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THE PROBLEMS OF A SUCCESSFUL AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

By Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn

Editor's Preview: In this issue, an observer of American culture and politics for over fifty years, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, briefly examines historical and contemporary attitudes which constitute the basis for U.S. foreign policy. His ultimate conclusion is that while the Soviets have an ideology—a mission—Westerners do not, and that American intervention in world affairs since 1917 (others would claim even a century earlier) has suffered from a lack of clear vision and long-range strategies.

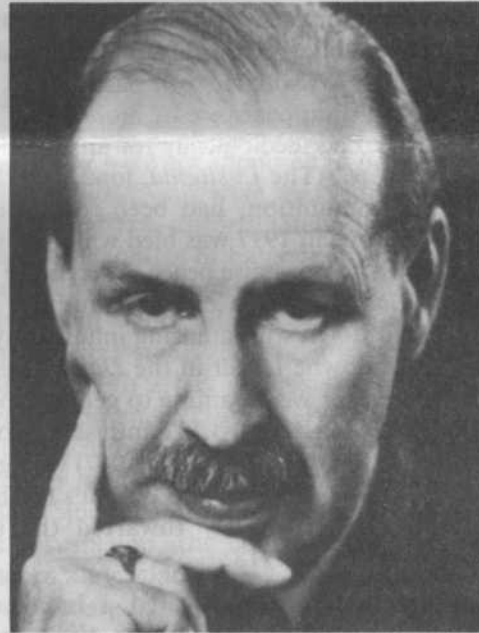
Mr. Leddihn argues for a strong executive branch to take the initiative in foreign diplomacy and a more vigorous, less ethnocentric, less self-centered, education in world events for our leaders and the general public. Although neither of these recommendations, if realized, can guarantee anything, Mr. Leddihn emphasizes that they are essential tasks for creating an enduring and philosophically consistent guide for American foreign policy.

"Ah," exclaimed the baron, with his wickedest leer, "what for is my conclusion good? You Americans believe yourselves to be excepted from the operation of general laws. You care not for experience."

Henry Adams, *DEMOCRACY*, 1882

The United States of America was originally conceived as an Isle of the Blessed and this, indeed, it was; a truly gigantic island surrounded by three oceans, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. This splendid isolation was stressed by the Monroe Doctrine which (inspired partly by Britain) stated that the Old World should not intervene in the New World—and vice versa.

Yet, very soon after this declaration, the American scene changed drastically. In 1828 came a watershed in American history. Americans elected a president who represented a political system totally alien and un-American: democracy—a French ideology which had been emphatically rejected by the Founding Fathers. This change coincided organically with the eclipse of Amer-



ica's founding greatgrandfather, Jean Calvin, in favor of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the replacement of one John from Geneva with another. The modern American is, as a rule, Rousseauian, but more often than not still has Calvinist undertones in his character.

Democracy, unfortunately, permeated American folklore and affected the American mind, although the Whiggish-aristocratic background was not totally effaced. (The strong, often hysterical affirmation of demo-egalitarian principles is due precisely to the challenge of surviving memories.) As a result of this development—so strongly deplored by great Americans like Herman Melville, who spoke about "the Dark Ages of Democracy" (in *Clarel*), like William Graham Sumner, Henry Adams or Irving Babbitt—we see the United States becoming increasingly a champion of the appropriated democratic ideology, a trend that became fully evident in the 20th century. Here it must be mentioned that democracy can be liberal or illiberal. (Vide Athenian democracy

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which condemned Socrates for his critique of democracy, or the French democracy of 1792-1794.) Democracy answers the question *who* should rule, (the majority of politically equal citizens), whereas liberalism, *rightly understood*, explains *how* rule should be exercised (granting the largest feasible amount of liberty to individuals). A synthesis of these two principles is, in the long run, highly problematic. Full equality can be achieved only in slavery; freedom fosters inequalities and majority rule can become extremely oppressive.

