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“The Crisis in Western Democracy”

By Jean-Francois Revel

Editor's Preview: Ideas do have consequences. But what ideas will prevail in a society that seems increasingly absorbed with material satisfaction — and less interested in long-term concerns like “freedom,” “responsibility,” and “values”?

Are we approaching the ultimate contradiction in our constitutional system when we expect the political process to solve all the nation's problems and meet all our individual desires simultaneously? Our attention span seems short, our interest in politics limited to the crisis of the moment, and our willingness to sacrifice personal comfort and convenience to achieve long term goals questionable. We vote by age group or interest more frequently, selling our loyalty to the party that promises us the most at the time.

But history goes on. The challenges to our security, our prosperity and our position in the world continue to increase. And we must wonder if our ideals, our constitutional system and our people are equal to the task we face. Perhaps the time has come to ask the question which has lurked behind the American experiment in self-government since the days of America's founding: Can democracy preserve our freedom? If it can, how can we convince a materialistic society to care? If it can't, where do we go from here?

The Nature of Crisis

Recently, I had the occasion to reflect upon the ambiguity of the concept of “crisis.” At the time, I was sharing with millions of Americans a daily experience very common nowadays in the



United States: When I landed at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, my plane was two hours late.

Now, the fact that many flights are frequently delayed can be seen as a symptom of crisis — indeed the opponents of air transportation deregulation have done their best to present it as such. But it can also be seen as a temporary and minor side effect of deregulation which has made flying cheaper and, for the first time, available to low-income consumers. The collateral damage caused by the alleged “crisis” is in reality an essential improvement. The same analogy, for instance, applies to the museums in Europe. Thirty or even twenty years ago, one could walk through the greatest museums in the West almost alone. Now one must wait in line to enter; but this inconvenience is due to a beneficial development: the democratization of culture.

Often the nature of my published writings leads people to call me a pessimist; it is an accusation which, for the most part I am willing to bear, but here I wish to stress that all crises are not necessarily bad.

A crisis is regarded as the result of instability, but it is that very instability which offers us the opportunity to eliminate some elements and strengthen others — choosing which is the key to the puzzle. Change, of course, can be positive or negative. It is positive when we resolve the conflict by inventing a new equilibrium, a new synthesis, which retains and enhances the fundamental qualities of the system to which we cling. This is how the democratic system survives and prospers. It is negative, however, when we achieve the relaxation of tensions by repudiating the fundamental values of that system. We can always relax tensions just by yielding to force; it is the most subtle form of blackmail to tell someone that he will get perpetual peace by becoming weaker, and it often masquerades as a solution to the crisis of the moment even if it may lead to the decline of an already decadent society. (After all, the fall of the Roman Empire solved all of its problems.) In the famous parody, *Duck Soup*, Groucho Marx played a general surrounded by enemies shooting at him. He shouted, “If you come one step closer, I shall shoot myself!” What is unfortunate is that in so many situations our Western diplomats have employed the same empty threat as a way of bringing crises to an end, heedless of the cost.

If one were to gauge the nature and extent of the general crisis which has confronted the United States in the postwar

era, it would be better to think in terms of the crisis facing all Western democracies, for they are all bound together. It is impossible in the modern world for any single country to pursue an isolationist foreign policy. Some neo-isolationists prefer to think that a large wealthy nation needs fewer allies than its smaller poorer counterparts, but this argument is disingenuous. The more powerful a country is, the more it depends upon the whole world. Economically, strategically, politically, isolation simply isn't possible. Even very small countries must take an international view. Switzerland, for instance, is heavily dependent upon international events; neutrality is merely a symbolic stance, one which the Swiss could ill afford to adopt if not for the protection of Western Europe and the United States.

In the fall of 1986, I visited one of the remotest and most primitive regions in the world, Bhutan, to the north of India. Not even tiny Bhutan can embrace an isolationist foreign policy. I learned about all the problems the country encounters with India, Nepal, China, Tibet, and so on. Like multinational corporations, no modern state can be isolationist.

