

A NEW AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM?

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Is there a serious prospect of a resurgence of isolationist sentiment in the United States?

The very fact that the question can be posed a year into the Reagan administration is in itself an ominous portent. For whatever else the election of Ronald Reagan may have meant, there can be no doubt that it resulted from a great popular demand for a more assertive American role in the world generally and in particular a more determined effort to contain Soviet expansionism.

This demand was not imposed upon the American people from above. On the contrary, it welled up from below, forcing even Jimmy Carter in the last year of his Presidency to reverse his position on the character of the Soviet Union and on the question of American power. Having at the beginning of his Presidency declared that the Soviet Union was no longer necessarily expansionist, he announced toward the end that the invasion of Afghanistan had changed his mind, and having been elected in 1976 on a promise to cut defense spending by at least five million dollars, three years

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later he (who had once also promised that he would never lie to the American people) was boasting that he had broken both promises by increasing defense spending throughout his term as President.

One can, and in the interest of sanity one even should, poke fun at Carter for these pious fatuities. But at the same time, one should also recognize that he was responding, as any politician in a democracy must, to an aroused electorate. And the electorate in 1979 was certainly aroused. According to the pollster Daniel Yankelovich, 50 percent of the American people interpreted the invasion of Afghanistan as the consequence of Soviet military superiority over the United States, and 78 percent saw it as part of an effort to gain «more influence over the oil-producing countries of the Middle East.»

Given this diagnosis of Soviet power and Soviet intentions, it is not in the least surprising that public opinion now favored a more determined American response in the form of a military buildup. Here the figures are even more impressive. After the invasion of Afghanistan, an incredible 74 percent of the American people came out for an increase in defense spending. This level of support declined as the shock of the invasion receded. But it remained in the still unprecedentedly high region of 60 percent, which, explains why Ronald Reagan as President was easily able to push a defense budget of over 200 billion dollars, the largest in our history, through a Congress which had accepted cuts in almost every other area.

It is important to recognize that neither alarm over Soviet intentions nor support for higher defense budgets was or is the product of a passing mood. Popular alarm over Soviet aggressiveness had been growing even before Afghanistan, and despite the assurance of academics like Stanley Hoffman that the Soviet Union had become a status-quo power, and of political leaders like Cyrus Vance that the Soviet

leaders had «dreams and aspirations» similar to our own for peace and security. Support for increases in defense spending had also been growing, and with similar steadiness, over the years, again despite the relentless attacks both by academics and politicians on our putatively swollen arsenals.

The figures tell an unambiguous story. In the early 1970's, only 11 percent of the American people favored increases in defense spending, but that proportion rose year by year as the decade wore on, climbing to 42 percent even before the invasion of Afghanistan, and then (as I have already said) reaching record highs afterward. Nor was Jimmy Carter the only politician who responded to this changing public temper by adjusting his own position on the issue. In 1972 the hawkish position in the Senate was to favor only small defense cuts; in 1979, the dovish position was to favor only a 3 percent increase in defense spending. In 1981, only 4 Senators out of 100 voted against the 200-billion dollar defense budget proposed by Ronald Reagan.

This is, then, a clear consensus in the United States on the reality of the Soviet threat and on the need for a determined American response in the form of a military build-up aimed at restoring the balance of power and perhaps — though this is increasingly doubtful — even restoring American superiority.

But if so solid a consensus exists, how can anyone talk seriously about a possible resurgence of isolationism?

The answer is that if by isolationism we mean a withdrawal or even a severe contraction of American attention, concern, and involvement in the affairs of the world, then no such development can be expected. No one advocates it and no one believes, not even subliminally, that it is possible for the United States to cut itself off from the rest of the world.

But if by isolationism we mean a policy that might more precisely be described as unilateralism or even as neutralism, then I think we can begin speaking of a possible resurgence.

