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**Political Errors
at the End of the
20th Century
Part III:
International
Errors**

By Russell Kirk



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Part III: International Errors

By Russell Kirk

In my previous two lectures of this series, I reproached the Republican party and the Democratic party for a diversity of errors. Today I mean to comminate both parties for lack of imagination and right reason in the affairs of nations.

Loyalty to a party may be a good loyalty. One recalls Edmund Burke's definition of party in his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770): "Party is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest upon some particular principle on which they are all agreed." And he continues, "It is the business of the speculative philosopher to mark the proper ends of government. It is the business of the politician, who is the philosopher in action, to find out the proper means towards those ends, and to employ them with effect." A few paragraphs earlier in that pamphlet by Burke occurs the famous phrase, "When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle."

Now I suppose that the politicians who lead our two great American political parties are concerned for the national interest. But some of them, I have long suspected, are yet more concerned for their private interest—that is, their interest in continuing to hold public office, with its emoluments and its pomp and circumstance. Doubtless such public persons have persuaded themselves that the national interest and their private interest coincide—which in some instances is true enough. However that may be, the politicians of both Republican and Democratic parties, those philosophers in action, need occasionally to look beyond the advantages of their particular party to not merely national, but international, concerns. Even those four august United States Senators who for the past several weeks have occupied themselves pleasurably in badgering a gentleman of color who has been nominated to high judicial office—even those virtuous modern tribunes, I venture to suggest, might do well to look outward from a Senate chamber toward the new world *disorder*—even if, in the phrases of John Henry Newman, "The sight of the world is nothing else than a prophet's scroll, full of 'lamentations, mourning, and woe.'"

Catalogue of Afflictions. In that world beyond Capitol Hill, French and Belgian troops have seized the airport at Kinshasa so that Europeans and others may flee from the violent anarchy in Zaire. The Yugoslav navy threatens to bombard the ancient Dalmatian—and Croatian—ports of Pula, Split, and Dubrovnik. Communists seek to seize power all over again in Romania. Russia grows hungrier day by day. The Kurds, never a gentle people—Armenians can testify to that—complain of Iraqi ungentleness and expect American patronage. Israel seeks to bully the United States into financing a fresh program of massive immigration, which, if achieved, would condemn the garrison-state of Israel to general poverty, miserable overcrowding, and precarious existence among implacable enemies. But why add to this catalogue of afflictions? My point is that in neither the Democratic nor the Republican party does one encounter leaders who offer any very coherent policy that the United States might follow in world affairs during the remaining nine years of the final decade of the twentieth century—let alone longer views.

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Of course one hears a great deal of talk, and reads a great deal of scribbling, about “isolationism” and “interventionism.” Such epithets are sterile abstractions. Nobody nowadays believes, really, that somehow the United States should shut itself off from all the world; and not many argue that the American government should bomb the Bad Guys in every obscure clash of interests and arms in remote corners of the world. Edmund Burke’s name and fame having been invoked by various parties to present controversies about the invisible and improbable New World Order, it is well to recall that Burke declared prudence to be the chief virtue for a statesman. What we should be pursuing is not an ideology called isolationism, or an ideology denominated interventionism, but prudence—the art of the politically possible, if you will.

Clash of Columnists. A curious exchange concerning the prudential wisdom of Edmund Burke has occurred recently, directly in connection with American policy in foreign parts and the disorders I touched upon two minutes ago. The antagonists are Mr. George Will and Mr. Paul A. Gigot. Their bone of contention is President Bush’s decision not to re-invade Iraq so as to take sides with the rebellious Kurds and perhaps to create an independent Kurdistan. Will evokes Edmund Burke to oppose the notion of a conceivable Kurdistan as a sovereign state—what Will calls “nation-building.” Using American power to carve a new ethnic state out of portions of Iraq—and presumably portions of Iran and Turkey, too—would be hubris, Will instructs us, adding that “this belief, contradictory to every symbol of Burkean conservatism, is that the nations are like Tinker Toys, to be rearranged by Americans who have a right to be rearrangers because they are such clever social engineers.”

To those remarks, Mr. Paul A. Gigot replied at some length in his *Wall Street Journal* column of April 12. Mr. Gigot instructs us that Edmund Burke was a Kurdiphile, and that we should go and do likewise. “The cause of which Burke was most proud— ‘on which I value myself the most’—was his defense of the Kurds in his own day, the British subjects in India...Burke was most adamant about Britain’s obligations to India. ‘Great Britain entered into a virtual act of union with that country, by which we bound ourselves as securities to preserve the people in all the rights, laws, and liberties.’ he told the House of Lords. Iraq is not an American colony, but the U.S. bombed it for 42 days, controls 20 percent of its land and all of its air space, and now intends to limit its commerce and industry through the U.N.”