Still, in 1917, the most fateful year in modern history, the United States intervened in the European war which, until then, had been a war between nations. In March of 1917, the Russian monarchy fell victim to the forces of democracy and republicanism. Alexander Kerensky was hailed by Woodrow Wilson as "a fit partner in a league of honor" and the disappearance of monarchial rule in Russia opened the road ideologically for an American intervention in Europe. (The *Lusitania*, loaded to the gills with arms and ammunition, had been torpedoed two years before.) Europe in 1917 was bled white, exhausted and approaching a compromise peace. There were Papal, Austrian and German peace efforts, mutinies in the French Army (put down with amazing inhumanity), and the famous Landsdowne Letter in the *Daily Telegraph*. Yet, certain Americans were panting to get into the fray, above all the highly leftist defrocked minister George D. Herron, whose *The Menace of Peace* (1917) won greatest praise from Wilson. Herron became Wilson's left hand in foreign affairs and effectively thwarted the second Austrian peace effort in 1918.

America's intervention constituted a break of the Monroe Doctrine and, at the same time, became America's Original Sin in the field of foreign relations. From that moment on, the dream of America as an Island of the Blessed was forever shattered and what followed had the inexorable character of a Greek tragedy. In his

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novel *Erik Dorn*, Ben Hecht likened Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference to "a long-faced virgin, trapped in a bawdy house and calling in valiant tones for a glass of lemonade." This man, who had only the sketchiest knowledge of history, geography and languages, was outwitted and did not even have a good grasp of America's mood. G. D. Herron, a fool but an idealist, was so appalled by the brutality with which the peace treaties were imposed that he prophesied endless wars of a "savage and tartaric character" as a consequence. (He died in 1925, a great admirer of Mussolini.)

The result of the American intervention, the throwing of America's weight on one side of the scales, was a temporary victory of democracy more or less imposed where it had no roots. One has to bear in mind that on the continent of Europe none of the great minds (except certain *literati*) had democratic convictions; they all were, quite naturally, elitists of one form or another. In Russia the democratic republic lasted 6 months, in Germany 15 years. By 1922 the very weak Italian monarchy was subordinated to a popular dictator. The Spanish republic succumbed after almost 4 years, the Portuguese after less than 16. Poland and Hungary had benevolent dictatorships, as did, more or less, all of Southeastern Europe. The Chinese republic, founded in 1912, ended in chaos.

The Americans who died in Europe "to make the world safe for democracy" had, indeed, died in vain. Wilson, a former professor of government at Princeton should have remembered Plato, Aristotle, and Polybius, who had seen democracy as the political stage immediately preceding the rise of tyranny. The "popular leader" who, very democratically, harangues and mobilizes the masses against unpopular but privileged minorities, the *demagogós*, reappeared in the period of our history following 1789. Max Horkheimer said clearly in 1939 that the French Revolution has unavoidably led to National Socialism. And, indeed, the renaissance of democracy marked the beginning of the Age of the "G"—guillotines, genocide, gaols, gallows, gaschambers and Gulags. All forms of Marxism and national as well as international socialism, proclaimed the French Revolution as their ancestor and vociferously claimed the democratic (but never the liberal) label. All nations from East Germany to North Korea, parading the democratic label in their official names, are totalitarian tyrannies.

For the time being, organic democracy can succeed merely in the islands and peninsulas of Northern Europe and in the English-speaking countries all over the globe. (Switzerland? It is a *military* democracy.) Harold Laski was dead right when he wrote that democracy can flourish only if two preconditions are met: a two-party system and a common philosophy, a common framework of reference subtly forming a bond between the two parties which thus become mere "ins" and "outs." These essentials are given only in the post-Protestant orbit, not in the rest of Christendom, nor anywhere else on this globe. The attitude expressed in the basically skeptic maxim "I think



I am right in my own way and you are right in yours, so let's make it 50/50" is un-Spanish, un-German, un-Russian, un-Islamic, un-Catholic, un-Eastern Orthodox, etc. But it is the very lubricant of democracy!

