, art and music have provided a cautionary tale, critics and teachers have presented it as a blueprint for living in an absurd world. It is a pessimistic picture, and the proper response we are taught is anger, defiance, and indignation, so that the outsider, the rebel, the revolutionary, and the criminal become the heroes of choice in this new story.

Those who serve and believe in the existing order of society are portrayed as evil-doers. Whether their collusion in perpetrating the established order is deliberate or unintentional, they are on the side of the forces that seek to curb the uninhibited self-expression of desire. The same dynamic that feeds the subjectivist ego is fuel to the fire of public appetite as well, releasing state power from the restraints once promoted by a general acceptance of the validity of Christian ethics. Germany from 1871-1945 provides a textbook example of just where humanitarianism leads.

The inception of modern German power was sudden and, much like our own, the consequence of a series of brilliant diplomatic maneuvers and effective but limited wars. The campaign that led to German unity was conducted under the auspices of Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), a man who sought a certain limited political transformation within the Germanies while valuing and understanding the importance of a larger European balance of power. The closest American equivalent to Bismarck is, perhaps, James K. Polk.

Like Bismarck President Polk understood the calculus of power. He knew when to use restraint, bluff, and also overt aggression without exceeding available means. During his administration the United States finally fulfilled what many had come to consider its "manifest destiny." Bismarck's achievement was to unite German-speaking peoples within a state that was clearly destined to become the dominant power in Europe. This limited use of power was unfortunately scuttled as a German version of chauvinistic idealism swept the national imagination clean of the remnants of realism. Bismarck had first to leave the scene.

The humanitarian motor for a drive first to European and then global supremacy was fueled by faith in the universally redeeming value of *deutsche*

Kultur, which resembles the American faith in its own power as an indispensable tool in the redemption of the world through global democratization. It is hard to tell whether Bismarck and Polk were genuine realists since the most remarkable statesmen generally keep their counsel to themselves. It is impossible to say whether either man had any "vision" at all.

Before Bismarck's work led to the establishment of a Second German Empire, many saw him as just another, particularly clever but reactionary Prussian Juncker, which, of course, he certainly was. Polk was not even considered particularly clever, and he remains one of the least-known presidents and an enigma to Americans. The character of his achievement is also subject, as is Bismarck's, to the doubts of revisionists who question the value of the new order he was instrumental in creating. The fact is that their vision led to an unprecedented aggrandizement of their respective states and an accumulation of power that threatened the Western order.

Once such grey eminences leave the scene, the powerful states they created fall into the hands of men of lesser vision. This was the case with Germany. Once Bismarck was gone power fell into the hands of a flawed and arrogant young emperor who was no longer checked by Bismarck's realism. Americans were at least momentarily fortunate that Polk was succeeded by the usual mediocrities possessing nothing like the German emperor's ambition. The fecklessness, lethargy, and ignorance of American presidents and the checks and balances of the government did not permit them, at least in the nineteenth century, to create the same level of havoc as a Hohenzollern prince managed from his position of domestic supremacy and European power.

If power curbed by considerations of common sense seeks stability and peace,

unleashed and unrealistic power fueled by modern humanitarian idealism is a destabilizing force in the international order. Wilhelm II was determined to undermine the status quo in the hope of aggrandizing Germany's place in the rankings of European states. He was assisted by the German intelligentsia that was thoroughly drenched in the notion of their particular version of humanitarianism, in which Germany serves as the world's civilizing beacon.

There are many points of similarity between Germany then and the United States lately. Germany's sudden rise from impotence to a powerful and threatening presence was unnerving to its neighbors and inebriating for its young monarch. Having spent the previous four centuries as a motley assembly of minor principalities, Germany's political elite was not ready to manage great power status responsibly. Neither had the wily old Bismarck schooled any successors in his canny skills, any more than did Polk.

The non-Prussian political elites in the other German principalities, having possessed no real power for generations, had spent their time aping the French court in ostentatious consumption of which the many palaces scattered throughout Germany today are proof. The only real alternate political experience to be found in Central Europe was in Austria, but Bismarck had marginalized it and left it out of the German union. The numerous German princes were, at any rate, so dizzy with Bismarck's success that their Austrian compatriots could not have kept them from adopting a Prussian tone even if they had tried.

It is crucial to stress that the mere "tone" of Prussia was transferred but not its hard-bitten realism that had enabled it to fight its way into existence and survive while surrounded by threatening and often greater powers. What was left and what was adopted had to do with the outer shell of the Prussian habitus and

nothing of its realistic character; it was all arrogant pride. Other civic constituencies, such as the middle classes, were unaccustomed to the purposes of government, their role having been restricted to service in extra-governmental institutions like the church, university, schools, high culture and, most recently, industry and trade; they were, therefore, particularly vulnerable to the fatuous wishful thinking of humanitarianism.

The people in their provincial ignorance offered no more resistance to the machinations of their leaders than Americans do today, and with much less real excuse. Germans were too familiar with the unobtrusive, quiet life in their villages and towns, disturbed only occasionally by the caprices of their overlords, insulated from the world, complacent in their traditional ways and simply indifferent to how unattended events outside their immediate sphere can turn with a vengeance and intrude in most unpleasant ways upon domestic tranquility that they had mistaken as part of nature.

In the meantime, Germany's government and its military were cutting a disturbing figure in the world, while Prussianized arrogance gradually trickled down through German society, transforming a genial, somewhat lethargic people into heel-clicking martinets. Their elites were, in the meantime, fast creating an industrial and military dynamo with the goal of striving for dominance in Europe and beyond.

The only opposition to this new imperial adventurism came from eccentric or marginal segments of the population. The novelist Hermann Hesse emigrated, for instance, to Switzerland in protest and never returned. Other members of the intellectual classes, the most renowned case for the Anglophone world being Thomas Mann, had their heads turned by the new sense of destiny and power, and like Mann later came to regret bitterly and

publicly their infatuation.

An imperial pretender never arises out of a vacuum, and Germany was not alone in its imperial aspirations. Such was the temper of the times. Other European powers were just as busy blustering, strutting, and sword-rattling, though with less power to enforce their wills. In one respect, Germany simply joined the crowd. Even tiny Belgium had jumped on the imperialist bandwagon and committed unspeakable atrocities in the Congo. On the other side of the Atlantic, the United States had been primed by its victory against the Confederacy and the opening of vast resources in the west to develop its own imperialist goals.

Once again there are parallels in the German example and in our own behavior. The United States came into being in the cauldron of war, its subsequent history a chronicle of internal and external conflict, civil war and expansionism. Once it had achieved territorial satiation successive administrations showed little inclination to abstain from future wars less directly tied to its immediate interests. Both Germany and the United States

have appealed to humanitarianism to justify their actions to themselves and to the world, each with diminishing external credibility.

The chilling resemblance lies in the internal dynamics in which phantasms of cultural superiority enhance aspirations to global supremacy. Justified in its arrogant presumption and destructive behavior by humanitarian pantheism, the population tolerates and even promotes a fatal distortion of national objectives. They are drawn into an inexorable march to destruction, which ends in Germany's case with the desolation and the complete demoralization of absolute capitulation expressed in the German phrase *die Stunde null*.

In the end, whether the goal is the proliferation of a superior and presumably redeeming German *Kultur* or an American crusade to bring to the world the blessings of its own unique civic and political culture, the consequences are the same. Being taught to abandon any respect for the existing order of relations in the world, men are left to pursue sheer mischief. The harvest is the whirlwind.