

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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**Political Errors
At the End of the
20th Century**

Part I:

Republican Errors

By Russell Kirk



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Political Errors at the End of the Twentieth Century

Part I: Republican Errors

By Russell Kirk

Now that the United States has become, temporarily, the greatest power in the world, some of us recall an observation, half a century ago, by the French writer Andre Siegfried: "The United States is the only country to have passed from barbarism to decadence without having known civilization." At the end of the twentieth century, have Americans intelligence and imagination sufficient to lead the peoples of the world? Indeed, do Americans possess talents sufficient to maintain their present degree of security and prosperity?

These are grave, if not fatal, questions. Decisions are being made nowadays, in public policies abroad and at home, that may be irrevocable. And it appears that such decisions may be based upon erroneous assumptions.

Therefore I offer you during this year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and ninety-one, ladies and gentlemen, a series of four lectures on the general topic "Political Errors at the End of the Twentieth Century." My first lecture, to be delivered to you this very day, is entitled "Republican Errors"; the second, this spring, will be "Democratic Errors"; the third, in summer or fall, will be "International Errors"; the concluding one, "The Politics of Reality," when I will suggest some paths to truth in public policy.

I commence with an examination of the state of mind and heart in America's two great political parties; and of the two, I venture first to touch upon certain errors prevalent in the Republican Party. I have known various Republican presidents, presidential candidates, members of Congress, governors, and other party leaders, all the way from Herbert Hoover to my friend and neighbor, John Engler, very recently elected governor of Michigan against heavy odds: From time to time I have had a hand in their campaigns, especially in those of Senator Goldwater. I was on cordial terms with President Nixon and President Reagan. My wife and I succeeded in reconciling the several factions of the Republican Party in Michigan, on the eve of the national convention which chose Mr. Bush as the party's nominee for the presidency. So you will understand, ladies and gentlemen, that in my lamenting of the present state of Republican leadership in Washington, I am more moved by sorrow than by wrath.

Stolid Party. During this twentieth century the Republican Party has been more stolid than imaginative. It has attracted public support by its appearance of practicality, its defense of private property and of a competitive economy, its reluctance — most of the time — to embark upon adventures abroad. Although praised as the party of industry and business, also, at least in my Michigan backwoods, Republicans were the representatives of the rural interest. In short, it has been a broad-based party which, in recent decades, has made considerable gains in the region that used to be the Solid South. Of presidents taking office since World War II,

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five have been Republican, three Democratic. The tremendous margins of victory enjoyed by Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush in their presidential campaigns seemed to suggest that the Republican Party might sweep away the Democratic Party within a few years, as long before the Federalist Party, and the Whig, had gone to the wall.

Yet the Republican Party, which achieved its greatest vigor in this century during the presidential terms of Ronald Reagan, now seems in the sere and yellow leaf. Permit me to discuss with you, for a quarter of an hour, the domestic errors of the Republican national administration, and then to examine, for the second quarter of an hour, that administration's blunders in foreign policy.

My task with respect to the fiscal measures of the Bush Administration is made the easier for me by Dr. Edwin Feulner's "State of Conservatism, 1991" message, entitled "Fashionably Out of Fashion Again." I concur heartily in his observation that "after more than eight years of steady growth, a combination of new federal taxes, out-of control spending increasing, and suffocating regulatory burdens have conspired to send the economy into spasms." Federal expenditure soon will exceed a quarter of the gross national product; the deficits for the present fiscal year and for the fiscal year 1992 will be the largest in the history of the United States. The reforms of income tax and inheritance tax, worked in the Reagan years, are undone. As socialism dissolves in Eastern Europe, in the United States, an unofficial and unproclaimed form of socialism gains ground.

Why has this come to pass? Why does a national administration elected on a conservative platform offer such feeble resistance to measures advocated by doctrinaire liberals.