The global democratic dream was evidently based on a specifically American illusion. The United States has been the haven for countless millions of immigrants from a large variety of nations. Either they, their children or their grandchildren have become thoroughly "Americanized." This led to the belief that human beings all over the world are, after all, basically alike; that, if properly

propagandized, "enlightened," instructed, washed and educated, every one of them is a "potential" American believing in common decency, compromise and the Golden Rule of Progress. Unfortunately this is not the case.

The common denominator of mankind is extremely small and the mental variations and differences based upon cultural rather than racial dissimilarities are tremendous. Temperament is racial, but not conviction, which has predominantly religious roots. Love and hatred are judged differently in Islam and in the Christian faiths; the Catholic nations and those belonging to the Churches of the East are highly individualistic and even inclined toward anarchy, whereas the nations of the Reformation faiths are emphatically "communitarian." And there are many other subtle differences. It should be remarked that the truly Continental nations are patriarchal and family-minded, yet basically irreverent. They would not worship constitutions, and phrases like "the Majesty of the Law" make them laugh. Hence also the very deep and permanent misunderstanding between English-speaking nations and Continentals. Here the map lies: the crease dividing the Western world is not the Atlantic, but the Channel. In these often painful relations, the greater responsibility must be attributed to the "Northwest" where there is more material development, more discipline and thus more power. The Continent is the anvil to the Northwest's hammer. This situation is somewhat obscured by the rise of Soviet Russia where "something new has been added."

And this puts into relief yet another matter: the existence of an ideology which soon assumed a position of near-monopoly—Marxism and its minor variations. We have to keep in mind that the quintessence of politics since 1789 has been the mobilization of the envious masses against unpopular, mostly privileged minorities. For such actions, democracy, with its elections and its "politicization" of the masses, provides an ideal framework. (Engels saw this very clearly and regarded the democratic republic as a necessary precondition for a Communist takeover.)

In this respect the French Revolution made a real start. The concept of numbers, of "majorities" and "minorities," from then on colors the entire political scene. The majorities are considered to be rather right than wrong, rather good than bad and endowed with a genuine moral claim to rule, whereas minorities are seen in a rather pejorative light; they have either a connotation of weakness and inferiority (at the bottom), or of elitist arrogance (at the top). Marx hated the wealthy "bourgeois" and the *Lumpenproletariat* equally.

There is, needless to say, no philosophical, theological, or, least of all, scientific proof for these superstitious assumptions relating to rights, superiorities or inferiorities. Yet, the Marxist ideologies, in a very democratic manner, promise a Heaven on Earth through the expropriation of the minority of exploiters and the consequent

chment of the masses. This, of course, is economic sense. As a matter of fact, the Marxist ideology's best side is its economic aspect, even though it emphatically pretends to be an economic doctrine. Emphatically, it has failed completely, since the working classes in the Marxist countries are notoriously poorer than those in the free market nations. R. L. Stevenson tells us that "man does not live by bread alone, but dominantly by catchwords."

Moreover, man is not only a religious, but also, whether he realizes it or not, an ideological creature in the urgent need of a coherent world view—whose practicability is only of secondary importance. A German proverb says that, if famished, the Devil will eat flies. Man is apt to fall for a false, even for a murderous ideology if no other is offered to him. He will accept, for instance, international socialism or, if for some reason this seems distasteful, he might embrace national socialism. At the present time there is not much else on the global menu.

The U.S.S.R., the Great Socialist Fatherland, promotes Christian Socialism. And what has the leader of the Free World, the USA, to offer? Free elections—with most uncertain results. Free elections *per se* are not an ideology, but they might produce almost anything under the sun; a majority might vote for a middle-of-the-road party or, in a certain mood, for a bloodthirsty, totalitarian mobster. We have seen this all too clearly in Germany in 1932, when the National Socialists, waving the Red Flag, emerged as the largest party—no less than 60 percent of the Germans, if we include the Communists, thus voted totalitarian and the Germans, after all, could be considered rather progressive.

