AMERICA'S BATTERED SPIRIT: OUR SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY DILEMMA

by

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In this turbulent historical era, our systemic political and economic problems, and, most fundamentally, the battered, declining American spirit pose a critical dilemma for our security and foreign policy: Should we accept the reduced world role that our domestic realities suggest is necessary, thus eroding still further our ability to defend our interests; or should we try to exercise a more proactive international policy, thus risking failure of that policy because it is not consonant with domestic realities? The way out of this dilemma may be a reinvigorated national spirit.

There can be little doubt that in recent years America's international power and prestige—and our ability to influence the worldwide political, economic, and military environment in which we must exist—have been eroded. This has been so not only in relation to our principal adversary, the Soviet Union, but also with regard to various countries and groups of countries in the Third and Fourth Worlds (for example, Mexico, Cuba, Vietnam, and OPEC). Moreover, this unfavorable trend seems to be accelerating, most recently as we helplessly watched some of our most important strategic and economic interests being destroyed in Iran.

Such, at least, is a widely held perception of our situation, both at home and abroad. *Time* magazine, for example, is fairly representative of a rather wide range of editorial opinion in calling for a return to:

> . . . a geopolitical world view that features America as an active, assertive and purposeful leader, rather than the baffled, dismayed, uncertain spectator it has too often seemed in the recent past.[1]

And, a growing number of world leaders increasingly mistrust our ability or our will to exercise effective leadership of the West and to defend vital Western interests.[2]

In my opinion, such perceptions are thoroughly rooted in reality; but regardless of whether this is so, perceptions are at least as important as reality for such intangibles as international leadership and prestige, and consequent ability to pursue an effective

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diplomacy. If people *believe* we are weak, then we *are* weak.

Many commentators seem to be laying the blame for this situation largely on President Carter and the current administration, alleging weakness, indecisiveness, and ineptitude in some aspects of foreign affairs. Without addressing the extent to which the administration's reported shortcomings may have contributed to our present international woes, I want to examine the fundamental, historic, largely domestic trends which have brought about this situation, and which would confront any administration with a most serious security and foreign policy dilemma. Our national spirit, I fear, has been so battered that we face a virtually inevitable period of serious national danger. Let me explain what I mean by this "battered spirit" notion and the dilemma it poses for our foreign policy and ultimately our national security. First, let us look at our present position from a long-term, historical perspective; then examine some of our more specific, contemporary political and economic problems; then focus on the most fundamental difficulty we face, which can be termed "spiritual"; and finally assess the security and foreign policy implications of this analysis.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: A NEW SOCIETY

Many visionary observers of the contemporary scene have pointed out the watershed nature of the mid- to late-20th century, particularly for the most advanced Western societies. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for example, says that the world "has approached a major turn in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance."[3] C. E. Black writes:

> The change in human affairs now taking place is of a scope and intensity that mankind has experienced on only two previous occasions . . . i.e., the emergence of human beings from primate life [and the transformation] from primitive to civilized societies.[4]

Daniel Bell describes the current transition as a movement into the "post-industrial society."[5] And, according to Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock*, "What is occurring now is, in all likelihood, bigger, deeper, and more important than the industrial revolution." We are, he writes, "creating a new society. Not a changed society. Not an extended, larger-than-life version of our present society. But a new society."[6]

No one could doubt that America is at the forefront of this global, profoundly revolutionary watershed in the history of mankind, however it may be defined and to whichever historical precedents it may be compared. Thus, it is not surprising that we may be among the first to experience the tangible problems as well as the spiritual discomfiture which must inevitably accompany it.

There is a considerable body of contemporary opinion, moreover, which holds that if this country has not yet committed national suicide, it is certainly in a period of long-term, probably irreversible decline. "The United States," asserts historian Andrew Hacker, "is now about to join other nations of the world which were once prepossessing and are now little more than plots of bounded terrain."[7] He says our days as a great industrial power are numbered because we have lost our self-discipline, our sense of mission, our messianic spirit.[8] Many futurists, such as Daniel Bell and Samuel Huntington, while less pessimistic in their view of America's future, agree that the coming decades are likely to witness further decline in worldwide American influence, perhaps even the "retreat of the United States from the center of world power."[9]

Other observers are more sanguine, or at least more cautious, pointing out that we have experienced difficult times before, and that gloomy predictions have not been historically unique to the 1970's.[10] The weight of scholarly opinion, however, suggests that this nation's passage through the remaining years of the century is likely to be exceedingly difficult at best.

