American Power and World Responsibility

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THERE is a fateful significance in the fact that America's coming of age coincides with that period of world history when the paramount problem is the creation of some kind of world community. The world must find a way of avoiding complete anarchy in its international life; and America must find a way of using its great power responsibly. These two needs are organically related; for the world problem cannot be solved if America does not accept its full share of responsibility in solving it.

Analogies between individual and collective life have only limited application. It may therefore seem dubious to speak of America "coming of age." Nations do not have well defined periods of infancy, adolescence and maturity. Nevertheless, the analogy is more than usually applicable to American life. The period of our infancy can be clearly defined. We were once a small and weak nation, and we seemed justified in that period to abjure all "entangling alliances" while the nation established itself upon a vast and virgin continent. There followed a period of adolescence, (roughly between the Civil War and the first World War) in which we exhibited a typically adolescent disparity between growing physical strength and lack of social experience. Our relations to the world were tentative and diffident. We were furthermore relatively "innocent" rather than virtuous. Our domestic life was free from great social tensions because an expanding economy and a retreating frontier solved or mitigated all our social problems. Our two vast ocean-moats gave us external security. These simple solutions for vexing problems prompted us to underestimate the difficulties of all problems of human togetherness and gave both its political and moral thought an overtone of adolescent sentimentality. Nor was it free of adolescent self-righteousness; for it was unmindful (as young people prove to be) of the favored circumstances which had contributed to its virtues; and it did not understand the difference between untempted innocency and the virtue which has surmounted temptation. From this strain of self-righteousness was drawn that dubious note in our foreign policy, according to which the other nations of the world appeared in the guise of "city slickers" who would, if we came too close to them, corrupt our morals and take advantage of our guilelessness.

If we have now "come of age," we have done so only in the sense that it is gradually dawning upon us that we are really a very powerful nation, perhaps the most powerful upon earth. We have not had sufficient experience in the complexities of international relations to have lost all remnants of our adolescent vices. They will still rise to plague us. And we may add a few vices of youthful maturity to them. Thus we may add a heedlessness toward the problems of the community of nations, which is derived from our sense of power, to a feeling of irresponsibility, which was derived from our favored geographic position. The real peril to the soul of America lies in the fact that both our power and our favored position make the establishment of a system of mutual security less urgent for us than for other nations. Though we speak of this war as a war of survival, our survival is not at stake in the same sense that it has been for Russia, Britain, China and the smaller nations. We would have had to come to terms with a tyrannical world over-

lord in the event of an Axis victory, and would have lost our soul in the process; but our actual survival as a free nation would not have been at stake in the same way as that of the other nations. It is this fact which makes it quiet impossible to overcome the impulse toward irresponsibility in our national life as absolutely as we might desire. The fires of history have not, and will not, purge us as completely as they have some other nations. Nor will the lash of fear support the gentler persuasion of conscience to the same degree as in the experience of others.

Isolationism Impossible

Meanwhile, the world has grown smaller while we have grown more powerful. The advances of a technical civilization have made our continental security almost as untenable as Britain's island security. Britain has finally learned that she cannot withdraw from the continent and we may have learned that we cannot withdraw from the world. Yet there is a difference between the width of the channel and the ocean, and that geographic difference is almost perfectly matched by the difference between the British and the American temper toward world problems. We have become successively involved in two wars from which we (or many of us) believed we could remain aloof, if only this or that policy had been different. The first World War should have proved to us that our fancied continental security was in reality partly parasitic upon the power of the British Navy.

More exactly, it was a security presaged upon the ability of British policy to maintain a semblance of order in the world by a European balance of power. When this balance was challenged we knew ourselves to be insecure. We chose (in terms of adolescent sentimentality) to justify our participation in the first World War as an effort to make the world "safe for democracy." We would have done better to admit that it was merely an effort to make the world safe. Order, mutually secured, is the first purpose of the international, as of every other, community. Democracy is an ideal form of such order; and is not easily established. Our disillusionment in failing to establish world democracy contributed to our cynical irresponsibility after the war. Cynicism is, in fact, the usual reaction of disappointed sentimentalists. It is always wrong to interpret political tasks purely in terms of either ideal ends or of purely egoistic ones. No political program ever completely lacks the inspiration of the one and the corruption of the other. But the substance of it deals with minimal standards of mutual justice and security.

Our reaction from our first large-scale effort on the world scene was so deep as to have amounted to a psychosis. And the effects of the psychosis were so great that we refused to recognize the realities of the international scene when the second crisis came. We might still be in a mood of withdrawal and irresponsibility had it not suited the strategy of the dictators to awaken us from our slumbers, though it must be admitted that our sleep had been for some time uneasy and full of nightmares.

The two wars coming after each other have proved that our continental isolation does not guarantee our safety. In profounder terms they have proved: (1) that balance of power politics is not sufficient to guarantee the world's peace; (2) that in any event a European balance of power is certainly unable to maintain order in a total world (Europe having lost its position as the world's strategic center); and (3) that even if the first two points were not true, Britain does not have sufficient power to manipulate a balance of power alone.

