

Where the Left Goes Wrong on Foreign Policy

by Murray N. Rothbard

With every passing year, as memories of the Vietnam War fade from our nation's historical consciousness, the calls for America to reassert itself in the world arena grow more insistent. A proliferation of national-security think tanks and conservative publicists issue daily proclamations that all the world is a battleground between the United States and its Soviet adversary. The infrastructure of intervention, from Carter's Rapid Deployment Force to Reagan's 600-ship navy, forges ahead, unmindful of the legacy of our past interventionist follies.

When the Old Right Sounded (Almost) Like the New Left

Who is there to remind us of those follies? Now that neoconservatism has captured so many of America's liberals, it seems at times that the left, which can still round up a good crowd to demonstrate against aid to El Salvador, has a monopoly on the noninterventionist wisdom. But the left, too, is changing with the times; although it can always be counted on to oppose American support for rightist regimes, increasingly the left has abandoned the lessons of the 1960s to advocate its own, more "progressive" brand of intervention on behalf of radical regimes and social movements. Soon it may be true that only the libertarian heirs of the old right will stand for a principle that, before World War II, commanded the loyalty of the majority of the population.

In today's political lexicon, of course, the right favors a militant foreign policy of global intervention, whereas the left is still seen to advocate nonintervention and peace. But it was not always so. Indeed, from the mid-thirties down to the mid-fifties, the right was "isolationist," anti-interventionist and anti-militarist to the core, opposing American entry into World War II, the Marshall Plan, NATO, conscription, and the sending of U.S. troops to Korea. In contrast, before, during, and considerably after World War II, spokesmen for the left were ardent partisans of the interventionist policy of "collective security," a philosophy on which the United Nations was founded. The left proved as anxious to prosecute the Cold

War as it had been to join in the Second World War. It remained for later revisionist historians to realize that the left-wing campaign of Henry Wallace for the presidency in 1948, so ardently supported by the Communist Party, was mired in the same reverence for the global American Empire, and the same worship of collective security, that had long captivated liberals and centrists in American politics. This kinship was starkly revealed when Henry Wallace and Glen Taylor, the Progressive Party candidates on the 1948 ticket, later enthusiastically supported American entry into the Korean War.

It is ironic that in American politics, aside from a few Marxist sects and one or two independent journalists, the only forces strongly opposing the Korean War were the writers and politicians of the old, classical liberal right: Robert Taft, Kenneth Wherry, George Bender, and Howard Buffett in Congress; Felix Morley, Garet Garrett, and John T. Flynn among the writers and theorists. The liberals, including the *Nation* and *New Republic*, endorsed the Korean War and strongly attacked the conservative opposition.

The collective-security concept that so enchanted the old (pre-1965) left *sounded* pretty good: Each nation-state was viewed as if it were an individual, so that when one state "aggressed against" another, it became the duty of the governments of the world to step in and punish the "aggressor." In that way, the bitter and lengthy war in Korea became, in President Truman's famous phrase, a "police action," needing no declaration of war but simply an executive decision by the world's chief cop – the president of the United States – to be set into motion. All other "law-abiding" nations and responsible organs of opinion were supposed to join in.

The "isolationist" right saw several grave flaws in this notion of collective security and the analogy between states and individuals. One, of course, is that there is no world government or world cop, as there are national governments and police. Each state has its own war-making machine, many of which are quite awesome. When gangs of states wade into a conflict, they inexorably widen it. Every tinpot controversy, the latest and most blatant being the fracas in the Falkland Islands, invites other nations to decide which of the states is "the aggressor," and then leap in on the virtuous side. Every local squabble thus threatens to escalate into a global conflagration.

And since, according to collective security enthusiasts, the United States has apparently been divinely appointed to be the chief world policeman, it is thereby justified in throwing its massive weight into every controversy on the face of the globe.

The other big problem with the collective-security analogy is that, in contrast to spotting thieves and muggers, it is generally difficult or even impossible to single out uniquely guilty parties in conflicts between states. For although individuals have well-defined property rights that make someone else's invasion of that property a culpable act of aggression, the boundary lines of each state have scarcely been arrived at by just and proper means. Every state is born in, and exists

by, coercion and aggression over its citizens and subjects, and its boundaries invariably have been determined by conquest and violence. But in automatically condemning one state for crossing the borders of another, we are implicitly recognizing the validity of existing boundaries. Why should the boundaries of a state in 1982 be any more or less just than they were in 1972, 1932, or 1872? Why must they be automatically enshrined as sacred, so much so that a mere boundary crossing should lead every state in the world to force their citizens to kill or die?