Why do these views predominate? The "historic transformation" idea is based

primarily on our burgeoning technology; the revolutionary social, cultural, and psychological changes which accompany it; and our demonstrable difficulty in coping with them. Kenneth Boulding, an eminent economist and social thinker, observes that "as far as many statistical series related to activities of mankind are concerned, the date that divides human history into two equal parts is well within living memory." In effect, when we examine changes of many kinds, this century is a kind of dividing line in the middle of human history, with as many scientists alive today as existed in all previous generations, and so forth. Consequently, Boulding continues:

> The world of today . . . is as different from the world into which I was born as that world was from Julius Caesar's. . . . Almost as much has happened since I was born as happened before.[11]

We should condition ourselves, therefore, to the idea that fundamental changes in present realities are not only possible, but likely.

As for the pessimistic views concerning this country in particular, we can seek their basis in an examination of current American political and economic developments and in what I believe to be our national spiritual malaise.

AMERICA'S POLITICS: THE "DEMOCRATIC DISTEMPER"

Samuel Huntington has written, "The vitality of democracy in the United States in the 1960's produced a substantial increase in governmental activity and a substantial decrease in governmental authority." This, in turn, "raises questions about the governability of democracy in the 1970's." Huntington points to the rise in welfare spending as the result of popular expectations and group demands; the replacement of "party politics" by "issue politics" and the corresponding decline in the relevance of both major parties; the rise of the press as a major new political force on the national level; the erosion in the power of the President to govern effectively; and the general extension of the democratic principle as the means for constituting authority, to the point where our institutions are threatened by an excess of democracy. He calls this condition "The Democratic Distemper."[12]

Other commentators, from the right to the left of the political spectrum, seem to agree that there is something fundamentally wrong with our present political system. Several have emphasized the dissolution of the national political "consensus" which formerly helped bind our society together.[13] Paul Weaver examined the democratization of our political processes and concluded that this "has been in fact a transfer of power from one oligarchy [party bosses] to another oligarchy [middle-class ideologues], and a less representative one at that."[14] Paul McCracken agreed that we are moving politically toward "a tyranny of the minority, given the tendency for interest groups to have a vastly disproportionate influence on legislation."[15] Hannah Arendt was only somewhat more apocalyptic than other political observers when she wrote:

> Disobedience to the law, civil and criminal, has become a mass phenomenon. . . . The defiance of established authority . . . may well one day be accounted the outstanding event [of the 1960's]. . . . No clearer writing on the wall—no more explicit sign of the inner instability and vulnerability of existing governments and legal systems—could be

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imagined. If history teaches anything . . . it is that a disintegration of political systems precedes revolutions, that the telling symptom of disintegration is a progressive erosion of government authority, and that this erosion is caused by the government's inability to function properly, from which springs the citizens' doubts about its legitimacy.[16]

AMERICA'S ECONOMY: A LOSS OF DYNAMISM

If the effectiveness of our political institutions has come into question, so has the viability of our economic system. The immediate problems are well-known and need no elaboration—inflation, unemployment, an internationally weakening currency, energy shortages, a stagnant stock market, and so forth. However, like many other problems which beset us, these seem to be symptoms of something deeper, something more fundamentally wrong. As Bell puts it:

> Today, one thinks of an American climacteric, a critical change of life . . . carrying the implication that the U.S. economy has passed its peak, that the aging process is real and the loss of leadership irretrievable. . . . The sense remains that the period of American dominance in the world has crested.[17]

Looking behind the more visible problems, we see such serious trends as the decline in American productivity relative to other industrialized economies and decreased technical innovation.[18] Still more fundamental, perhaps, are some basic changes in the very nature of our economic machine. As Toffler put it, for example, "We are moving from a 'gut' economy to a 'psyche' economy because there is only so much gut to be satisfied."[19] Thomas Griffith, among others, has pointed out that we have been forced to recognize that our resources are not unlimited and therefore neither are our prospects for unlimited expansion. "If rapid growth is no longer the easy answer to our problems, the alternatives to it are difficult for a nation with an economy so attuned to growth."[20]

Tocqueville wrote of 19th-century America:

> Democracy does not confer the most skillful kind of government upon the people, but it produces that which the most skillful governments are frequently unable to awaken, namely an all-pervading and restless activity, a superabundant force, and an energy which is inseparable from it. . . .[21]

We may still have the most affluent economy, but it would be hard to argue that we still have the most dynamic economy. Perhaps we have somehow lost Tocqueville's "force."