The most fertile soil for such a resurgence is on the Left in which I include many of the people nowadays called liberals, even though their connection with the liberalism of even 20 years ago is at best tenuous. Among these people, isolationism takes the form of downplaying the Soviet threat and suggesting, or even stating explicitly, that the real danger we face comes not from the Soviet Union but from the United States. If there ever really was a threat from the Soviet Union, it no longer exists. The Soviet Union in this perspective is seen as defensive and beset by internal weaknesses. The idea that it seeks to extend its hegemony is dismissed as an illusion perpetrated by the military-industrial complex for the sole purpose of increasing its own power and wealth. It follows that here is no need for an American military buildup either in Europe or anywhere else. Indeed, the real danger we face lies in just such a buildup. As a spokesman for this point of view once put it: «The Committee on the Present Danger is a greater danger to this country than the Soviet Union.»

On the Right in which I include the group now known as the neoconservatives, even though its views, especially on foreign policy, are almost identical with the standard liberal position of the Kennedy years — the Soviet threat is seen as greater than it ever was. Certainly it is seen as greater than it was in the 40's and 50's when the United States enjoyed a strategic nuclear superiority so great, and a technologically qualitative edge in conventional weaponry so impressive, that they more than compensated for the quantitative conventional edge enjoyed by the Soviets. Having over the past ten years retained their numerical superiority in conventional forces, having nearly caught up in quality as well, and having achieved parity or perhaps better in strategic forces, the Soviets have — according to this view — become

bolder in the use of their power. They have dared to send Cuban and East German surrogates into Africa and the Middle East; and they have dared to send their own troops into Afghanistan. But beyond the direct military use of their power, they have made effective political use of it as well, frightening millions of West Europeans into protesting against all efforts to respond and resist.

It was triumph of this perspective in American public opinion that swept Ronald Reagan into the White House and has just given us the largest defense budget in our history. The last thing in the world one would have expected was that many who had struggled for years to establish this perspective — to call attention to the rising Soviet threat and to marshal an adequate American response — would within 10 months of Reagan's election be wondering aloud whether the United States ought to withdraw from NATO. Yet this is just the question we now hear being asked by writers on the editorial pages of the **Wall Street Journal**, which has been one of the great centers for the exposition and propagation of the new perspective. It is just this question we now hear being raised by other staunch proponents of the new perspective like William Safire of the New York **Times**, Walter Laqueur of **Commentary**, and even Henry Kissinger himself.

What has happened to make a rekindling of the dying members of left-wing isolationism possible on the side, and on the other side, to push the likes of Safire, Laqueur, and Kissinger toward the idea of withdrawal from NATO?

The answer, of course, is the response of Western Europe to the new perspective itself as embodied in the attitudes and policies of the Reagan administration. So far as the Left is concerned, it is obvious why the millions who have taken to the streets of every West European capital to protest against the planned deployment of the new intermediate-range nuclear missiles would give great heart to their political counterparts in the United States who also profess to

believe that the problem is not the Soviet missiles already in place but the American missiles still on paper. Thus far the American version is smaller and more ideologically restrained than the so-called peace movement in Europe. Thus far it speaks mainly of the horrors of nuclear war and of the need for arms control. But the safest prediction one can make is that it will grow larger and that, as it does, it will become bolder in calling for various forms of accommodation to Soviet power up to and including unilateral disarmament by the West.

So much, as I say, is obvious. What may be less obvious is that the millions who have taken to the streets of West Europe in the last few months have had a profound effect on those of us whose alarm over the Soviet Union has reached nearly apocalyptic proportions. When in response to the invasion of Afghanistan the West Europeans showed a great reluctance to go along even with the less than world-shaking sanctions proposed by the Carter administration, many of us blamed the vasillations and uncertainties of American policy under that administration. We said that there was no use hectoring the Europeans about increasing their defense budgets or following the American lead in Afghanistan and elsewhere. We said that the Europeans could see all too clearly that the balance of power was shifting from the United States to the Soviet Union and that they were responding, as nations always and inevitably do, to what the Soviets call the correlation of forces. They were tilting away from us and toward Moscow because the very ground on which they stood was tilting in that direction. The answer was not to send American emissaries to Bonn and the other West European capitals to extract promises of increased defense budgets. Such promises could not and would not be kept so long as the United States refused to show the way with a serious effort to rearm and restore the overall balance.