Socialism is a leftist ideology and as such it has the advantage of creating radical "Santa Claus parties," (*i.e.*, parties promising material gifts to the many—and "security" besides). These parties, all of them left—some way off-center, are in a more favorable position than the parties which are right of center. Nobody wants to kill Santa Claus and thus these parties cannot be defeated. They can, however, terminate their rule by committing suicide. . . . by proving utterly corrupt, by general failure, by putting up candidates who are obviously fools, bad actors or, worse still, ones who are unphotogenic. Yet, appealing to one of the strongest (and lowest) human emotions, *envy*, socialism-communism can arouse the masses anywhere, anytime, in the name of "social justice."

Here "capitalist" America faces one of the strongest challenges on this globe. We have to bear in mind that, in the name of (individual or national) "social justice," without exaggerating, more than 100 million people have been killed in this century. Even the misnamed "holocaust" belongs to this category because, had the Jews been lazy, unambitious, stupid and poor, "anti-Semitism" would never have raised its ugly head in Germany, Austria or elsewhere.

All this partly explains why the USSR, the "Socialist Fatherland," could again and again start or support revolutions, rebellions, civil wars, terrorism and violent overthrows across the map, why the Soviet Union struck blows which we merely parried (successfully or unsuccessfully) and why we, the West led by the United States, never ever took the initiative in this undeclared Third World War. The Soviets have an ideology, a mission, a utopian vision, the urge and also the ability and opportunity to lure the "disinherited" plus the half-baked intellectuals of so many big and small nations to join their camp. They have heart appeal and brain appeal, too.

The West has nothing of the sort, nor has its leader, America. All the United States have to give is the good advice to vote, to vote freely and then to count noses. Ideologically, this is a most uneven struggle. As Irving Kristol has said, you cannot fight ideology with non-ideology. The President himself has deplored the lack of a great idea uniting the still free West. In the Old World, the cry "Europe needs an idea" can be heard again and again.

Hence, the United States, leader (even if perhaps reluctantly) of the Free World, has to intervene in so many regions, not always with empty hands or without arms, but certainly without a vision or program based on continuity or at least a semblance of permanence. Large sectors of the world could have been at least superficially "democratized." But democracy, in the sense of representative government based on recurrent elections, means *change* and all the uncertainties that go with change. What we get in the Free World is a Punch and Judy show whose "actors"—politicians rather than statesmen—keep popping up and down. How could they, for the purpose of a constructive, long-range foreign policy ever be "synchronized?" In the democratized post-war scene we in Europe had, by a fluke, a few statesmen—de Gaulle and Adenauer, for instance. They were friends who liked, appreciated and trusted each other, but when they made plans for the future, formulated agreements and sketched arrangements, they always had to say to each other: "Provided I am re-elected, *provided* my party (or brittle coalition) will remain a majority!" The entire free (democratic) world lives, in every respect and especially in regard to foreign policy, in constant uncertainty, fear and tension. What are the next elections going to produce—in my country, in a neighboring or allied country? Is mutual confidence among the Free World nations possible? The answer is obviously NO.

Of course, even absolute Christian monarchs have sometimes broken their word, but then one could openly accuse them of unchristian behavior, of lacking loyalty and steadfastness. Democracies, however, have the best excuses for changing their minds. In the 18th century, Britain was called "Perfidious Albion" because, after 1688, it had become empathetically a *parliamentary* monarchy in which the king no longer ruled supreme.

During the Spanish War of Succession, the Holy Roman Empire had an alliance with a government controlled by the Whigs. At the height of success, the francophile Tories replaced the Whigs, and left the Hapsburgs holding the bag.

