

Prospects For Conservatives

Part I: Prospects Abroad

By Russell Kirk

Modern civilization's Time of Troubles, according to Arnold Toynbee, commenced in 1914. Four years later, the worst blow to the received political and social order was struck by the triumph of the Bolsheviki in Russia. But in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and ninety, it begins to appear that once more it may become possible to speak with some confidence of the Permanent Things. Old concepts of order, justice, and freedom may prevail, after all. God willing, much that is worth keeping may be conserved, here near the end of the twentieth century. It is one of the marks of human decency, Eliseo Vivas instructs us, to be ashamed of having been born into the twentieth century. Perhaps we may atone for the century's sins by overthrowing at the end of the century the fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse, Revolution.

Already America's conservatives have won a great victory, after seven decades of struggle. From President Wilson's dispatch of troops to the Russian arctic to President Reagan's expedition to Moscow for conferring with Gorbachev, the great American Republic wrestled with the Russian bear; and the Western concept of ordered freedom contended against the ideology of Marxism. Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw that tremendous contest, which now has been decided in favor of the United States of America and in favor of the politics of prudence and prescription.

Calling Communist Bluffs. The final encounter was run by an elderly and eminent conservative, Mr. Ronald Reagan. When he took the presidential oath of office, Mr. Reagan was thoroughly unacquainted with foreign affairs. And yet, with the exception of his failure in Lebanon, President Reagan was wondrously successful in foreign policy. He restored the vigor of the American economy, so that the oligarchs in the Kremlin perceived the Soviet Union's weakness in the face of American productivity. He commenced work upon the Strategic Defense Initiative; and the masters of the Soviet empire, even the imperialists of the Red Army, knew to their sorrow that they could not find the resources to match that shield against nuclear rockets. He sent a rocket into the very parlor, literally, of the malign dictator of Libya; and the masters of the Soviet system opened their eyes wide at his audacity. The Communists of Russia and the Communists of Cuba seized upon the island of Grenada to make another base of it; but President Reagan promptly dispatched a military expedition to Grenada, shot some of the Russians and the Cubans in the course of taking it, and shipped back to Moscow and Havana, as released prisoners, the rest of their men. This told the rulers of the Evil Empire that President Reagan, given to calling bluffs, was not afraid of those ten-foot-tall Russians. Besides, already the Soviet Union sporadically was dependent, for very subsistence, upon shipments of American wheat. It was borne in upon Gorbachev and his comrades that they must rethink, retrench, and resign numerous ambi-

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tions, lest they perish altogether: for the old actor from the Californian ranch, quick on the draw in his films, had outgunned them.

I spent some time with Mr. Reagan in the White House very shortly after his return from Moscow. He told me two jokes – his humorous fictions, by the way, appear to originate with him – one of which I venture to repeat today, by way of making a point.

President Reagan, addressing me, represented himself as having engaged in colloquy with “a high Soviet official.” The dialogue went as follows. Mr. Reagan said innocently:

“Can you tell me, just how high does Communism stand with the Russian people?”

“One point six meters.”

“Really? How can you be so precise? And what does that signify, ‘one point six meters’?”

The high Soviet official drew his hand across his throat. “It signifies I’ve had it up to here!”

American Win. After seventy years, indeed, the Russian people had had Communism up to there; they were drowning in Communism; and so Gorbachev knew that he must come to terms with the lively old gentleman from the country back of Santa Barbara – and with the republic of the United States of America. Without striking any greater blow than American landing forces had inflicted upon the Russian “technicians” in Grenada, the American conservatives had won at last in world affairs.

I have subjected you, ladies and gentleman, to so lengthy a prolegomenon because we are gathered together here in a year of triumph. In general, prospects for conservatives are more cheerful than they seemed in the heyday of Chairman Johnson, say; and in particular, conservative prospects in the field of foreign affairs look bright just now. Permit me, then, to sum up America’s gains in international affairs; and then to utter, Cassandra in trousers though you may think me, certain vaticinations of a cautionary character.