Then came Reagan and just such a serious effort was begun. Yet contrary to what we expected, the reaction in

Europe was not relief, let alone enthusiasm. It was an outburst of protest. Against what? Not against the thousands of Soviet tanks on the German frontier but against the deployment of a weapon whose only purpose is to defend against those tanks. Not against the actual deployment by the Soviet Union of more accurate nuclear missiles threatening every major city in West Europe, but against the **planned** deployment by the United States of missiles whose only purpose is to neutralize that threat. To make matters more bizarre, the idea that NATO should deploy both the neutron weapon and the new missiles originally came not from Washington but from Bonn.

Thus many of us who thought that a resurgence of American power and resolve would stiffen the European spine are now beginning to think we were wrong. We have begun to wonder how much longer the United States can go on begging other people to allow it to defend them. If Ronald Reagan were not in the White House, he himself would undoubtedly be asking that question.

There are those who think that an American withdrawal from NATO might provide just the shock the Europeans need. No longer able to depend on the United States for their defense, they would pull themselves together and provide for their own defense. Since an American withdrawal may soon be impossible to prevent, I hope and pray that this is so. Yet I have my doubts. To me it seems more likely that an American withdrawal would lead to the triumph of what might be called Red Vichyism everywhere in Western Europe.

I also disagree with those who think that a withdrawal of the American commitment to the defense of Western Europe would be good for the United States. The people who take this view have no clear idea as to the American role in a post-NATO world. Some talk vaguely of reorienting American policy toward the Pacific; others speak of a hemispheric defense; others speak of a series of shifting bilateral alliances;

still others think of going it alone. If, they say, we can do business with the Soviet Union itself, not to mention its East European satellites, why could we not do business just as well with a Finlandized West Europe? Why, for that matter, should we endanger ourselves for the sake of preventing the Soviets from taking over the oil fields of the Persian Gulf? If we were no longer committed to the defense of West Europe, we would no longer have a vital interest in preventing the Soviets from seizing control of the oil fields, to whose defense we committed ourselves in the first place mainly because such control would give the Soviets the power to enforce their political will on Europe. As for us, we are much less dependent on the Persian Gulf than the Europeans, and in any case we should buy oil from the Russians just as well as we do from the Saudis, and perhaps even on better economic terms. In the absence of far-flung commitments, moreover, we could cut back radically on our defenses.

Seductively appealing thought this vision may be to many American eyes, I do not believe that it represents anything really substantial. Quite apart from other objections that could easily be raised, I find it hard to believe that if Western Europe were Finlandized or Vichyized, the United States could long survive as a free society. Having finally abandoned its commitment to all the other countries making up the free world, its commitment to its own free institutions would inevitably grow weaker, while its vulnerability to external pressures would inevitably become greater. In a Finlandized world, the United States would ultimately be Finlandized as well.

Can anything be done to revert this universal calamity? Let me propose the shocking thought that the answer rests largely with the West Europeans. What can be done by the United States is already being done. We have come to our senses as a nation about the Soviet threat. We have begun to take action against it. I would be the first to agree that we could do much more than we are doing. Our policy under

Reagan still lacks the clarity and the consistency that are needed. Instead of asserting ourselves forcefully in the Persian Gulf, we are appeasing the Saudis. After a promising beginning, we have faltered in our action against the Soviet-backed insurgencies in Central America. Nor do I think we were right to capitulate to the European pressure for arms-control negotiations that can lead to nothing but disappointed hopes or the ratification of Soviet gains. Worst of all, our response to Poland has been hesitant and uncertain though, of course, it has been the quintessence of purposeful resolve as compared with what the other members of NATO have said and done.