"Rockefeller Republicans." Why, one ought not to blame Mr. Bush unduly. When he stood for the Republican presidential nomination against Mr. Reagan in 1980, of necessity he turned for support to the liberal wing of the Republican Party. That wing had insufficient strength to secure him the nomination; but in the course of the contest he acquired advisors and helpers best classified as "Rockefeller Republicans." Those people, some of them eminent, are at his side still, and have his ear.

An anecdote will illustrate my point. While, in 1988, Mr. Bush was campaigning vigorously, I was invited to confer with an inner circle of his staff, in Washington. Mr. Bush was busy elsewhere, but kindly telephoned me during the course of the discussion. One of the pieces of advice I had offered to the Bush people there was to emphasize Mr. Bush's opposition to abortion-on-demand; I said he has consistently advocated the sound policy of returning the abortion question to the police powers of the several states. My remark was received with an embarrassed silence; clearly some people present very much favored abortion. A little later I pointed out that in national publicity, the Bush campaign should refer repeatedly to Mr. Bush's conservatism.

"What has he done that's conservative?" inquired, perhaps rhetorically, a Young Lion of the Bush. I might have pointed to his intelligently conservative years in the House of Representatives, but contented myself at the moment by suggesting that others present might know Mr. Bush's principal views and utterances better than I did. Some of Mr. Bush's people there present in the headquarters shivered at that dread word "conservative."

I am suggesting that all presidents, in some degree, are held captive by the inner circles of the Executive Force, their own Executive Force. I doubt whether President Bush himself in-

clined initially to the fiscal measures that presently he accepted; but those close about him persuaded him of the need for such damaging concessions to liberals' demands.

Now the Republican Party long boasted of its frugality. The Bush Administration, on the contrary, has stolen some of the Democrats' old clothes while the sons of Jefferson and Jackson were out bathing. But those purloined garments are ragged; and Republicans look odd and unconvincing when clad in them.

Oppressive Taxation. With respect to a sharp increase in the level of taxes, it seems as if the Bush Administration really does not understand the principle of diminishing returns, or know the history of the consequences of excessive taxation. When computing our federal income tax very recently, my wife and I discovered that more than half our gross income is taken in taxation – federal income tax; Social Security taxes; state income taxes; village, township, and county taxes, school property tax; sales taxes. And we are not of the number of Franklin Roosevelt's "malefactors of great wealth." We are in the process of educating four young daughters, paying off mortgages, trying to save something for one's declining years – I, being seventy-two years of age already – and contributing to charitable causes. Yet we are better off than many taxpayers. What straw will break the camel's back?

A state that annually exacts in taxes half of a citizen's income is more oppressive, financially, than the despotisms of old. In the ancient monarchies of China, a tax load of more than ten percent would have been thought unjust. Excessive taxation is a major cause of the decline and fall of great states: so writes C. Northcote Parkinson, the author of Parkinson's Law, in his last book.

"Taxation, taken to the limit and beyond, has always been a sign of decadence and a prelude to disaster," as Parkinson puts it. "For government expenditure is the chief cause of inflation and is also the means of government interference in commercial, industrial, and social life. Where evil has been averted it has normally been from lack of funds. Where evil has been done it was usually because the perpetrators had money to spend."

Billion Dollars Daily. The Bush Administration had one handsome prospect for reducing governmental expenditure, reducing the federal deficit, and possibly even making a gesture at reduction of the federal debt: that is, the prospective contraction of the armed forces, what with the dwindling of the Soviet menace. Instead, Mr. Bush has plunged the United States into a war which, so far, has cost about a billion dollars a *day*. (You will recall that a billion dollars is a thousand million dollars.) Already, more taxation to pay for this struggle in the Levant is being discussed in Washington. So I quote Parkinson once more: "Taxes become heavier in time of war and should diminish, by rights, when the war is over. That is not, however, what happens. Although sometimes lowered when the war ends, taxes seldom regain their pre-war level. That is because the level of expenditure rises to meet the war-time level of taxation."