First, ladies and gentlemen, you and I are in at the death of the Marxist ideology. As H. Stuart Hughes wrote more than thirty years ago, “Conservatism is the negation of ideology.” Because any ideology – that is, a theory of fanatic politics promising the terrestrial paradise – is illusory, eventually the consequences of the ideology are perceived by most people to be ruinous; and then, God willing, a healthy reaction occurs. That has happened after seven decades in Russia; it is happening today in China; it will occur quite soon in the African, Asiatic, and Latin-American states that succumbed to Communist ideologues during the past forty years.

The practical consequences of Marxist doctrine are so thoroughly exposed that before long Marxism will find defenders only in the American academy. Marxism pretended to be a moral system as well as an economic and political panacea. Now some first principles of morals, at least, and some workable assumptions about politics and economics, any people must have. What beliefs will fill the vacuum left by the evaporation of Marxist dogmata?

Conceivably some alternative ideology might take hold upon the minds and emotions of peoples who recently have freed themselves from Marxism — some other dogmatic and treacherous system that immanentizes the symbols of transcendence. Yet what such an ideology might amount to, no man can say — presumably not some equivalent of Nazism, which Hannah Arendt called “an ideology in embryo,” nor yet the theories of Italian Fascism. Some naïve Americans speak windily of an “ideology of democracy” — but about democratism I shall have something to say presently.

Stimulating Faith. It seems more likely that there will succeed to Marx’s dialectical materialism, in Russia, Eastern Europe, and much of Africa, a renewed Christian belief, already resurgent obviously in Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, and elsewhere. Persecution stimulates, rather than stifles, a people’s religious faith — provided that the state’s persecution is not perfectly effectual, as it was not in the Roman Empire, and has not been even in the Soviet Union, let alone Romania. The history of the Jews attests this truth. And when the survival of a nation is identified with the survival a church, as in the history of Ireland, religion is stronger than ever ideology might be.

No religious creed supplies satisfactorily a plan of politics and economics: the purpose of religious faith is the ordering of the soul, not the ordering of the state. But religious dogmata do offer answers to ultimate questions; while ideology cannot convincingly answer such questions. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn touched upon this in his Templeton address in London in 1983. “Over a century ago, while I was still a child,” Solzhenitsyn began, “I recall hearing a number of older people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: ‘Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this happened.’”

And so, indeed, those disasters had come to pass, through the malign power of dialectical materialism. Now, Communist illusions having been repudiated, in much of the world men and woman may turn again to what Marx had called, falsely, “the opiate of the people”: to the religious understanding that, among other hard truths, teaches why man and society are not perfectible here below.

It is even conceivable that the resurgent Christian belief of Eastern Europe may be communicated to a fair number of people in these United States, where increasingly both Protestant and Catholic churches have suffered from the inroads of ideology or of secular humanism.

How ever that may be, Marxist ideologues can take some small comfort from the knowledge that their ideology will not be altogether effaced from this earth. For as John Lukacs remarks, “There will always be Communists — in Manhattan.”

Marx Refuted. In foreign policy, no longer will our Department of State be contending with the fanatic irrationalism of ideology in Europe, Asia, or Africa — or, at any rate, not by the beginning of the twenty-first century, I believe. Great states and small are beginning to settle for politics as the art of the possible. Marx’s insistence on the inevitability of ‘Communism’s triumph has been refuted totally — and almost overnight.

Forty years ago, Whittaker Chambers gloomily believed that in choosing the American cause of order, justice, and freedom, he was joining the losing side. It is said that Henry Kissinger, at the height of his influence in Washington, privately believed that his diplomatic endeavors were only postponing the eventual triumph of Communism and the Soviet

Union. How very different is our present prospect! One thinks of Edmund Burke's rejection of historical determinism at the end of his days in his first *Letter on a Regicide Peace*. Providence, or mere individual strong wills, or chance, Burke says, abruptly may alter the whole apparent direction of a nation. "I doubt whether the history of mankind is yet complete enough, if ever it can be so, to furnish grounds for a sure theory on the internal causes which necessarily affect the fortune of a State," as Burke puts it. It is possible, he mentions, that great and sudden changes in the affairs of nations may be the consequence of the "occasional interposition and the irresistible hand of the Great Disposer." One may speculate on whether during the past three years the Great Disposer's instrument may have been the Great Communicator, Mr. Reagan.