Thus the world faces the task of finding more adequate instruments for preventing anarchy while we must recognize that both conscience and interest compel our participation in this task. We may not have learned as much as some other nations during this tragic era; but there are indications that we have learned enough to know that we cannot completely evade this issue. The immediate symbol of the difference between our mood now and twenty-five years ago is that the Republican party is no longer solidly isolationist.

Our greatest peril today is not the temptation to a complete withdrawal from world responsibility. There will indeed be some impulses in that direction; and they will be supported not merely by a conscienceless indifference toward the plight of the world community, but also by the secularized and sentimentalized conscience of those Christians who are so affronted by the moral ambiguities of world politics, as of all politics. They therefore prefer immoral irresponsibility and inaction to the moral taint which is involved in all poltical action. But we have gone through too much experience to make the isolationism of 1920-40 a live option. It is more likely that we will combine the impulse to dominate the world, to which we will be prompted by our undoubted power, with the impulse toward withdrawal, to which we are prompted by our comparative geographic security. To be sure our power is not great enough to give us security; even as our isolation is not complete enough to guarantee it. But our temptation lies in the fact that we have just enough power to make the policy of seeking security by an unmutual expression of power seem plausible; just as we have enough continental isolation to obscure the urgency of the problem of mutual security, which other nations feel so strongly.

Isolationist Imperialism

The danger that we will combine two contradictory impulses in our life in a compound of isola-

tionist imperialism is heightened by the fact that such a policy nicely combined the diffidence of our recent adolescence with the pride of our mature strength. Already the signs are multiplying that the isolationists of yesterday are the imperialists of today. They will not yield any of the strategic points which we have secured in the world conflict. They even want more air and naval bases. They know that we have the economic power to maintain a larger air force and navy than any one else; and they intend to do it. But they do not intend to make any international commitments which would bring our strength into mutual relations with other nations, either great or small.

We need not assume that the present administration will give itself to such ideas and ideals. Its orientation runs, on the whole, in the opposite direction. But there are powerful opposition forces in Congress and in the country working partly consciously, and partly unconsciously, toward isolationist imperialism. Furthermore, some military ideas, developed under the aegis of the administration, fit into the general imperialist pattern. The fact that we disavow "imperialism" consciously is no guarantee against the expression of this impulse to dominate with our power, without regard to the rights and interests of the rest of the world. It is one of the perils of adolescence and early maturity to display power without full regard for the consequences.

Sometimes our more idealistic newspapermen and some of our religious leaders piously inform Britain that we are through with imperialism forever, meaning thereby that we have a critical attitude toward traditional imperialism, with all of its stereotyped marks of identification. But the same newspapermen may give voice to sentiments of isolationist imperialism in the next moment; and some religious leaders of sentimental persuasion will regard any tolerable solution of the world's problems with as much disfavor as British imperialism, because it would fail to conform to the ideal requirements of world brotherhood. If I were British, I would find nothing quite so difficult to bear as these American criticisms, levelled against British policy, from sources which have little or no understanding of the greater perils of American imperialism.

One reason why isolationist imperialism is, in fact, so great a danger is because the more "idealistic" forces of America, whether secular or religious, are inclined to plan for a world community in such abstract terms as not to engage the actual historical realities at all. Their plans are so completely irrevelant to the real problems which the world faces and so far from the actual possibilities of a tolerable system of mutual security, that the realists can afford to disregard them. Thus our policy moves toward a cynical expression of American power, while our avowed war aims are as pure as gold.

It would be fatal to assume that the wiser and more sensitive forces of America have already lost the battle against an irresponsible expression of American power in the post-war world. But if the battle is to be won, we will have to draw upon profounder insights of our Christian faith than is our wont. Nothing is quite so important for the Anglo-Saxon world in general, and for America in particular, as the knowledge that it is not possible to build a community without the manipulation of power and that it is not possible to use power and remain completely "pure." We must not have an easy conscience about the impurities of politics or they will reach intolerable proportions. But we must also find religious means of easing the conscience, or our uneasy conscience will tempt us into irresponsibility.

Most Urgent Problem

The world's most urgent problem is the establishment of a tolerable system of mutual security for the avoidance of international anarchy. Such a system will not meet all the requirements of perfect justice for decades to come. There is a sense in which it will probably never meet them. Yet it is possible to avoid both a tyrannical unification of the world and the alternative anarchy, if each nation is ready to make commitments, commensurate with its power. If America fails to do this, the world is lost for decades to come. In that case we would gain little satisfaction from the knowledge that some of our idealists had perfectly splendid schemes for the federation of the world, which would have been adopted if only the nations had been wise or good enough to recognize their worth.

But America must not fail. This will be the great battle of the next decades. It will not be easy to win, but it is certainly not yet lost. We may be grateful that the religious leadership of America has, with its secular leadership, been chastened by history. The pronouncements on world problems by the Federal Council Commission on a Just and Durable Peace have become increasingly realistic and continue to stress America's responsibility to the world community. Other unofficial groups, such as the Committee on War and Peace under the chairmanship of Bishop McConnell are making the same emphasis. We must find a way of placing the power of America behind the task of world order. We must overcome the impulse toward domination toward which we are tempted by our power and the impulse toward irresponsibility to which we are tempted by our youth and comparative security.