No, far better and wiser is the old classical liberal foreign policy of neutrality and nonintervention, a foreign policy set forth with great eloquence by Richard Cobden, John Bright, the Manchester school and other "little Englanders" of the nineteenth century, by the Anti-Imperialist classical liberals of the turn of the twentieth century in Britain and the United States, and by the old right from the 1930s to the 1950s. Neutrality limits conflicts instead of escalating them. Neutral states cannot swell their power through war and militarism, or murder and plunder the citizens of other states.

Such were the lessons taught by the right and ignored by liberals and the left. By an irony of history, however, both sides were to reverse course after the Korean War. The reversal started with the right wing. The death of such leaders as Senator Robert Taft and Colonel Robert R. McCormick, powerful publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, and the retirement of others, including the resignation of Felix Morley from the weekly *Human Events* (which he had helped to found) in protest of its change of heart, provided an ideological and political vacuum for a new right to emerge and become triumphant in American conservatism. The influential biweekly *National Review*, founded in 1955, quickly captured the right wing with its ideology of militarism and global anticommunist crusades. The right was now firmly and even more fervently in the very same prowar, interventionist camp that had once been a monopoly of the left and center.

For a decade or more, the Cold War consensus was scarcely marred by a ripple of dissent. Ideologists and politicians vied with each other over who could be more anticommunist in their favored use of American power abroad. Kennedy and Nixon, during the 1960 campaign, hastened to accuse each other of being soft on various communist regimes; and it should not be forgotten that for John Kennedy, then the idol of liberals and many leftists, Camelot included sending the Green Berets into Vietnam and marching to the brink of nuclear war in order to force Soviet missiles out of Cuba.

Of course, it was Vietnam that turned the tide and led to the flowering of the new left in the late 1960s. While the student and antiwar rioters received the publicity, the most enduring new leftists were historians and scholars who challenged the consensus views of the Cold War by showing the enormous extent of US responsibility for East-West conflict. Most of the historians were students of William Appleman Williams, then at the University of Wisconsin. Williams established the new-left paradigms of anti-interventionism in foreign policy, and

attacks on corporate liberalism, or New Deal statist policies in domestic affairs. Though socialists and independent Marxists, Williams and his followers – David Horowitz, Ronald Radosh, James Weinstein, and others – acknowledged the lonely and prophetic struggle against war and intervention waged by the old right and praised the moderate anti-interventionism of Robert Taft and Herbert Hoover. *Ramparts* magazine, the vanguard of the new left, even gave space to classical liberal antiwar writers.

Moved by its opposition to the Vietnam War, the new left came to echo (largely unwittingly) the old right in attacking the imperial presidency and its growing executive dictation over foreign affairs. While the new leftists never understood or appreciated free-market economics, they showed a willingness to make common cause with libertarians, not only on foreign policy and civil liberties, but even in attacking centralized post-New Deal statism. Their occasional mutterings about local, "decentralized" communitarian socialism seemed vague and quixotic, but at least they appeared to appreciate the menace of the Leviathan State, at home and abroad.

Nowadays, however, the new-left interlude seems to be over in more ways than the disappearance of the much-vaunted counterculture or of student riots. On the domestic front, the antistatist insights of the new left are mostly forgotten, leaving the new left virtually indistinguishable from the old. Read *In These Times*, for example, the weekly published by the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) and edited by James Weinstein, a distinguished historian of the Progressive Era who seems to have abandoned scholarship for journalism. On domestic affairs, apart from superior intelligence, there is very little to distinguish *In These Times* from such old-left papers as the *Daily World*. There is the same concentration on local left-wing political action, and on the boring activities of various insurgent union locals. Ronald Radosh and other new-left scholars have joined the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (now the Democratic Socialists of America), the epitome of old leftism in its devotion to the Democratic Party and to the "Browderite" strategy (named after Earl Browder, former head of the Communist Party) of achieving socialism through gradual accretions of state power. Whatever happened to the blistering new-left critique of Progressivism and New Dealism? Whatever happened to the new left's repudiation of Browderism and centralized statism?