Be that as it may, the power of the Marxist ideology, menacing even the United States for the past century and a half, appears to be broken. And the power of the Soviet empire, too, is breaking rapidly into pieces. The question even arises of whether Moscow will retain effective control of any territories beyond Great Russia and White Russia. Civil war may consume the energies of what, for some seventy years, was the Soviet Union. No longer can the Soviet system compete in armaments with the United States; that competition, which sorely tried the finances of the United States, worked the ruin of that enormous domination which extends from the Baltic to the Pacific.

No Worthy Rival. Thus it has come to pass that the United States faces no rival power worthy of the name. China is sunk in poverty and hopelessly misgoverned; the British and French empires gave up the ghost four decades ago; Japan is strong economically, but not big enough to contest the mastery of the world; even a reunited Germany, chastened by the misfortunes of a half-century ago, will not aspire to exercise a hegemony over Europe, let alone to box seriously with the United States. Henry Luce and Richard Nixon used to say that the twentieth century must be the "American Century"; but that aspiration may be fulfilled, instead, in the twenty-first century.

Aye, nowadays America alone is a great power in the world, with resources — both military and financial — sufficient, in most respects, unaided to secure her national interest against all comers. But this vast question looms up: how should the United States employ the powers of its ascendancy? Are we Americans fulfilling a manifest destiny, the mission of recasting every nation and every culture in the American image?



Various American voices have been raised these past few months to proclaim enthusiastically that soon all the world, or nearly all of it, will embrace an order called "democratic capitalism." It seems to be the assumption of these enthusiasts — many of them members of the faction called Neoconservatives — that the political structure and the economic patterns of the United States will be emulated in every continent, for evermore.

This attitude brings to mind an observation of Daniel Boorstin, the best of our present generation of American historians, that the Constitution of the United States is not for export. Also it brings to mind a character in the best of American novels, George Santayana's *The Last Puritan*. That character is Cyrus P. Whittle, a Yankee schoolmaster, very like the type of academic that dominates American universities at the present hour. Whittle is a

sarcastic wizzened little man who taught American history and literature in a high quivering voice, with a bitter incisive emphasis on one or two words in every sentence as if he were driving a long hard nail into the coffin of some detested fallacy.... His joy, as far as he dared, was to vilify all distinguished men. Franklin had written indecent verses; Washington – who had enormous hands and feet – had married Dame Martha for her money; Emerson served up Goethe’s philosophy in ice-water. Not that Mr. Cyrus P. Whittle was without enthusiasm and a secret religious zeal. Not only was America the biggest thing on earth, but it soon was going to wipe out everything else; and in the delirious dazzling joy of that consummation, he forgot to ask what would happen afterwards.

Just so: what sort of world would this projected universal Americanization produce? Ever since World War II, American publicists have been describing the Earthly Paradise to be created by the establishing of “democratic capitalism” in every land – even though the phrase “democratic capitalism” is of recent origin, a bit of neoconservative cant. For instance, in 1951 there was published in the British periodical *The Twentieth Century* an article entitled “The New American Revolution.” Its author was a David C. Williams, director of research for the Political Action Committee of the AFL-CIO. His sentences are interestingly similar to certain outpourings of the new Endowment for Democracy and other organs of “global democracy.”

“This twentieth century manifestation of the American Revolution has been aptly called ‘the revolution of rising expectations’,” Williams wrote.

Americans insist that it would be under way even if there were no such thing as Communism in the world.... The agents of this new revolution are the numerous officials, businessmen, technicians, and trade unionists whom the American Government is sending abroad.... American businessmen have the task of convincing their European counterparts that it pays to modernize, and to produce for the masses rather than the classes. They can assure their European friends that it is possible for them to achieve as a group the position of highest prestige in their communities, displacing landowners, civil servants, and officers of the armed forces from their traditional places of honor.

Thus American energy is to become a revolutionary influence rather than a conservative one, deliberately appealing to cupidity, class envy, and the itch for change: so Williams argued. In Asia, he continued, we Americans will help to “break down the traditional bonds of caste and family which prevail” and “drive the handicraft producers to the wall.” Will there be anguished protests? So much the worse for reactionaries. We will condescend to educate them out of their prejudices.

The new American revolution is not to everyone's taste," Williams declared unflinchingly.