Unless the Bush Administration abruptly reverses its fiscal and military course, I suggest, the Republican Party must lose its former good repute for frugality, and become the party of profligate expenditure, "butter and guns." And public opinion would not long abide that. Nor would America's world influence and America's remaining prosperity.

But, time running on, I must turn to affairs diplomatic and military: Republican errors internationally. What are we to say of Mr. Bush's present endeavor to bring to pass a gentler, kinder New World Order?

Presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson were enthusiasts for American domination of the world. Now George Bush appears to be emulating those eminent Democrats. When the Republicans, once upon a time, nominated for the presidency a “One World” candidate, Wendell Willkie, they were sadly trounced. In general, Republicans throughout the twentieth century have been advocates of prudence and restraint in the conduct of foreign affairs.

But Mr. Bush, out of mixed motives, has embarked upon a radical course of intervention in the region of the Persian Gulf. After carpet-bombing the Cradle of Civilization as no country ever had been bombed before, Mr. Bush sent in hundreds of thousands of soldiers to overrun the Iraqi bunkers — that were garrisoned by dead men, asphyxiated.

And for what reason? The Bush Administration found it difficult to answer that question clearly. In the beginning it was implied that the American national interest required low petroleum prices: therefore, if need be, smite and spare not!

That excuse reminds me of Burke’s rebuke to the Pitt ministry in 1795, when it appeared that the British government was about to go to war with France over the question of the navigation of the River Scheldt, in the Netherlands. “A war for the Scheldt? A war for a chamber-pot!” Burke exclaimed. Now one may say, “A war for Kuwait? A war for an oilcan!”

“The blood of a man should never be shed but to redeem the blood of man,” Burke wrote in his first *Letter on a Regicide Peace*. “It is well shed for our family, for our friends, for our God, for our country, for our kind. The rest is vanity; the rest is crime.” Burke was eager that England declare war against France because of the menace of the French revolutionaries to the civilized order of Europe, and because of their systematic crimes. But he set his face against war for mere commercial advantage. So should Republicans. “The rest is vanity; the rest is crime.”

War for Righteousness. A war for an oilcan not turning out to be popular, however, President Bush turned moralist; he professed to be engaged in redeeming the blood of man; and his breaking of Iraq is to be the commencement of his beneficent New World Order. Mr. Bush has waged what Sir Herbert Butterfield, in his little book *Christianity, Diplomacy, and War*, calls “The War for Righteousness.” As Butterfield begins the third chapter of that book, “It has been held by technicians of politics in recent times that democracies can only be keyed up to modern war — only brought to the necessary degree of fervor — provided they are whipped into moral indignation and heated to fanaticism by the thought that they are engaged in a ‘war for righteousness’.”

Now indubitably Saddam Hussein is unrighteous; but so are nearly all the masters of the “emergent” African states (with the Ivory Coast as a rare exception), and so are the grim ideologues who rule China, and the hard men in the Kremlin, and a great many other public figures in various quarters of the world. Why, I fancy that there are some few unrighteous men, conceivably, in the domestic politics of the United States. Are we to saturation-bomb most of Africa and Asia into righteousness, freedom, and democracy? And, having accomplished that, however would we ensure persons yet more unrighteous might not rise up instead of the ogres we had swept away? Just that is what happened in the Congo, remember, three decades ago; and nowadays in Zaire, once called the Belgian Congo, we zealously uphold with American funds the dictator Mobutu, more blood-stained than Saddam. And have we forgotten Castro in Cuba?