On foreign policy the current position of the left is far more ambivalent.¹ Certainly they are still opposed to the Cold War and to the current manifestations of US imperialism. William A. Williams recently wrote for the *Nation* a trenchant and hard-hitting attack on "Empire as a Way of Life." Once in a while, they still praise libertarian foreign policy and call explicitly for nonintervention. Thus, in his latest work, *America's Impasse*, Alan Wolfe, a Marxist historian and foreign-affairs expert close to the IPS, flatly urges a "noninterventionist foreign policy" and favorably mentions the libertarian foreign-policy work of Earl Ravenal.

And yet one wonders. First, of course, there is economics, never the new left's strong suit. While Williams certainly uncovered an important cause of American imperialism in the continuing drive to subsidize American exports, he unfortunately also contributed the egregious misconception of "free-trade imperialism." In this view, free trade is just another variant of imperialism, less messy perhaps but just as effectively imperialist as colonial conquest or the neocolonialist blend of political pressure, undercover intrigue, and economic aid. It seems impossible for socialists to understand the peaceable and mutually beneficial nature of free markets and free trade. Sir Norman Angell and other nineteenth-century liberals may have been overoptimistic in their paeans to the peaceful influence of free trade, but they grasped a vitally important point. The old motto "If Goods Can't Cross Borders, Troops Will" still makes sense. Oddly enough, the left recognizes this in a backhanded way when it argues, correctly, for freedom of East-West trade as a linchpin of détente. Why, then, does it seem incapable of extending that analysis to other countries? Why should the virtues of free trade not apply, for example, to relations between the United States and the Third World?

Free trade not only means unrestricted trade; it also means unsubsidized trade. One of the agreements between classical liberals and the new left used to be their opposition to foreign aid. Foreign aid is a system by which the American taxpayers are mulcted, in the name of national security or defense of the "free world," to subsidize US export companies and prop up client states (often ruled by dictators maintaining their regimes through systematic torture). It is, in that sense, a gigantic racket, and it was exposed with gusto by old-right classical liberals, and following them, by the new left.

But I am not sure that the left still opposes foreign aid with its former enthusiasm. It was not long ago that the left argued vehemently for continuing economic aid to the leftist regime in Nicaragua. And Alan Wolfe in his manifesto calls not for the scrapping of foreign aid, but rather for a "concerted effort to provide foreign aid through international agencies not committed to strategic and capitalist interests." Shades of Henry Wallace and the liberal imperialism of the 1940s! The left wants to overthrow American imperialism without touching one of its major props, foreign aid. The taxpayer is still to be robbed, but this time the looting is to be cleansed of "strategic and capitalist" interests through some sort of UN agency. Yet, as a good Marxist, Wolfe should surely know that there is no such thing as a neutral state agency, national or international, devoid of strategic interests or power politics. *Some* power group is going to control it, at the expense of the taxpayer and of genuine freedom of enterprise. And since the United States will be doing much of the taxing to support any such agency, it presumably will have at least something to say in the division of the loot.

In the same book, Alan Wolfe calls upon the United States to ratify the Law of the Sea Treaty as a first step toward "international economic negotiations that would establish trade and currency rules..." What Wolfe fails to tell us is that these "rules" would impose a permanent

cartel to restrict production of minerals and to raise their price on behalf of foreign governments. Private enterprise would be crippled or shut down altogether. Whatever the Law of the Sea Treaty is, it is scarcely consonant with the "noninterventionist foreign policy" that Wolfe says he is calling for.

Egalitarian welfare imperialism in behalf of Third World governments is explicitly called for by Marcus Raskin, cofounder of IPS, in his book *The Politics of National Security*. Raskin comes out for an "International Economic Order built on principles of equity, sovereign equality. . . and narrowing the gap between rich and poor nations." Again, it is scarcely noninterventionist to advocate a massive stripping of property from Americans and Western Europeans in order to subsidize Third World governments, a process that would kill the Western goose and lay virtually no golden eggs for Third World peoples, who will not find prosperity until they make it for themselves.

Free-market economist P.T. Bauer is far more cogent about what such an international economic order would entail:

It is now widely urged that differences in income and living standards should be reduced or eliminated not only within countries but between them, and indeed even globally. Hence the proposals for a New International Economic Order approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Because of the enormous and stubborn differences between peoples, policies designed to equalize their living standards would require world government with totalitarian powers. Such a government, to be equal to its ambitions, would be even more coercive and brutal than the totalitarian governments of individual countries.