Those whose traditional positions of prestige will be overturned of course abhor it. But perhaps the greatest spiritual distress is felt by European and Asian intellectuals. To them, the American way of life appears crass and vulgar. Many American intellectuals would agree with them. But they would also warn them that the logic of mass production and mass markets cannot be resisted. The 'happiness' which the average man wants, and will get, is not yet that of the aesthete. The Communists of Eastern Europe showed a sound instinct of self-preservation when they banned American jazz as a corrupting influence. Cheap music, cheap comic books, Coca-Cola, and cars are what the people want — understandably, because they have had no opportunity to learn to want, or to obtain, anything better. Culture can no longer be preserved by being made the monopoly of the favored few. The much harder task lies ahead of educating the masses to want better and more satisfying things than they do now.

So America's contribution to the universal "democratic capitalism" of the future (David C. Williams' premises granted) will be just this: cheapness — the cheapest music, the cheapest comic books, and the cheapest morality that can be provided. This indeed would be the revolution of revolutions, the hell of universal vulgarity and monotony. This is Cyrus P. Whittle, telling himself that not only is America the biggest thing on earth, but it is soon going to wipe out everything else; and in the dazzling delirious joy of that consummation forgetting to ask what will happen afterward.

This advocacy of an American-directed culture of materialism is not confined, by any means, to publicists for the great labor unions. A few years after Williams wrote, I found myself at a large assembly in this city of Washington, a speaker sandwiched between Vice President Nixon and the gentleman then president of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States. This latter speaker read aloud an address written by a Grub Street hack of the libertarian persuasion, in which he declared that America, happily, was a revolutionary power, not at all conservative; and that it would be American policy world-wide, to efface archaic cultures and sell backward peoples no end of American goods and services; also to bestow upon such peoples democratic ways of politics, whether the recipients might welcome democracy or not.

Preserving Identity. Here I interject a general proposition of mine bearing some relation to American foreign policy. It seems to be a law governing all life, from the unicellular inanimate forms to the highest human cultures, that every living organism of every genus and species endeavors, above all else, to preserve its identity. Whatever lives tries to make itself the center of the universe; it resists with the whole of its power the endeavors of competing forms of life to assimilate it to their substance and mode. Every living thing, as part of a species, prefers even death as an individual, to extinction as a distinct species. So if the lowliest alga struggles fatally against a threat to its peculiar identity, we ought not to be surprised that men and nations resist desperately — perhaps unreasoningly — any attempt to

assimilate their character to some other body social. This resistance is the first law of their being, extending below the level of consciousness. There is one sure way to make a deadly enemy, and that is to propose to anybody, "Submit yourself to me, and I will improve your condition by relieving you from the burden of your own identity and by reconstituting your substance in my image."

Just that, in effect, was what the Russian Communists said, at the end of the World War II, to the unfortunate inhabitants of the Baltic states. And today we behold the desperate reaction of those peoples. Can we suppose that forced-draft Americanization, in the name of the abstraction "democratic capitalism," would be much more cordially received throughout the world than forced-draft Russianization in the name of "proletarian dictatorship"?

Ruinous Results. Let me call to the attention of the zealots for global democracy — that is, of course, American-directed democracy — of certain ruinous results which have occurred, and are occurring today, when in the name of "democracy" or of "democratic capitalism" the government of these United States has intervened to thrust some approved pattern of democratic institutions upon some nation-state whose political culture is far removed from the politics of North America. I will not go so far as to describe Lyndon Johnson's endeavor to bomb the Vietnamese of the North into being good democrats; this zealous attempt was unsuccessful. Rather, in that land let me remind you, ladies and gentlemen, of how President Diem was found insufficiently democratic by President John F. Kennedy and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge; how, therefore, Kennedy and Lodge, at the urging of the "Gung-Ho boys" in the Department of State, connived with certain ruthlessly ambitious military men in South Vietnam to overthrow, and promptly murder, President Diem, the only leader who might have held back the Communists of the North. The consequence? Why, nowadays the South of Vietnam, like the North, is a grinding and impoverished "people's democracy," Marxist style. What a triumph of the democratic dogma!