Momentum of Its Own. I doubt whether much good is going to come out of the slaughter of perhaps a hundred thousand people in Iraq. "For one of the troubles of war," Butterfield writes, "is that it acquires its own momentum and plants its own ideals on our shoulders, so that we are carried far away from the purposes with which we began — carried indeed sometimes to greater acts of spoilation than the ones which had provoked our original entry into the war. Before the war of 1914 had lasted a year, its own workings had generated such a mood that we had promised Russia Constantinople and had bought the alliance of Italy with offers of booty, some of which had later to be disavowed by President Wilson. And it is a remarkable fact that in wars which purport to be so ethical that the states attached to neutrality are sometimes regarded as guilty of a dereliction of duty, the great powers primarily concerned may have required an iniquitous degree of bribery to bring them into the conflict, or to maintain their fidelity. The whole ideal of moderate peace aims, and the whole policy of making war the servant (instead of the master) of negotiation, is impossible — and the whole technique of the 'war for righteousness' has a particularly sinister application — when even in the ostensibly 'defending' party there is a latent and concealed aggressiveness of colossal scope, as there certainly was in 1914."

You may perceive some parallels between Butterfield's description of the course of the Allies during World War I and the course, so far, of the coalition against Iraq. Already there is talk of what shall be done with the "remains of Iraq." Mr. James Baker talks of rebuilding Iraq; others talk of dismantling Iraq altogether, by way of spoilation. And what promises and bribes were provided by the government of the United States, in recent months, to secure the assent of such murderous governments as that of Ethiopia to strong measures against Iraq; to secure, indeed, by holding out prospects of massive economic aid, the cooperation of the Soviet Union, Iraq's former patron?

Was not Egypt's cooperation obtained by forgiving the Egyptian government's indebtedness of several billion dollars? Was not Syria's assent gained by America's ignoring of the Syrian conquest of the Lebanon, with a massacre of General Aoun's Christian army? What began as determination to restore a legitimate (if somewhat arbitrary) government in Kuwait may result in the overturn of several governments in the Levant. As for regarding neutral states as guilty of dereliction of duty — why, the United States has done just that to Jordan, by cutting off economic aid at the very time when Jordan is crammed with destitute refugees from Iraq.

Disagreeable Consequences. In short, deliberate entry into war commonly brings on consequences disagreeable even to the seeming victors. Prudent statesmen long have known that armed conflict, for all involved, ought to be the last desperate resort, to be entered upon only when all means of diplomacy, conciliation, and compromise have been exhausted. In Iraq, we have crushed an insect with the club of Hercules. Temporarily, Mr. Bush's stroke is popular. When a democracy goes to war, at first there occurs a wave of enthusiasm: "Bop the Wop; sap the Jap; get the Hun on the run!" But afterward, when troubles arise....

True, we did not suffer a long war in the deserts of Kuwait and Iraq. But we must expect to suffer during a very long period of widespread hostility toward the United States — even, or perhaps especially, from the people of certain states that America bribed or bullied into combining against Iraq.

In Egypt, in Syria, in Pakistan, in Algeria, in Morocco, in all of the world of Islam, the masses now regard the United States as their arrogant adversary; while the Soviet Union, by vir-

tue of its endeavors to mediate the quarrel in its later stages, may pose again as the friend of Moslem lands. Nor is this all: for now, in every continent, the United States is resented increasingly as the last and most formidable of imperial systems.

In this century, great empires have collapsed: the Austrian, the German, the British, the French, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Italian, and the Japanese. The Soviet empire now languishes in the process of dissolution. "Imperialism" has become a term of bitter reproach and complaint; all this within my own lifetime.

American Empire. But there remains an American Empire, still growing — though expanding through the acquisition of client states, rather than through settlement of American populations abroad. Among the client states directly dependent upon American military power are Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Israel, and El Salvador; and until the withdrawal of American divisions from Germany for service in Arabia, Germany, too, was a military client. Dependent upon American assistance of one kind or another, and in some degree upon American military protection, are the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, and Panama; and also, in the Levant, Egypt and Jordan, and formerly Lebanon. Now Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are added to the roster of clients. I hardly need mention America's earlier acquisitions: Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Virgins, and lesser islands. I refrain from mentioning America's economic ascendancy, through foreign aid or merely trade, over a great deal more of the world. In short, although we never talk about our empire, a tremendous American Empire has come into existence — if, like the Roman Empire, in a kind of fit of absence of mind. No powerful counterpoise to the American hegemony seems to remain, what with the enfeebling of the U.S.S.R.