AMERICA'S BATTERED SPIRIT

What ails America today is surely more than the sum of our turbulent historical era, our political and economic ills, our social stresses, our environmental woes, and the other tangible, measurable problems which beset us. Many observers point to something which is vague and perhaps indefinable, but yet very real: a battered, declining national spirit.

Americans traditionally regarded their country as peculiarly blessed among nations. Our political institutions, while not always functioning exactly as one might wish, served the average citizen well in providing the personal freedom he desired along with a reasonable degree of responsiveness in meeting his perceived needs; in popular myth, these institutions were idealized as perfect or very close to it. Likewise, American economic success was very real, and even those who might fail to achieve prosperity themselves could not only hope for but expect better times for their children. On the whole, Americans were participants in a national consensus: confident about the nation's future and proud of the spiritual values it represented. As Tocqueville put it, the people regarded the general prosperity "as the result of their own exertions; the citizen looks upon the fortune of the public as his private interest, and he cooperates in its

success. . . ."[22] Most Americans believed that this nation was indeed one to which others could look for inspiration; that, in Thomas Paine's words, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind."[23] Regardless of whether such beliefs were wholly warranted by the facts, they were real, and most people could agree that they were at least to some degree justified.

In recent years, however, this picture has changed. As we have seen, a new historic era has brought problems unprecedented in both magnitude and speed, and the ability of our political and economic systems to function effectively in the contemporary world has been brought into question. The national mood has become listless, perhaps even sour. America has, of course, been through difficult periods before. But the changes taking place in the last two decades or so have appeared to be more than merely cyclical, not just a temporary deviation but a fundamental redirection of the national course. As one Bicentennial essayist put it, "There is a widespread feeling that America is at a kind of turning point. . . . The American dream has changed, to say the least."[24]

The country's spiritual malaise has been described in a wide variety of ways. Many call it a "failure of will."[25] Stanley Hoffman, on the other hand, says, "We have lost, not our will, not our might, but our compass."[26] Another analyst, finding us guilty of "spiritual narcissism," points out:

> What is peculiar about contemporary American disillusionment is that it is not limited to the victims of social oppression, the down-and-outers of society. People who have everything that is supposed to make them happy are still dissatisfied and alienated and insecure.[27]

McCracken concludes that "our philosophical foundations have themselves been shifting and wobbling underneath us."[28] Hacker, who looked extensively at the psychological and spiritual side of our problems, found that most contemporary commentators:

> . . . agree that rootlessness, alienation, and a crisis of identity characterize the time. Confused over goals and values, Americans find themselves powerless and frustrated appendages in an age of dehumanized institutions.[29]

Toffler argues persuasively that the "pathology that pervades the air" is closely related to "the uncontrolled, non-selective nature of our lunge into the future."[30]

Perhaps because he is a foreigner and thus may be, like Tocqueville and Lord Bryce, in some ways more qualified to analyze this country than any American could be, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's views expressed in his Harvard commencement address are most alarming. He was talking about the West in general, but also in particular about America, its leader. He found that we have been liberated not just from political oppression, but from our "moral heritage" as well; that we are imbued with materialism and superficiality and hastiness; and that all our technological achievements do not redeem our "moral poverty." He said:

> This may be the most striking feature that an outside observer notices in the West today: The Western world has lost its civil courage. . . . Should one point out that from ancient times decline in courage has been considered the beginning of the end?[31]

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

All of this logically suggests the following:

- We are in the forefront of a global transformation in man's history which makes our future not only difficult to predict but also predictably difficult.
- Our political and economic problems are systemic, not superficial, and solutions, if they exist, are not yet visible.
- Our most fundamental trouble is spiritual in nature.