It is encouraging that Raskin, as does Wolfe, "look(s) with respect at such men as Robert Taft who asserted a noninterventionist road for the United States." But it is difficult to see Robert Taft doing anything but spinning in his grave at the thought of a scheme for world egalitarianism through the use of coercive government.

Another piece of massive global intervention the IPS people seem to be endorsing is some form of world monetary planning. IPS cofounder Richard J. Barnet calls for the "hard work of developing a new international monetary system." What this is supposed to be remains highly vague, although it is scarcely reassuring to find Alan Wolfe urging a reconstruction of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and a return to their "original purpose." These Bretton Woods institutions imposed dollar imperialism on the world, by tying other currencies to an increasingly inflated dollar – in short, these institutions brought in their wake chronic and aggravated world inflation. Wolfe's "original purpose" provides no balm; he chides the United States for rejecting proposals during the 1950s that would have been far more inflationary, on the grounds that the world would have "grown" (i.e., inflated) even faster. Wolfe's blueprint would give one

agency the power to generate a worldwide inflation. Not only is his scheme pernicious; it hardly squares with the ideal of nonintervention.

Another disquieting aspect of left opinion is a tendency to cast a blind eye toward the dictatorial or totalitarian character of the socialist regimes that it tends to favor. Most on the left think of themselves, and probably sincerely, as "democratic socialists," as believers in a blend of socialism with democracy and freedom of speech and opinion. Libertarians hold that vision to be self-contradictory, and democracy, freedom of speech, and socialism to be ultimately incompatible. But, be that as it may, one would expect democratic socialists to be unsparing in their denunciations of violations of freedom and democracy in socialist countries.

Sadly, the left's record has scarcely been reassuring on this issue. The hysterical reaction of many leftists to Susan Sontag's belated discovery of communist totalitarianism is only the latest instance of this myopia. Fortunately, there is little remaining of the old left's adulation of Stalin, and it is difficult for anyone, even Russians, to get particularly excited about Brezhnev or whoever his stolid successor may be. But romantic revolutionaries like Castro and Ho Chi Minh are another story altogether, and, despite the salutary criticisms of Cuba by Ronald Radosh, we have seen numerous apologias by the left of the Castro regime, by Barnett and others of the Vietnamese regime, and, in earlier years, by Gareth Porter (an ex-IPSer) of the odious Pol Pot regime in Cambodia.

Take, for example, the monthly *Democratic Left*, organ of the Democratic Socialists of America. In it we see a laudatory article about the Cuban revolution by Michael Germinal Rivas, a Cuban émigré who chaired the Hispanic Commission of the DSCO ("Twenty Years After the Cuban Revolution," February 1979). Rivas is certainly not completely uncritical of the regime, but we find that "while remaining critical of some aspects of the revolutionary process, there has been increased appreciation... for the undeniable accomplishments of the Revolution" among the younger Cuban exiles, which clearly include Rivas himself. Delighted that Castro has been willing of late to open a dialogue with Cuban exiles as well as with the United States, Rivas writes glowingly of Cuban schools, hospitals, and fishing fleets. As Rivas simperingly puts it, there is "the Cuba of people very proud of building a modern, more equitable society in the face of very difficult odds." Rivas goes on about "positive elements in the revolutionary process," hopes for the future, new signs of pragmatism in the regime, and all the rest. He even claims that democracy is on the rise, since local people are allowed to discuss such issues as street lighting and garbage collection.

Well, suppose that someone in the 1930s wrote similarly – as many journalists and visitors in fact did – of the great achievements of the Mussolini and Hitler revolutions, how they made the trains run on time, how there was a new spirit of hope in the revolutionary process, and so on. How would we – indeed how would our democratic socialists – feel about that? They would treat such guff as naïve and

repellent apologetics for a detestable regime, whether the specific "achievements" were true or not. Why then do they use a different standard for socialist regimes?

All this is not to excuse the equally repellent apologetics of neoconservatives and right-wingers in glossing over the brutalities committed by right-wing regimes, such as Chile or South Africa. A focus only on their economic achievements – which are far more plausible than the supposed socialist triumphs – while ignoring or glossing over the brutalities and oppression should earn the equal contempt of all people who are truly devoted to personal freedom. Double standards by right or left – or by any group – should receive our condemnation. The Kirkpatrickes who try to maintain that left-wing torture is bad while right-wing torture is okay, are no more contemptible than the leftwingers who would, implicitly or explicitly, maintain the contrary.