Curiouser and curiouser, as Lewis Carroll’s Alice would say. In an earlier Heritage Lecture, I ventured to suggest that it is absurd to conjure up from the tomb certain politicians of yesteryear, to inquire how they might vote in political disputes near the end of the twentieth century. I then offered evocation of Burke on present-day concerns of military technology as an instance of such absurdity. “Would Burke vote for the Strategic Defense Initiative?” I inquired, ironically. Much wisdom is to be found in Burke, but every one of us is a creature of his own era, and the prudential judgments of two centuries gone must differ from the prudential judgments of this ephemeral hour.

Now Burke denounced the rationalistic notion that societies may be reconstituted overnight, as Mr. Will points out; but he was no foe to empire; he pleaded for conciliation with the American colonies because he wished to preserve the British Empire; and he sought to convict Warren Hastings of crimes because that would demonstrate the justice of the British raj and so keep India within the Empire. Nor did Burke aspire to set up an independent sovereignty within India for the Pathans, say—the ruthless robbers who were then, and are now, the nearest Indian equivalent to the Kurds.

Mr. Gigot’s analogy between British suzerainty in eighteenth century India, and Mr. Bush’s alleged suzerainty over devastated Iraq, strikes me as most peculiar: he seems to tell us that because the United States carpet-bombed the Cradle of Civilization, we Americans now have the moral obligation to parcel out Iraq’s territories to all comers. On the same ground, Hitler might

have justified his prolonged occupation of the Low Countries by the fact he had destroyed Rotterdam by the Stuka bombers of the Blitzkrieg. One good wrong deserves another. Forty-two days of bombing make an implausible premise or footing on which to found “the relationship between a nation’s moral and political power” as expounded by Mr. Charles Krauthammer and endorsed by Mr. Paul A. Gigot.

But perhaps I digress in this expression of doubt of the omniscience of newspaper columnists. My point is that occasions arise in great states when “the file affords no precedent” (as Burke himself put it) and that America’s decisions in international concerns today cannot be prudently made either upon a mere disavowal of moral responsibility or upon a moralistic shriek of: “Let justice be done, though the heavens fall!” As Herbert Butterfield declared at the end of the Second World War, beware of righteousness! (That is, of national self-righteousness).



Nearly four months past, in this very auditorium, Dr. Robert G. Kaufman pursued a line of discourse somewhat resembling that of Mr. Gigot. He told his audience that “the outlook and prescriptions of Burt Pines and Irving Kristol would return us to the world of Nixonian *realpolitik* which the Reagan Revolution and even Nixon himself now have repudiated. We should reject their restricted conception of the national interest and their dichotomy between morality and foreign policy.” He added that “a Judeo-Christian conception of man, morality, and the international system should continue to guide U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era.” A little later, Dr. Kaufman went on to say that in international politics, “Judeo-Christian absolute morality ought for moral and pragmatic reasons to serve as the guide for evaluating relative degrees of moral and political evils.” In conclusion, Kaufman unveiled the Galatea that had been created by his chisel, his “Judeo-Christian Liberal-Realist approach” (his own description, not mine). His auditors were assured that this approach is “a sober but not somber realism, leavened by Judeo-Christian liberal democratic ideals and a modest faith in the possibility, albeit contingent, of slow progress toward a more peaceful world.”

Undismayed at Cost. Dr. Kaufman confessed that for the United States to “practice a policy of vigilant internationalism based on these principles” would be costly, very costly. But he was undismayed: “Our rejoinder is that we cannot afford not to.” When I hear such fatuous phrases, there rise in my mind images of the cabinet of Clement Attlee, after the Second World War. That government’s rates of taxation, which even Sir Hartley Shawcross called “savage,” were crippling the British economy and causing much injustice to everybody who had saved money; but whenever the question was put, “Can we afford it?”—why, the Attlee crew responded, as with one voice, “Can we afford not to?” Anybody who has headed a household presently becomes aware that, yes, some expenditures we must afford *not* to undertake, no matter how pleasurable certain extravagances are represented as being.