As for democracy, the crisis can be analyzed from an internal as well as an external point of view. (I will devote few words to the internal crisis because the latter is far more relevant to this discussion.) Internally, of course, our societies have many problems, yet political democracy has never been so strong; for the West it is unthinkable that we should

About the Author

Widely celebrated as one of the most important writers of the twentieth century, Jean-Francois Revel is the author of more than a dozen books on culture, science, philosophy, history, and social criticism, including *As For Italy* (1958), *Why Philosophers?* (1957), *On Proust* (1960), *In France, or the End of the Opposition* (1965), *Without Marx or Jesus: The New American Revolution Has Begun* (1970), *The Totalitarian Temptation* (1977), and, *How Democracies Perish* (1983). A member of the Resistance in World War II, Mr. Revel has been a professor of philosophy and literature in Algeria, Mexico, Italy and France. He has also served as literary editor and editor-in-chief for *L'Express*.

revert to any other system. This was not the case as recently as 10 years ago when for many, particularly those who were educated Europeans, centrally-planned socialism appeared to be the wave of the future. In Western Europe the Communist Party enjoyed great strength for most of the postwar era; now the last vestige is the Italian Communist Party, and even this

countries, at least they are better off than Guinea or Tanzania, for instance.

A Foreign Policy Crisis

It is also widely acknowledged that the free market economy cannot really work without political democracy. Why then, have democracies lost strategic

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group is more reformist than revolutionary. Communism is but a ghost, albeit a huge one, in Italian political life. The 1987 elections in Britain, Italy, Spain, and Portugal saw the triumph of conservative parties even in socialist-dominated Spain where now the free market, rather than nationalization, is the order of the day. As telling, perhaps, is the fact that in elections all over Europe the Left is now regarded as having the least chance to win. Ideologically, moreover, Marxism is discredited. (It is very difficult now to find a Marxist in France when you need one for a public debate. Usually we have to import them from the United States.)

In the Third World, significantly, African socialism has completely collapsed and countries which have been able to adopt a free-market stance have done so eagerly. Ethiopia, Angola and Mozambique cannot, only because they are under the control of the Soviet Union. Everywhere in the other regions of the Third World, especially in Latin America and Southeast Asia, there is a great deal of excitement regarding free enterprise, the creation of jobs and individual responsibility. Two decades ago socialism was touted as the only possible vehicle for economic development in the Third World; now it is exactly the reverse and the models are the new industrialized countries of the Pacific zone. And even if the Ivory Coast or Kenya are not very rich

ground everywhere? The crisis is clearly one of foreign policy blunders precipitated by a widespread failure to understand what constitutes a proper response to totalitarian systems.

Let us consider for a moment the conditions of a successful foreign policy. The famous American political theorist Alexander Hamilton defined four elements: decision, activity, secrecy and dispatch. To this criteria, I would add the term conception. By examining each, it is possible to determine to what extent various modern democracies have fulfilled Hamilton's vision.

It must be recognized from the outset that most foreign policy initiatives are not independent. As I intimated earlier, nations must act in concert, creating alliances and concords which are often frustrating, inefficient and chaotic but wholly necessary. Unlike totalitarian states which can coerce their satellites into following a certain line, democracies can only build loose, temporary coalitions in which each member is, of course, free to make its own decisions.

Conception

What are the results? Let us look first at the area of conception. When President Reagan announced his Strategic Defense Initiative in 1983,

America's European allies, with the temporary exception of Great Britain, immediately assumed hostile positions. The reasons were not always ideological. Mitterand of France, for example, rebuffed SDI without even studying it because he felt that Reagan had not helped France by lowering interest rates. Politics, not strategic priorities, often leads allies to disown one another.