It is true that logically one's friendliness or hostility to a foreign regime has no relation to one's maintenance of an interventionist or noninterventionist foreign policy. In theory, someone may love one regime and hate another and yet not advocate that the United States aid and subsidize the one or move coercively against the other. In practice, however, relaxing our standards of truth and freedom for or against a regime can easily lead to an interventionist position. There is, for example, the left's record of favoring positive intervention – US aid – in the affairs of socialist Nicaragua, along with the blackmailing claim that without such aid the regime would turn Marxist. Take the way Eldon Kenworthy handles Nicaragua in *In These Times* (February 24/March 9, 1982). In this whitewash, the regime appears to be interested almost solely in growing rice and beans and in building latrines. Nicaraguan rule, claims Kenworthy, is not totalitarian.

In fact, in a breathtaking statement, Kenworthy maintains that the Nicaraguan state "controls less than it needs to, to make the country run." One grows glad that Professor Kenworthy is not himself in power. As for the outlawing of the publication of any "false news" that might harm the economy, this is brusquely dismissed as called for by the economic emergency. (Why is it that socialist regimes always seem to have such "emergencies"?) As Kenworthy sums it up: "Given the economic crisis confronting Nicaragua – shared by all Central America – such emergency measures do not seem out of line." I suppose whether or not they seem "out of line" depends on one's perspective: whether from inside Managua or sitting in capitalist comfort in Ithaca, New York.

To its credit, *The Nation* is not so ready to ignore the growing tyranny. The thirty-day suspension of civil liberties and the declaration of a state of emergency, it writes, "should sadden all those who think of themselves as friends" of the Nicaraguan revolution. The Nicaraguan justification – this time the US threat rather than economics – the *Nation* considers real, but not enough to require the suspension of liberties. The magazine points out that the revolution will be hampered by this imposed silence and the covering up of abuses of the

Sandinista regime. Fair enough, but perhaps the *Nation* will one day rethink its friendship to the revolution, and come to see that, in the good old Marxian phrase, "it is no accident" that socialism has been accompanied by increasing tyranny. The *Nation* so far refuses to accept the contention of the opponents of the regime that despotism is inevitable, given the centralizing, socialist ideology of the Sandinistas; the magazine instead adopts the cop-out that "by imperiling the Nicaraguan government, they [the opponents] forced the worst from the Sandinistas. They are partners with the Sandinistas in deserving blame." By adopting the convenient "we are all murderers" theme, the left, as it has done repeatedly, lets those actually committing foul deeds off the hook. Again, how would the *Nation* itself treat a journal that used these very words, say, about the current Chilean or Salvadoran regime, let alone those of Mussolini and Hitler?

Anyone who thinks that the specter of possible left interventionism is exaggerated should ponder the point that the left has led the mainstream in the United States in urging intervention against the right-wing government of South Africa. And suppose that the remarkable, recently stated aspiration of the Reagan administration should come true, and Fidel Castro should agree to a *détente* in the Caribbean in return for massive US governmental aid; does anyone think that the left would rise in protest?

Despite occasional obeisances to the libertarian and indeed American tradition of nonintervention, then, it looks very much as if the current left has betrayed much of the analysis of the new left and has at least partially returned to the Browderism and the collective-security notions of the old. Today the left still considers itself in opposition to US imperialism. But when the veteran Yugoslav democratic socialist Bogdan Denitch, in an important foreign and defense policy thinkpiece in *Democratic Left* (December 1981), calls for "a nonimperialist US that could ally itself with democratic struggles for self-determination and popular rule," and for allying itself with "popular forces" in South West Africa, South Africa, Angola,

Ethiopia, and Latin America, one realizes that the left has a long way to go to reach a policy of nonintervention. One wonders, in fact, whether the left is at all prepared to accept a foreign policy in which the United States government allies itself with *no one* and retires from the world scene, leaving all international encounters to the private realm of free trade, travel, and cultural and social exchange. For that is what a policy of genuine

noninterventionism and anti-imperialism would mean: a world in which the US government no longer tries to push other people around, on behalf of any cause, anywhere.

Note

1. In the current "left" I do not include either the *New Republic*, which is so

interventionist that it now may be termed "left neoconservative," nor the various febrile Marxist-Leninist sects. This leaves mainly the *Nation*, *In These Times*, and the IPS people as the major left forces.