Or consider what is happening in the Republic of South Africa today, the politics of that land having been found insufficiently democratic by the present Congress of the United States, the wise and temperate statesmen of the United Nations General Assembly, and other deliberative bodies in various quarters of the world. Because Jeremy Bentham's and Earl Warren's doctrine of "one man, one vote" has not been applied to the Bantu peoples of South Africa — whose political tradition is thoroughly undemocratic, consisting rather of the rule of hereditary chiefs who succeed through the matrilineal principle of descent — severe economic penalties are imposed upon the only political order in Africa which adheres to parliamentary government and the prescriptive rule of modern law.

It has been the deliberate policy of certain political interests in the United States to bring down that constitutional government by any possible means, regardless of consequences. "Let justice be done, though the heavens fall!" Already the heavens are falling in Natal, where different Bantu peoples and factions struggle fiercely one against another. Will such "liberation" be carried so far as it was in the Congo, now Zaire, where today the brutal despot Mobutu rules absolutely, supported by Washington and the bankers of New York? What a charming democratic prospect for South Africa! But there being lands beyond Stirling and men beyond Forth, the government of South Africa may find economic salvation, at least, through new trade treaties with the states of Eastern Europe and even the Soviet Union. The new governments of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and other countries are

not under the illusion that proletarian dictatorship, or its African equivalent, is an expression of true democracy.

In short, I venture to suggest that it would be highly imprudent for the government of the United States to set about undermining regimes that do not seem perfectly democratic to the editors of the *New York Times* — whether that undermining be worked through the suasion and the money of the Endowment for Democracy, or through the CIA and the military operations of this land of liberty. There has come into my hands a recent document of the Department of the Army and the Department of the Air Force, entitled “Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict.” Even the modified version of this report which I have obtained discusses such measures as the equalizing of incomes in “host nations” or “Third World Countries” as a means of aiding insurgency or counter-insurgency; and touches upon political and economic measures which American forces intervening in such lands might implement. I suspect that behind these military designs lies an impulse to “democratize” oldfangled orders in the Third World, by force if need be. This is the ideology of democratism, advocated, for instance, by the International Security Council, an unofficial group made up principally of veteran Cold Warriors. Brief sentences must suffice here to suggest the rather belligerent notions of this Council: “An artificial ideal of noninvolvement should not be the benchmark against which the profile of an American policy is judged. This is particularly applicable to a policy that directly promotes the values and practices of democracy.” So write the publicists of this International Security Council.

Tyranny of the Majority. “Four legs good, two legs bad” — such is the ideology of the pigs in *Animal Farm*. “Democracy good, all else bad” — such is the democratist ideology. A politicized American army operating abroad would be no more popular soon than the Red Army has been. An imposed or induced abstract democracy thrust upon peoples unprepared for it would produce at first anarchy, and then — as in nearly all of “emergent” Africa, over the past four decades — rule by force and a master. About 1956, Chester Bowles, previously head of the Office of Price Administration, was writing and lecturing about how gratifyingly democratic lands like Angola and Mozambique would become under American tutelage once the colonial oppressor was forced out. I trust that everyone present here today knows the present circumstances of Angola and Mozambique: certainly Archbishop Tutu, of South Africa, is aware that African states nowadays are far worse off, in terms of liberty and order, than they were when governed by European administrators. For what de Tocqueville called “the tyranny of the majority” we see all about us.

If by the word “democratic” is meant the complex of republican political institutions that has grown up in the United States over more than two centuries — why, the new paper constitutions being discussed in Eastern Europe cannot magically reproduce American history. If by “capitalism” is meant the massive and centralized corporate structures of North America — why, massive and centralized state capitalism is precisely what the self-liberated peoples of Eastern Europe are endeavoring to escape. The differing nations of our time must find their own several ways to order and justice and freedom. We Americans were not appointed their keepers.

I have been suggesting, ladies and gentlemen, that a soundly conservative foreign policy in the age which is dawning should be neither “interventionist” nor “isolationist”; it should be prudent. Its object should not be to secure the triumph everywhere of America’s name and manners, under the slogan of “democratic capitalism,” but instead the preservation of

the true national interest, and acceptance of the diversity of economic and political institutions throughout the world. Soviet hegemony ought not to be succeeded by American hegemony. Our prospects in the world of the twenty-first century are bright – supposing we Americans do not swagger about the globe, proclaiming our omniscience and our omnipotence.