But despite these defects and deficiencies, the United States under Reagan has begun to turn the corner and to take the first steps in the direction of a new strategy of containment. Those of us here in the United States who had advocated such a policy did not dream as little as two years ago that even this much would be possible so soon. We will continue to push for more, but we may yet have to devote most of our energies to making certain that the gains we have achieved are not rescinded or altogether lost in the months ahead as a result of budgetary and other pressures which have already begun to chip away at the popular support for increased defense spending.

Whether or not we succeed will depend to a considerable extent on what now happens in Western Europe. In recent months, Europeans who support NATO and who also support the decision to deploy the new intermediate-range missiles have been telling their American friends that the so-called peace movement does not represent the majority of West Europeans. They point to public-opinion polls showing that the United States is more popular than ever, and that support for NATO is at record levels.

We doubt this is so, but Americans may be forgiven for wondering why the silent majority is so silent. More to the

point, why are the political leaders who claim to represent this silent majority so timid and so tepid in their response to the pacifists and neutralists and their fellow-travellers all over Europe? Why are they not answered forcefully? Why do we hear so much about the dangers of nuclear war and so little about the dangers of Finlandization? Why is there so little talk about the freedom and the prosperity - and the peace - that have been enjoyed by more Europeans than ever before in their history as a result of the American shield? Why are those who for all practical purposes have already reconciled themselves to Soviet domination of Western Europe allowed to seize the moral high ground from those Europeans who believe that the freedom they enjoy must be defended - even if the alternative is a continent of Finlands or Hungarys rather than a continent of Czechoslovakias or Polands? Why do the political heirs of Churchill stand mute when the contemporary avatars of Chamberlain shake the political heavens with their contemptibly self-righteous wails and whines?

So long as our European counterparts remain silent or only stammer defensively while the neutralists and the appeasers and the Red Vichyites dominate the European air, we in the United States who wish to resist the rising tide of American neutralism and isolationism will be unable to do so indefinitely. What I am saying is that in the sphere of ideas the responsibility for the defense of Europe against the threat of Soviet imperialism has **already** shifted to Europe itself. If Europe is unable to defend itself ideologically; if it is unable to explain to itself why the life it now leads is worth making sacrifices for; if it cannot make itself understand why the willingness to risk war is the only way to avert war and surrender alike; if it cannot remember the lessons of the 1930's and teach these lessons to its children, then we in the United States will be unable to go on with our commitment to the defense of Europe.

I say this not as a threat but as a prediction. Vast

numbers of Americans are to use the words more and more of them have been using themselves «sick and tired» of begging other people for the privilege of defending them. They are beginning to ask aloud why they should be risking nuclear war with the Soviet Union for the sake of other nations who seem oblivious to the Soviet threat, and who constantly berate them for exaggerating the evils of the Communist system. Only recently I heard a prominent German intellectual blame the rise of the anti-nuclear movement in Europe on the alarmism of groups like the Committee on the Present Danger and the Committee for the Free World; evidently we frightened this movement into being. I have, to put it mildly, grave doubts about this analysis, but I have no doubt whatever that the resurgence of neutralism and isolationism in the United States can be blamed to a considerable extent on the idea that there is not enough difference between the East and the West to warrant the risk of resistance.

If so much were not at stake here-if **everything** were not at stake here - even many Americans like myself would take a bitter satisfaction in this turning of the tables. But believing as we do that the future of freedom everywhere would be jeopardized by an American withdrawal from NATO, and believing as we do that only a revitalized European commitment to the common defense of freedom can prevent such a withdrawal, we are forced to forgo any vindictive satisfaction and to urge and hope and pray that Europe will come to its senses soon enough to save the situation for us all.