If this is the case, what are the implications

for American security and foreign policy? The immediate conclusion that might be drawn is that a period—perhaps lengthy—of national introspection and caution is in order, if not inevitable. This seems to be echoed in the determination that there be "no more Vietnams," in the conclusion that we must no longer be "the world's policeman," and more concretely in the ever-declining share of our gross national product and federal budget which goes to defense and foreign aid. If, for whatever reasons, we can no longer operate effectively as a superpower, perhaps we should scale down our ambitions, revise our dream, and accept a much-reduced role in world affairs. Perhaps, as many of President Carter's advisers are reported to believe, we have no other alternative than to adjust our global responses to "the new realities" of world power.[32]

Herein, however, lies the dilemma. To the extent that we follow an essentially reactive, noninvolved course in world affairs, even to the extent that other countries *perceive* us to be following such a course, we will have lost a great deal of our ability to defend our national interests, however we define them. In a dangerous, largely hostile world, can we afford to be in this position? On the other hand, if we attempt to follow a more vigorous, proactive policy in world affairs, would we not be going against the grain of our present national psyche, our domestic realities? Would we not then be courting failure, or at best a renewed demonstration of ineffectualness which would only hasten our decline?

The escape from this dilemma clearly lies in a rekindling of the American spirit, a renewal of our national vigor. But how can this be accomplished? It is of course easier to identify the illness than to prescribe the cure. It may be true that "if the American dream is dead, or dormant, it is because the dream of the fathers has been mostly realized, while the dream of the sons has not yet been successfully formulated."[33] We need someone to formulate that dream. Perhaps this spiritual reawakening is the ultimate challenge for American political leadership of the 1980's. Perhaps it is time, as Solzhenitsyn puts it, "to defend not so much human rights as human obligations."[34]

NOTES

1. "Surprise and Confusion," *Time*, 26 February 1979, p. 15.
2. See, for example, the attitude of French President Giscard d'Estaing, in "Giscard Airs Criticism of Carter's World Role," *The Washington Post*, 16 February 1979, p. A30.
3. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "The Exhausted West," *Harvard Magazine*, 80 (July-August 1978), 26.
4. C. E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization: A Study in Comparative History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 2.
5. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
6. Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 14, 165.
7. Andrew Hacker, *The End of The American Era* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 6.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
9. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp. 215, 217.
10. Laurence Veysey, "Rejoice! Some of What Ails Us May Not Be So," *National Observer*, 1 May 1976, pp. B1-7.
11. Kenneth Boulding, as quoted by Toffler, p. 15.
12. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Democratic Distemper," *The Public Interest* (Fall 1975), 9-38.
13. For example, see Joseph Kraft, "The Crumbling of Consent," *The Washington Post*, 5 October 1978, p. A19; Paul McCracken, "Our Underpinnings: A Bicentennial View," *Journal of Neurosurgery*, 43 (November 1975), 515-22, reprinted by the American Enterprise Institute, Reprint No. 56 (November 1976); and Thomas Griffith, "Reshaping the American Dream," *Fortune*, 91 (April 1975), 88-91, 204.
14. Paul H. Weaver, "Do the American People Know What They Really Want?" *Commentary*, 64 (December 1977), 65.
15. McCracken, p. 520.
16. Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 69.
17. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, p. 213.
18. Bradley Graham, "US Productivity: Golden Days Over," *The Washington Post*, 5 October 1978, p. F1.
19. Toffler, p. 209.
20. Griffith, p. 88.
21. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 180.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
23. Thomas Paine, *Common Sense and Other Political Writings* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1953), p. 3.
24. John Hamer, "America's Next Century," *Editorial Research Reports*, 1 (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Inc., January 1976), 1.
25. Bradley Graham, "U.S. Advised on Productivity," *The Washington Post*, 5 October 1978, p. F3.
26. Stanley Hoffman, as quoted by Hamer, p. 18.
27. Joseph H. Ficter, "The Trend to Spiritual Narcissism," *Commonweal*, 17 March 1978, p. 170.
28. McCracken, p. 516.
29. Hacker, p. 158.
30. Toffler, p. 325.
31. Solzhenitsyn, p. 22.
32. Hugh Sidey, "The Flood Tides of History," *Time*, 19 February 1979, p. 16.
33. Griffith, p. 88.
34. Solzhenitsyn, p. 22.