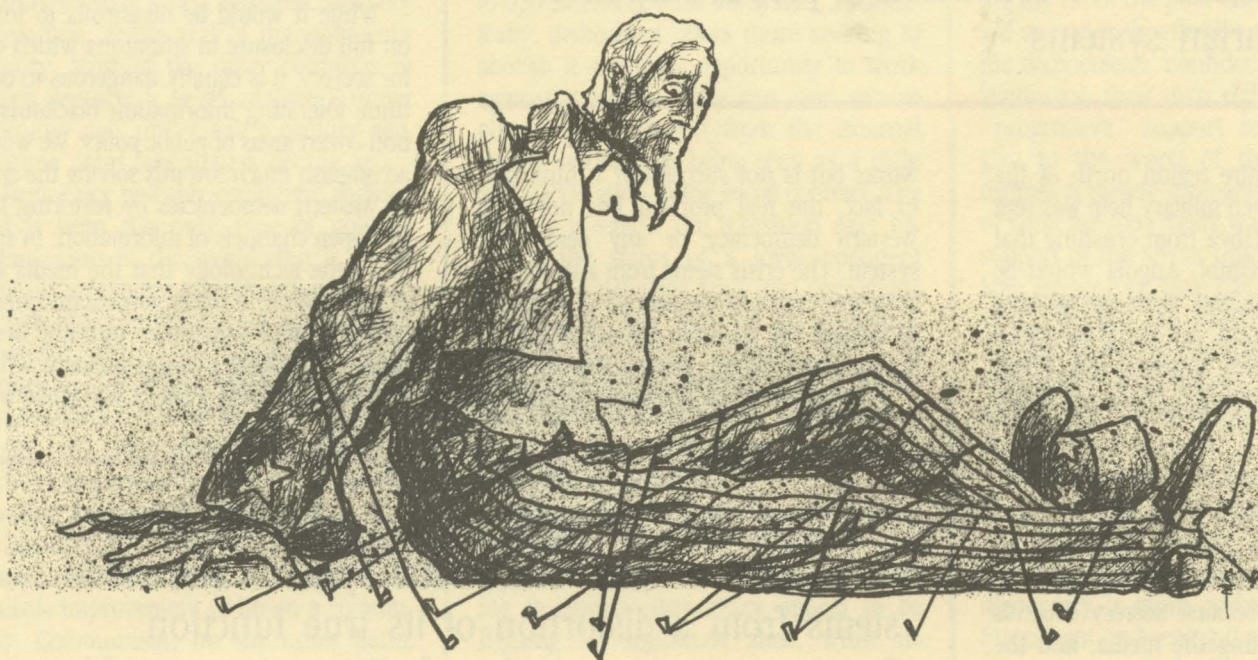
In the recent Persian Gulf crisis, the same scenario applied. The United States sent ships to Kuwait; but the British declared that they would not send the requested backup. The French sent a fleet which never arrived. And the Italians split over the question of any intervention in the Gulf in a noisy and bitter political fight.

soldiers stationed in Lebanon in 1983 had an enormous negative influence upon domestic public opinion and politics in America and France. If Syria, undoubtedly the sponsor of the bombing raid, had led a conventional war in order to achieve the same result, it would have cost months or years, and victory would have been unlikely. Terrorism is one of the most powerful weapons of war precisely because it is able to manipulate public opinion. Modern democratic leaders simply cannot afford to have its citizens killed in "peaceful" times, when there is no official war to rationalize such casualties. The fragility of democracy in such instances is so apparent that our enemies know exactly what to do in order to reach the desired

can we expect such citizens to exert themselves in defense of democracy?

Activity

Following Hamilton's sequence, the next stage — activity — is always minimal when there are such obstacles to a coherent approach within each country, let alone in a coordinated foreign policy for allied nations. The easiest action, of course, is always inaction, which is less divisive. To wait and hope that the problems will solve themselves is always the best foreign policy, many observers claim. But most available evidence contradicts their complacent reasoning. Iran is a typical case. What we heard in July



Decisionmaking

Given the obstacles to conceiving plans which do not alienate one's allies, it is no wonder that the decisionmaking stage in foreign policy is so difficult to reach. What we generally witness today is a kind of fragmentation in both processes.

Internal concerns are naturally predominant in every democratic country, but when domestic problems and popular opinion become the main deciding factors, a successful foreign policy is effectively thwarted. Terrorist activity which destroyed two barracks of American and French

results. Gradually, a democratic nation can even get trapped into a situation in which its own defensive measures are considered an aggression.

When a KAL flight was shot down by the Soviets in 1984, I happened to be here in the United States at a university in Indiana for a few days. I was very struck by hearing conversations among students and faculty in which the great danger posed was not the Soviets' military power and the extraordinary arrogance of their crime, but Reagan's reaction! Most of them seemed to be greatly relieved, however, when the president said that there would not be any kind of violent retaliation. How

and August of 1987 was always, "Let's maintain a low-profile attitude. Iran will change." Such advice has always been offered in the face of an implacable enemy who is somehow, miraculously expected to mend its ways only if no outside pressure is applied. Why do we believe so easily in *glasnost*? Because accommodation and conciliation are safer, non-confrontational policies and because often the correct response calls for hardened resolve, uniform political will, and a large dose of ordinary patriotism; qualities which our modern pluralistic society has not, sadly enough, encouraged.

