

Decline but not fall

Good intentions help – sometimes

What I left out of that jaundiced survey of American history is that the American revolution did indeed bring hope and inspiration to the world at large. While keeping their hands clean from European politics, they contributed much to establishing the international economic and social infrastructure which is now the basic element of the vast United Nations system. In due course they set a precedent for peaceful coexistence with a weaker neighbor. They promoted regulations for quarantine, for agriculture, arbitration and other forms of peaceful conflict resolution. Roosevelt's Trade Agreements Act of 1934 was the precursor of GATT. Without admitting it the US Navy joined the British in maintaining the freedom of the seas.

The conviction of exceptionalism leads Americans in alternative directions. The intentions are noble enough. The problem is with prescribing moral abstractions from their own experience for a world more complex than New England. Their moral absolutism gives them the strength of crusaders when we need it, but it leaves them open to the charge of irresponsibility and hypocrisy. Self-determination was good for Czechs and Poles in 1919 but it tore Europe apart – and it did not seem to apply to black Americans.

With a force so strong there are bound to be some good things we applaud and some bad ones we deplore. In the part the US played in recreating world order after WW II, the good things certainly prevail. Roosevelt's idea was that the world would be run by the great powers, one in particular. But fortunately we lesser powers changed that. However, the UN system would never have got on its feet if the US had not acted for several decades as a kind of surrogate UN. They alone at that time had the economic resources to float the IMF, the World Bank and provide the bulk of the UN force in Korea. By the Marshall Plan they got the Europeans on their feet and contained the challenge of communism from the East.

The Americans made mistakes, of course. They pursued their own interests, as we all did, but with a sense of responsibility for the welfare of the international community that has been missing of late. It was to their advantage to open the channels of trade and exchange, but one must ask in whose interest it would have been to perpetuate the barriers that had led to stagnation and war. None of us was adequately aware of the plight of the Third World, mostly hidden within the old empires. Canadians, like Americans, were sincerely beguiled by the trickle-down theory of a prosperous world economy and we thought that self-government alone would do wonders. It is easier to see now that, as Robin Winks has put it: "The US transferred abroad its consumptive technology, but it did not transfer its productive technology. If its absolute contribution to the less-developed countries was positive, its relative contribution was negative. It created an *imperialism of interdependence*." That was very hard to foresee in 1945.

The Americans cannot be blamed more than others for the partial breakdown of the security provision of the UN. Universal collective security is not a practical proposition for a lopsided world, and for all kinds of historical reasons the lack of trust between East and West was such that unanimity in the Security Council was out of the

question. That did not mean that the UN was irrelevant, but its function was to prevent war by multilateral diplomacy rather than by trying to enforce peace. To that kind of diplomacy the Americans devoted their best brains. They did not impose the Cold War on us. The Russians managed stupidly to scare the hell out of Europeans, Canadians, all of us, and the initiative for NATO came from us. We wanted a guarantee of Europe from a reluctant US Senate. (NATO rescued us from panic and stabilized an exceedingly dangerous situation.) That the US alone had an atomic bomb was an inescapably intimidating fact, but, whatever the ravings of wild editors and generals, the US in association with its allies acted with prudence to contain the Soviet probing for weak spots – especially in Berlin.

Having power thrust upon one

There are those who see from the day of Pearl Harbor a calculated US plot to take control of the world and run it in their interest. That makes little sense to me. As Averell Harriman noted at the time, all the American people wanted to do was make a settlement with the Russians, go to the movies and drink coke. Furthermore, with their antiquated constitution they cannot calculate a concerted foreign policy of any kind. (They have a government with no one in charge. It remains a serious problem that the superpower on our side cannot fine-tune its policies.) The war was just the culminating factor of twentieth century history that left the US in a predicament of power from which it could not escape. We must be eternally grateful to them for not trying to and for recognizing the awesome responsibility of their strength. Congenital messianic fever helped.

The essential formula for international security as conceived in the UN Charter is to be found not in the rhetoric of collective security but in the provision for the management of peace by the five great powers in the Security Council – aided, abetted and restrained, of course, by wise representatives of the lower and middle classes. In the absence of this prescribed unanimity it was inevitable that the dominant power would feel obliged, or tempted, or both, to act as it saw fit to hold the world in equilibrium as the Charter intended. The rest of us are unhappy about that in principle, but in practice we feel more comfortable because the US accepted the responsibility of pilotage, even though we often have grave doubts about the wisdom of the pilot.

Encased in an alliance to which it must pay some attention and, more than they realize, in the politics of the international community, of the United Nations, the US has not had it all its own way. *In extremis* the responsibility placed on the five great powers to manage peace has actually been assumed by the two superpowers, and it is well for us at this critical time on the Persian Gulf to recall the occasions on which, when faced with what they both feared most – the global escalation of hostilities – the US and the USSR have been in collusion to check the combatants. The Arab-Israeli conflicts of 1967 and 1973 provide classic examples. In fact, there is now some evidence of concern in Europe and Asia that if the superpowers achieve nuclear agreements they will try to dispose of the rest of the world as they see fit. Those two might well find bilateralism more comfortable