In the Vietnam War, the South Vietnamese, whose casualties were seven times those of the Americans, were left in the lurch not only because the American Army, for a variety of reasons, was never permitted to win, but also because the Americans, under the spell of Jane Fonda, *The New York Times* and the bosses of the mass media manipulating public opinion, increasingly opposed that venture.

Mr. Leslie Gelb in his highly revealing book *The Irony of Vietnam, The System Worked* (1978) has told the Americans (and, through book reviews also told the startled Europeans) that the irony of the Vietnam War was the fact that it ended with a smashing victory of Communism and of democracy at one and the same time. The masses finally prevailed upon the politicians and the military. Democracy worked.

Needless to say, that the criminals in the Kremlin are never in the least worried by public opinion, by reporters *a la* David Halberstam, by the editors of *Isvestiya* or the likes of Jane Fonda. They have no politicians prepared to do anything in order to be re-elected and therefore they have the possibility to produce statesmen, men who do not make politics, but history, who do not worry about their popularity, but about the fate of their grandchildren, who might even "think in generations." Lincoln Steffens, who visited Lenin in 1921, compared him to a great navigator—and Woodrow Wilson to a sailor. And let us remember the warning lines written by Jacob Burckhardt in 1878: "Once politics are going to be based on the fermentation of nations, all security will come to an end." It *has*. Not, however, for the USSR which believes in its own "manifest destiny" and has retained its present foreign minister for more than 40 years.

The happy days when Washington could rely on Salazar, Franco, or the Shah as long as they ruled their respective nations, are over. (In a negative sense it can, of course, always "rely" on Moscow which offers only expected, dreaded "surprises.") Grave problems are also troubling America's internal machinery, its legal and constitutional set-up.

A hundred years ago, the Achilles Heel of every democracy, the combined areas of contact with the rest of the world, *foreign affairs and defense*, was a mere footnote in America's politics. Today this dual conundrum is more than a vulnerable spot, its handling is a question of do or die, a question of *survival*. In both fields today, enormous wide knowledge and experience are necessary as well as an exceptional swiftness in making decisions. Dean Acheson, the not-so-popular but intelligent Secretary of State, confessed in December 1952 before leaving office to the oldest son of the last Austrian

Emperor: "The difficult problem I had to deal with was how, in an atomic age, to steer the foreign policy of a superpower with the constitution of a small, 18th century farmers' republic." Yet, somewhat earlier, the President—a former haberdasher in Kansas City—had in his hands the greatest trump card ever held by a ruler in history: for more than three years he had the monopoly of the A-bomb. Had he been a statesman, he might have sent a postcard (airmail, registered) to his colleague in Moscow, asking him in view of America's asset, to clear out of Central Europe. But he did nothing of the sort. Defenders of Harry S Truman insist, that the American people were not "ripe" for such a policy—which reminds one of the French politician Ledru-Rollin who told the French people: "I am your leader, so I must follow you."

Parliaments, we must remember, originally had the character of debating clubs with various factions. Only later did they become *legislative bodies*—and nothing else. They were not supposed to be policy-making assemblies; such activities were reserved to the government. Today this phase, unfortunately, is over and parliaments supervise, control or hamper governments in all sorts of ways. In many countries a two-party system of mere "ins" and "outs" does not exist and one or more frequently very small additional parties may be able to tip the scales, to affect sudden changes within a coalition even between elections. Thus they contribute to the multiplication of shortlived cabinets and add to the insecurity and distrust among democratically governed allies. Since liberal democracy traditionally regards power with suspicion, the constitutions, on the principle of checks and balances, try to weaken the executive. (Ac-ton's *fausse idee claire* that power tends to corrupt and that absolute power corrupts absolutely, has done great damage. Was Charles V, in whose realm the sun never set, corrupt? Or was Maria Theresa? Not in the least!) Only a strong and independent executive can carry out a strong and independent foreign and military policy which in many cases cannot be made public because the enemy always listens in. The atomic age requires swift and unhampered action. The struggle for parliamentary consensus, especially if two chambers are involved, can in certain situations be considered archaic and might even have fatal consequences.