When action has occasionally been

taken in the last decade, it was not because we stood firm and made a decision to confront an enemy; in each instance, it was because the local resistance did not yield in places like Afghanistan, Angola, and Chad, and because the West was no longer able to stand aloof.

In Chad's war to defend its borders, France has helped logistically with military supplies and other aid, but even three years ago it had already completely accepted the division of the country and Libya's domina-

implementation at all. Dispatch, the last of the requirements for a successful foreign policy cannot occur unless the four preceding ones have been carried out. Worse yet is the fact that the need to act leads Western nations to foolishly forge ahead and suffer the consequences. A bad foreign policy, it appears, is better than none at all.

So, shall we conclude by a kind of paradox that communism doesn't work but is more successful? Or that democracy

uct we may buy is the result of a complex world economy, and that our security is based on the worldwide interdependence of nations. How many of our media representatives and our politicians are really competent in foreign affairs? Usually, I would suggest, they are not. And we take for granted that it is more or less normal that foreign affairs and defense issues are very difficult to comprehend, so we relinquish any personal responsibility for shaping them. In the legislature, specialists and subcommittees are given enormous responsibility for foreign affairs. The executive branch and the agencies which are charged with carrying out intelligence operations, diplomacy and national defense must find ways to do so without incurring the opposition of the first group. Information plays a key role in deciding who will prevail.

While it would be disastrous to insist on full disclosure in situations which call for secrecy, it is equally dangerous to continue tolerating information blackouts in non-covert areas of public policy. We would accomplish much towards solving the crisis of Western democracies by restoring free and open channels of information. In spite of all the technology that the media has at its disposal, it often perpetuates inconsistencies and sometimes outright lies. I began by relating a minor incident which illuminated a large issue; I will close with

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tion over the entire region north of the 16th parallel. French military help was sent only to prevent Libya from crushing that line. Without Savimbi, Angola would be completely communist, with the blessing of the Western world. Aid to his resistance movement has been minimal too. These are only two examples; there are many more.

Secrecy

As for secrecy, it is a big problem, of course, because secrecy depends upon resisting the media, and the “right to be informed” which is one of the primary mainstays of democracy. Also of critical importance is the current debate over the limits of executive power. Implementing a foreign policy involves a delicate balance between executive, legislative and judicial authority as well as the public's understandable but often unreasonable demand to share in the intimate details of every covert action.

Dispatch

Current American foreign policy has fallen far short of Hamilton's expectations; it enjoys no unity of conception, no harmony of decision, no coherence in action, and sometimes no

works but is not successful? I think not. In fact, the real problem lies not with Western democracy or any democratic system. The crisis stems from a distortion of its true function. Democracy is supposed to facilitate the equitable division of power; it should not merely prevent the use of it.

The relationship between democracy

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and the distribution of information is especially important. Traditionally, we think of democracy in action as expressed in the electoral process. “One man, one vote,” and “consent of the governed” are its slogans. The citizens delegate the power and can recall it at definite points in time. But of what use is the right to vote when citizens are misinformed? In this world, it may be argued that there is not a single really local issue, that domestic affairs are unavoidably foreign affairs, that every prod-

another one. I read in the *London Observer* in late August that there is an elected government in Nicaragua despite the fact that the 1984 elections in Nicaragua were not free. Why is this so significant? Because reporters feel free to challenge the United States for trying to topple “an elected government” in Nicaragua. The implication is clear: We need a second democratic revolution in the West to end such lies — an information revolution. ■

From *How Democracies Perish* by Jean-Francois Revel:

“The End Of An Accident”

Democracy may, after all, turn out to have been a historical accident, a brief parenthesis that is closing before our eyes.

In its modern sense of a form of society reconciling governmental efficiency with legitimacy, authority with individual freedoms, it will have lasted a little over two centuries, to judge by the speed of growth of the forces bent on its destruction. And, really, only a tiny minority of the human race will have experienced it. In both time and space, democracy fills a very small corner. The span of roughly two hundred years applies only to the few countries where it first appeared, still very incomplete, at the end of the eighteenth century. Most of the other countries in which democracy exists adopted it under a century ago, under half a century ago, in some cases less than a decade ago.