That Dr. Kaufman does not care to count the costs is only one reason why I distrust his prescriptions for the part of the United States in the comity of nations. He, too, quotes Burke—a passage I mentioned at the beginning of this present lecture: “Evil will indeed triumph, as Edmund Burke warned, when good men do nothing.” But if what good men actually do is a foolish action, evil may triumph after all. Virtuous intentions may lead to imprudent actions. In Dr. Kaufman’s next sentence, after his citation of Burke, there is more than a hint of the sort of international activity Dr. Kaufman approves: “As President Bush’s splendid handling of the Gulf Crisis attests, the United States must continue to respond vigorously before potential or minor threats become major ones.” Well, Mr. Bush’s “splendid handling”—that is, excessive use of force to crush a gnat—resulted from inanity of diplomacy on America’s part, which led Saddam Hussein to fancy that his annexation of Kuwait would be of no consequence to Washington; the

United States distinctly had not responded vigorously before a potential threat loomed large. Does Dr. Kaufman's phrase "respond vigorously" imply "bomb 'em!"—and, as in Bush's "splendid handling," the extinction of a hundred thousand or more of the undemocratic folk who ventured to stand in the way of American access to fossil fuels?

Although willing—if reluctantly—to tolerate "ideological diversity in geopolitically less significant regimes," Kaufman does not much conceal his eagerness to insure "human rights" universally. (Who, by the way, is to define these "human rights"—the American Civil Liberties Union?) "President Bush lacks even a plausible justification for appeasing Chinese totalitarians for their blatant violations of human rights," Kaufman pontificates. What is President Bush supposed to have done? To have sent the Marines to Shanghai; to have dropped nuclear bombs on Beijing? Or have imposed that Judeo-Christian morality upon the Chinese, willy-nilly? After all, politics is the art of the possible.

Insisting on Conformity? In short, it appears to me that Dr. Kaufman's Judeo-Christian Liberal-Realist approach, with its Judeo-Christian liberal democratic ideals, would have consequences unanticipated by Dr. Kaufman. That approach is substantially liberal sentimentality in the conduct of foreign policy: which mode of proceeding in international affairs has failed over and over again. But combined with the doctrine of responding "vigorously" before even a minor crisis might occur, this Judeo-Christian Liberal-Realist approach might be employed to justify an American hegemony over all the nations. Will the United States insist on conformity everywhere to the American Way of Life? There exists today no counterpoise to American military might. Among the rising generations of Italy and Spain, my daughters tell me, those lands' great traditional music has given way to imported American rock. Are the politics, the economics, the very modes of thought throughout the world to be Americanized, through persuasion or compulsion? An Americanized world, with American bombs and rockets to make sure the world stays Americanized—what's wrong with that?

There's a great deal wrong with such a sunken state of the comity of nations. A New World Order, an artificial universal democracy, with no better footing than American military might, could dissolve so swiftly as did American power in Vietnam. Recently President Bush, whom I criticized somewhat mordantly in my first lecture of this present series on Political Errors, has been opening his eyes to this hard truth. It is conceivable that Mr. Bush may be the savior of American international policy.

President Bush has refused, so far, to send American troops to the interior of Iraq. He fought Desert Storm for limited objectives—which is how wars ought to be fought, according to the canons of international law—and did not demand unconditional surrender. He knows the suffering that would come of an attempt to overrun and occupy Mesopotamia. He knows what widespread distrust and dread of America would result from such a domination by terrible force. He knows better than to try to create tiny new states dominated by Kurds or Shia Muslims, which could not stand at all unless guarded by powerful American garrisons. He settles for politics as the art of the possible.

Resisting Special Interests. And President Bush means to rescue America's foreign policies from the clutch of powerful lobbies. There is no more reason why the Executive Force and the Congress should salaam to the Israeli lobby than they should dance to the tune of the Saudi Arabian lobby, or the Greek lobby (respecting Cyprus), or the black militant lobby, or the National Education Association lobby, or the American admirers of the Irish Republican Army. Often the Congress, and indeed the Executive Force, humbly have done the arrogant bidding of those powerful lobbies, and of others. But Mr. Bush aspires to govern, not be governed by special interests. He may even succeed in heartening some faint-hearted members of Congress to resist the blandishments and the menaces of the Israeli lobby, which by pouring funds into congressional

contests and other elections succeeded, a few years gone, in pushing Charles Percy of Illinois out of the Senate, and defeating in primary or election several members of the House.

As I suggested in one of my lectures here in 1990, the capital of the United States is not Tel Aviv, but the District of Columbia. It is the President and Congress who make decisions about pouring billions of dollars into Israel—not the Likud government in Tel Aviv. In chastening the importunities of President Shamir and of Israeli cabinet ministers who call the President an anti-Semite, Mr. Bush labors manfully to liberate American international policies from ethnic mortgages. May he persevere—in persevering, bring a measure of peace to the Levant! He may succeed, too, in ending such extravagant follies as arming Israel against Egypt—and, simultaneously, arming Egypt against Israel.

