

Past 5/1/65
To Avoid Anguish

Your editorial of April 26 on the "Anguish of Power" suggests Lord Acton's conviction that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." History supports your suggestion that powerful states have usually acted, often hesitatingly, and in response to what they consider a moral duty, to employ their power against weaker and, they believe, less enlightened people, to correct such people, until they have established huge empires over many unwilling peoples. The seeds of decay have, as Toynbee points out, been planted in the "time of troubles" before the empire was underway.

The reason is clear. Power creates a sense of responsibility to maintain order and advance civilization wherever the power will reach, but few people have been able to envisage order and civilization except in their own image. So the advancement of civilization has meant the imposition of unwanted values, institutions and concepts of progress upon alien peoples.

Might not the anguish and corruption of power be avoided if the responsibilities of power were guided by the concept of a world of peacefully coexisting states of different economies, politics, cultures and ideologies which each finds suited to its situation?

Such a conception of the world was envisaged by the international law which emerged after Europe had torn itself to pieces by a 30 years' effort of differing ideologies to impose themselves on all, and in the League of Nations and the United Nations after the two recent world wars. This conception of the world is difficult to grasp, especially by democracies which tend to be self-centered and xenophobic.

The United States originated

in the claim to self-determination, avowed this principle in its 19th century isolationism by promptly recognizing de facto governments and states, proclaimed it for its conquests from Spain in 1898, and accepted it by ratifying the United Nations Charter. But since achieving world power it has felt a duty to recreate all others in its own image. The American people seem to regard Communist states as wicked, Asian and African states as ignorant, and some European states as misguided because they are different, and not only when they are violating the law of nations.

Perhaps if the American people could acquire the tolerance for other peoples called for by the Charter, a revived belief in the self-determination of peoples, and a vision of a world of varied states each experimenting with its own culture and institutions, the American Government might avoid jumping from isolationism to imperialism. It might assist in building an international order in which states of varied culture and ideology can peacefully coexist under the law and can cooperate to prevent aggressions and interventions against the territorial integrity and political independence of any, to prevent violations of human rights which shock the conscience of mankind, and to advance whatever universal standards of social and economic progress may emerge from this cooperation.

Such a policy, aimed, as the Soviets have suggested, at preventing the export of either revolution or counter-revolution, might avoid both the anguish of power and nuclear destruction.

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