Democracy probably could have endured had it been the only type of political organization in the world. But it is not basically structured to defend itself against outside enemies seeking its annihilation, especially since the latest and most dangerous of these external enemies, communism—the current and complete model of totalitarianism—parades as democracy perfected when it is in fact the absolute negation of democracy.

Democracy is by its very nature turned inward. Its vocation is the patient and realistic improvement of life in a community. Communism, on the other hand, necessarily looks outward because it is a failed society and is incapable of engendering a viable one. The nomenklatura, the body of bureaucrat-dictators who govern the system, has no choice, therefore, but to direct its abilities toward expansion abroad. Communism is more skillful, more persevering than democracy in defending itself. Democracy tends to ignore, even deny, threats to its existence because it loathes doing what is needed to counter them. It awakens only when the danger becomes deadly, imminent, evident. By then, either there is too little time left for it to save itself, or the price of survival has become crushingly high.

In addition to its external enemy (once Nazi, now communist), whose intellectual energy and economic power are primarily

destructive, democracy faces an internal enemy whose right to exist is written into the law itself.

Totalitarianism liquidates its internal enemies or smashes opposition as soon as it arises; it uses methods that are simple and infallible because they are undemocratic. But democracy can defend itself only very feebly; its internal enemy has an easy time of it because he exploits the right to disagree that is inherent in democracy. His aim of destroying democracy itself, of actively seeking an absolute monopoly of power, is shrewdly hidden behind the citizen's legitimate right to oppose and criticize the system. Paradoxically, democracy offers those seeking to abolish it a unique opportunity to work against it legally. They can even receive almost open support from the external enemy without its being seen as a truly serious violation of the social contract. The frontier is vague, the transition easy between the status of a loyal opponent wielding a privilege built into democratic institutions and that of an adversary subverting those institutions. To totalitarianism, an opponent is by definition subversive; democracy treats subversives as mere opponents for fear of betraying its principles.

What we end up with in what is conventionally called Western society is a topsy-turvy situation in which those seeking to destroy democracy appear to be fighting for legitimate aims, while its defenders are pictured as repressive reactionaries. Identification of democracy's internal and external adversaries with the forces of progress, legitimacy, even peace, discredits and paralyzes the efforts of people who are only trying to preserve their institutions.

Already besieged by this combination of hostile forces and negative logic, the democracies are also harassed by guilt-producing accusations and intimidation that no other political system has had to tolerate. Like the “industry of vice” that reform groups used to talk about, there is now an “industry of blame”; it promotes the now universally accepted notion that everything bad that happens in the Third World is the fault of forces necessarily and exclusively located in the “more advanced”

or “rich” countries, meaning, in almost every case—and for good reason—the democracies.

The major shareholders in this industry of blame are, first, the despots who oppress the peoples of that unfortunate Third World with impunity. Next come the communist countries, exploiting the underdevelopment abroad that they cannot remedy at home and converting the poor nations into totalitarian military fortresses.

Here too, in what are termed North-South relations, the democracies' foreign and domestic enemies are converging; their maneuvers are of no help at all in improving the lot of the poor countries, but they are marvelously effective in undermining the democracies' confidence in their own legitimacy, their own right to exist. The “progressive” support some Westerners give to the worst of the Third World regimes is merely a geographical relocation of what for sixty years was “progressive” support of the Soviet Union and, later, of Mao Tse-tung's China: complicity by a part of the Western Left against the peoples of the less developed countries and with the tyrants who enslave them, brutalize, starve, and exterminate them. A shameful distortion of a noble cause!

It seems, then, that the combination of forces—at once psychological and material, political and moral, economic and ideological—intent on the extinction of democracy is more powerful than those forces bent on keeping it alive. Democracy is not given credit for its achievements and benefits, but it pays an infinitely higher price for its failures, its inadequacies, and its mistakes than its adversaries do. . . .

Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself because another power is working to destroy it. The distinguishing mark of our century is not so much communism's determination to erase democracy from our planet, or its frequent success in pursuing that end, as it is the humility with which democracy is not only consenting to its own obliteration but is contriving to legitimize its deadliest enemy's victory. **A**

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