Ignorance, too, can be fatal. In this domain we are so eminently shown the ever increasing gap between *scita* and *scienda*, between what is actually known and what needs to be known by voters as well as by their representatives. No educational program could ever catch up with the growing amount of existing knowledge and cope with the necessity to extend knowledge over wider areas. He who wants to talk rationally, constructively, sensibly about foreign affairs needs not only a firm grasp of politics, history and geography, but also a solid foundation in psychology, sociology, theology, strategy and—last but not least—economics. Whoever is not able to judge any given matter rationally will do it emotionally,

sentimentally. This is how Jane Fonda, for example, has become within the democratic framework a decisive factor in foreign policy. At present we see democratic governments in their policy toward South Africa, under the pressure of a manipulated popular opinion, imposing economic sanctions to the detriment of the humblest people in the RSA. (The sanctions against Poland have a similar effect.)

The three most basic elements in understanding foreign affairs are politics, history and geography. Yet, politics is taught in the United States from a strictly "ethnocentric" point of view. And to make matters worse, democratism, however alien to the tradition of the Founding Fathers, has so thoroughly permeated American folklore as well as the thinking of the masses, that countries and their governments are morally judged almost exclusively from that angle, and this although democracy today functions *organically* only in a small minority of nations.

History and, even more so, geography are stepchildren of American education. They figure at best in a hodgepodge called "social studies" and foreign languages are increasingly neglected. (Here we see a recessive development ever since the 1950s.) European history, only rarely an obligatory subject, is being taught as French history with frills and is presented altogether as the study of a steady advance toward more democracy and liberalism—the brutal facts presented by our century notwithstanding. In Continental European high schools and colleges (ages 10 to 18 or 19) geography and history are each taught twice a week during the entire 8 or 9 years.

In addition, leading Americans are even ignorant about contemporary events abroad. I cannot forget one popular but unsuccessful American presidential candidate with whom I conversed for hours; he knew less about the world at large than I did at the age of 10. Or another, who publicly demanded that the Soviets evacuate Austria—many years *after* they had actually done so. Or a President who declared that Poland did not have a Communist

government and, when corrected, insisted stubbornly instead of admitting a lapse of the tongue.

As one can see, a creative and effective American foreign policy has to cope with inherent weaknesses and grave problems. Some of these are "congenital" and cannot be overcome easily. Positive amendments could bring about effective constitutional changes and eliminate handicaps, just as negative ones have falsified the Constitution of the Founding Fathers. Most of the mistakes of American foreign policy could be corrected—not easily, not immediately, but in time and with determination. An ideology of the Right—theistic, traditionalist, oriented toward freedom, appealing to hearts and minds as, for instance, the *Portland Declaration*—could be developed and presented practically overnight. (Marx and Engels concocted the *Communist Manifesto* within weeks and it still menaces all of us.) Education can be revamped. The Augean Stable of confused semantics could be cleaned out. (Don't try to tell foreigners that liberals are leftists, that Adam Smith was a conservative, that the Founding Fathers believed in democracy, or that the U.S. Supreme Court issues infallible decisions!) Of course, these changes are imperative for *survival*—at which the present U.S. foreign and military policy is or should be directly aimed, instead of wiggling like a caught fish in the lethal net of her customs and institutions. They imply in some ways that America must jump over her own shadow.

Take only one item: the adoption and propagation of an ideology—after generations of idolizing the beloved method of trial and error. But we must all occasionally jump over our own shadows in order to answer a call, to succeed, or to avoid annihilation. And nations must act in the same, admittedly uncongenial manner. The Christian message, too, demanded *metanoia* and the shedding of the old Adam. All that is required in the situation in which the Free World finds itself now is intelligence, courage and determination. America has the capacity to show them—even if she does not seem to realize it.



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