Hard Questions. Mr. Bush, I suspect, may be entertaining second thoughts about this unhappy catch-phrase "New World Order." (That very phrase, incidentally, was employed by Lenin and by Hitler.) Should such an order be imposed by American military strength and American economic resources, what might happen in the long run to the American Republic and to other cultures of the world? Conceivably President Bush has been asking himself such questions recently. His present perplexity as to what may be done about Kurds and Shia Muslims in Iraq is merely the first of the troubles that must arise if the government of the United States presumes to issue decrees to distant nations and to assume that a design of "democratic capitalism" or of "Judeo-Christian Liberal-Realism," planned in Washington and New York, may be imposed readily enough upon ancient cultures of origins altogether different from American civilization.

The Roman Republic, and presently the Roman Empire, established a New World Order—that did confer the benefits of *Romanitas* upon most of the known world. But despite those benefits, the native cultures of Greece, of Gaul, of Anatolia, of the Levant, of Egypt, of Mesopotamia, drooped and withered under the Roman domination, deprived as they were of freedom and *genus loci*. In the fullness of time, the burden of ordering the world having become insupportable, the whole Roman structure and Roman culture collapsed, and slaves nocturnally opened the gates of Rome itself to the New World Barbarism.

The whole concept of swift and beneficent establishment of American "democratic capitalism" universally is founded upon the assumption that all peoples will readily and rapidly embrace American political and social forms—quite as the Russian Communists, for seven decades, assumed that all the world would come to accept happily—after some lively bloodletting—Marxist political and social forms. This confusion has been made worse by a loose and often demagogic employment of such terms as "freedom" and "democracy." The truth is that "liberal democracy" is a body of institutions of nineteenth century origins, almost peculiar to Western Europe and the English-speaking nations. Liberal democracy remains mostly incomprehensible and unattainable in the Third World states. It is in grave difficulties, for that matter, in what we call the West. Does liberal democracy prevail and prosper in such cities as Detroit?

Failure in Africa. Some thirty-five years ago, the American Department of State and various public men were well into a program for liberating Africa from "colonialism" and substituting an Americanization of the Dark Continent; such had been the dream of Woodrow Wilson and of Franklin Roosevelt; such designs still are at work against South Africa, the only African state where constitutional government and some prosperity have survived.

The intended translation of American institutions to Africa has been a dismal failure: Africa has insisted obdurately upon remaining African. Not one liberal democracy exists in "emergent" Africa, nor does there exist any prospect of such development. The one country that was founded (1822) in emulation of the American pattern, Liberia, has collapsed into a ghastly anarchy, with a considerable part of its population murdered or starved to death, and many more people fled to

Sierra Leone or the Ivory Coast, and no government that is recognized by any other country. The United States is denounced in many African countries as the new imperialist power. No large-scale industrialization has come to pass in “emergent” Africa; on the contrary, most of that continent’s agriculture and mining have sadly declined since independence. Constitutionalism is a sham in nearly all African states; squalid new oligarchs supplant tribal chiefs; the military junta and the monolithic repressive political faction stand triumphant—until overthrown bloodily by some new wave intent upon power and plunder.

This is no heartening record for the New World Order supposedly being concocted in Washington. And if now, under American pressure, order in the Republic of South Africa is undone and civil war erupts there, what course is Washington to follow—to establish American garrisons in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Pretoria? Already such measures are being discussed in American periodicals.

I venture to suggest that it would be highly imprudent for the government of the United States, in the name of some New World Order of Democratic Capitalism, to set about undermining regimes that do not seem idyllically democratic to the editors of the *New York Times*, say—whether that undermining is worked through the suasion and the money of the Endowment for Democracy or through the CIA and military operations.

“Four legs good, two legs bad”—such is the ideology of the pigs in *Animal Farm*. “Democracy good, other government bad”—such is the democratist ideology. An imposed abstract “democracy,” thrusting political power upon people who never have thought of political action, produces at first anarchy, and then rule by force and a master. The differing nations of our time must find their own ways to order and justice and freedom. The Americans have not been ordained their keepers. (This word keeper, by the way, signifies jailer.)

Unedifying Spectacle. President George Bush, no ideologue, very possibly may be reflecting on such difficulties as I have mentioned just now; certainly he must confront those conundrums. He knows better than to try to rule the world, it being difficult enough to try to restrain the Congress from follies. The spectacle of the President and the Secretary of State, separately, jetting frantically to capitals in Europe and Asia, during recent months, has been unedifying; silly things are being said when high dignitaries are being expected to speechify on short notice about everything under the sun. President Herbert Hoover held that no President of the United States should go abroad during his term of office; he should stick to business in the District of Columbia. Less travel and more thought might improve American diplomacy.