Such a universal ascendancy always has been resented by the lesser breeds without the law. Soon there sets to work a widespread impulse to pull down the imperial power. But that imperial power, strong in weapons, finds it possible for a time to repress the disobedient. In the long run — well, as Talleyrand put it, "You can do everything with bayonets — except sit on them." In the long run, the task of repression is too painful a burden to bear; so the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has discovered in the past few years. Napoleon discovered that hard truth earlier and King George III and the King's Friends discovered it between the years 1775 and 1781. Doubtless George Bush means well by the world near the end of the twentieth century. He is a man of order, diligent, dutiful, honest, and a good family man. But he lacks imagination, "the vision thing." And power intoxicates; and, as Lord Acton put it, power tends to corrupt. The love of power tends to corrupt both speech and actions. It may corrupt a grave national undertaking into a personal vendetta. It may corrupt what began as a chivalric rescue into a heavy belligerent domination. (Talk continues to come to our ears of a "permanent American presence" in the Persian Gulf.)

President Bush and Americans of his views doubtless intend the American hegemony to be gentler and kinder than the sort of hegemony that prevailed in the ancient Persian Empire, say; more just even than the Roman hegemony that gave peace, for some centuries, to several lands — relative peace, anyway, at the price of crushing taxation and the extinction of earlier cultures. But devastating Iraq (and the rescued Kuwait) is an uncompromising way of opening an era of sweetness and light. Peoples so rescued from tyrants might cry, as did the boy whom Don Quixote de la Mancha had saved from beating by the muleteers but who was thrashed by them not long later, nevertheless — "In the name of God, Don Jorge de la Casablanca, don't rescue me again!"

Don Jorge de la Casablanca has toppled and imprisoned one Central American despot – somewhat small fry – and is in the process of dealing after the same fashion with one Mesopotamian despot, somewhat larger fry. “Well done!” some cry. It has all been rather like deer hunting in my Michigan back woods.

Yet presidents of the United States must not be encouraged to make Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace, nor to fancy that they can establish a New World Order through eliminating dissenters. In the second century before Christ, the Romans generously liberated the Greek city-states from the yoke of Macedonia. But it was not long before the Romans felt it necessary to impose upon those quarrelsome Greeks a domination more stifling to Hellenic freedom and culture than ever Macedon had been. It is a duty of the Congress of the United States to see that great American Caesars do not act likewise.

Echo of 1984. If that duty is forgotten, before many years are out we may receive such television communications as follows.

The voice from the telescreen paused. A trumpet call, clear and beautiful, floated into the stagnant air. The voice continued raspingly:

“Attention! Your attention please! A newsflash has this moment arrived from the Malabar front. Our forces in South India have won a glorious victory. I am authorized to say that the action we are now reporting may well bring the war within a measurable distance of its end. Here is the newsflash – ”

Bad news coming, thought Winston. And sure enough, following a gory description of the annihilation of a Eurasian army, with stupendous figures of killed and prisoners, came the announcement that, as of next week, the chocolate ration would be reduced from thirty grams to twenty.

Perhaps you have already recognized the preceding passage from Orwell’s *1984*. Orwell describes our world of 1991, too. Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace comes to pass in an era of Righteousness – that is, national or ideological self-righteousness in which the public is persuaded that “God is on our side,” and that those who disagree should be brought here before the bar as war criminals.

I shall have more to say about such concerns in my Third Heritage lecture this year. Just now I conclude my thoughts on Republican errors by suggesting that it would be ruinous for the Republicans to convert themselves into a party of high deeds in distant lands and higher taxes on the home front. Such a New World Order, like the Pax Romana, might create a wilderness and call it peace; at best, it would reduce the chocolate ration from thirty grams to twenty. And in the fullness of time, the angry peoples of the world would pull down the American Empire, despite its military ingenuity and its protestations of kindness and gentleness – even as the Soviet Empire is being pulled down today, thanks be to God.