Ever since the end of the Second World War, Washington’s conduct of foreign affairs has been afflicted by liberal sentimentality. It has been assumed that “lesser breeds without the law” (in Kipling’s phrase) could be converted into so many reproductions of the American model: throughout the world, underdeveloped lands would be developed (capital being supplied by America) successfully; constitutional democracies peacefully would supplant long-established political patterns; American-style education would dispel old superstitions and reactionary notions (in Germany and Japan especially); and the United Nations Organization (as that body originally was designated) would grow into the Parliament of Man and Federation of the World.

Those ambitions have been blasted. Most of the world has grown poorer and more violent. The Third World regimes, sufficiently tyrannical most of them, have piled up national debts that presumably never can be repaid—and which now endanger the great American banks that advanced the money, and therefore may shatter the American economy. The old cultures of Latin America, Asia, and Africa have been greatly injured, but the “liberal realism” of America’s secular humanists has not taken root satisfactorily across the oceans. Far from being united, the nation-states are falling apart most speedily, with Yugoslavia as the current example.

Yet the United States has gone on supplying irresponsible governments abroad with many, many billions of dollars and great quantities of arms, as if the world could be perfected by a colossal and universal Marshall Plan. The Department of State—why, three decades ago George Kennan remarked that the State Department could be reformed only by one or the other of two conceivable events—either that an enormous depression should impel the American people to fire every civil servant in Washington, or else that a nuclear bomb should fall on the State Department. Congressional committees on foreign affairs, lacking continuity from one Congress to the next, have not intelligently considered any large-scale revision of American diplomatic policies. As for the President and his inner circle that is called the Executive Force of the White House, too often domestic political pressures and interests have been permitted to distort the part of the United States in international concerns—for instance the eagerness of the militant black lobby to destroy the present government of the Republic of South Africa, and the insistence of the Israeli lobby that American funds, and if need be American arms, should keep Israel afloat, regardless of America's other interests in the Levant.

Great Good Fortune. I have sketched, too briefly, the inefficacy of America in world affairs for nearly half a century. One piece of great good fortune has come to pass: the collapse of the Evil Empire of the Soviet Union. The immediate cause of this appears to have been the ruin of the Soviet economy by excessive military and technological expenditures; and that was brought about by President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, which the comrades in the Kremlin tried to match, vainly. There we find the one great American success—although President Reagan presumably did not expect that the competition in expenditure would bring down the Soviet system's economy so very promptly, and thus produce bitter discontent, beginning in Poland, that would break the dictatorship of the proletariat in every Russian-dominated country.

Both Republican and Democratic parties have failed to outline and advocate some intelligent and imaginative reform of America's part in international affairs. Both parties have submitted to the bullying of special-interest lobbies that put their particular concerns above the national interest. I am no enthusiast for the violent measures that raised President Bush his present height of popularity. But his star being in the ascendant, George Bush now enjoys the opportunity to purge American international policies of error. He seems inclined to do precisely that.

What ought he to do, specifically? Why, he ought to do precisely the opposite of what President Lyndon Johnson did. He ought not to engage in more tremendous military operations, and he ought to refrain from wasting American resources under the delusion that those resources are infinite. He ought to make clear to the American public a course of action in international affairs that does advance the international interest, but does not enlarge an American empire. He ought to rescue the shaping of foreign policy from overseas lobbyists, ideologues, dull wits of television commentators, newspaper columnists, and State Department bureaucrats.

The ideology of Marxism is perishing. Let us not raise up in its stead the ideology of Democracy. The world has room for a diversity of forms of government and a congeries of cultures. It is not Americans' duty to impose upon every people the levelling of egalitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and Earl Warren: one man, one vote. Here below, as in Our Father's house, there are many mansions; and although they are not all situated on the same floor, most people prefer their accustomed lodgings to some American "development." One thinks of Phyllis McGinley's poem "In Praise of Diversity."

Recalling then what surely was

The earliest bounty of Creation:

That not a blade among the grass

But flaunts its difference with elation,
Let us devoutly take no blame
If similar does not mean the same.

And grateful for the wit to see
Prospects through doors we cannot enter,
Ah! Let us praise Diversity
Which holds the world upon its center.
Praise *con amor*' or *furioso*
The large, the little, and the soso.

Praise what conforms and what is odd,
Remembering, if the weather worsens
Along the way, that even God
Is said to be three separate Persons
Then upright or upon the knee,
Praise Him that by His courtesy
For all our prejudice and pains,
Diverse His Creature still remains.

Let it be said, at the end of the twenty-first century, that being given providentially the mastery of the world, America encouraged every country to pursue its own humour.

