
A Byzantine Empire of the West?

If you've an historic periscope in your equipment, now is the time to put it up. For, over the political horizon comes a view not seen these sixteen centuries: the sunset of a world empire. The Spanish Empire, the Austrian potpourri, the German pretension—many such affairs have collapsed and hardly raised dust. But what we're witnessing now is a crackup comparable to nothing that's happened since the Roman affair. In a few years, most likely after the very next war, surely within the century, what was the British Empire will be little more than the United Kingdom. Maybe the ultimate will be another Merrie England, and the islanders will be the better off for lack of imperialistic burdens. That is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Something over two centuries ago this body of involuntary adhesions began forming. Thanks to British enterprise and British valor, tax-and-rent contributions from wherever the sun did not set bolstered the "national" economy. A wise division with native collaborators facilitated the arrangements, and the sub-

Chodorov published this article in analysis (April 1947). It was one of his most widely read articles. Rep. Howard Buffet was so impressed that he put it in the Congressional Record of April 29, 1947.

jected peoples made their peace with it because—well, one must live. The producers rubbed along somehow, in spite of the load, and things might have continued in the same way indefinitely were it not for that inevitable concomitant of imperialism, war. Short wars with weak peoples may bring a profit, but when it comes to a life-and-death struggle with a fellow your own size, you have all outgo and no possible return. Several such wars are bound to be disastrous to an empire, for the compounding costs drain production to the point where little is left for existence, let alone for further expansion. It then becomes difficult to maintain the constabulary which shores up the structure. When an empire cannot raise enough cash to “carry out its commitments,” and must call upon a big brother for help, it is a dead herring. No, the socialists are not to blame for the collapse of the British Empire, as the Tories claim; even after World War I the fiscal difficulties at Number Ten Downing Street came to what the doctors call a “critical condition,” and the mission of the present government is simply to administer the last rites. *Pax vobiscum.*

THE WORK OF MEN

This empire-building business has been going on for a long time, though only once in a while does it grow up to world-wide proportions, and always when an empire gave up the ghost its place was taken by some fledgling, and frequently several rivals sprouted at once. The Byzantine Empire followed hard on the heels of Rome. Though it did quite well for a time, it never made the grade of its predecessor; stirring in the sands of Africa and Asia Minor were imperialistic ambitions which stunted the growth of Constantinople, while a little later the

father of Charlemagne sowed the seeds of competition from the West.

It would seem from the constant recurrence of empires that there is something inevitable about the business, that it belongs "in the natural order." Even now, while the British Empire is hardly laid away, the outlines of a new imperialistic picture are clearly discernible. In the West a lusty heir apparent is flexing his muscles, while the ponderous bear in the East is bellowing his ferocious lust. It looks like another Armageddon is coming down the line.

If we were sure that empires are the product of natural forces, like societies or cabbages, it would be foolish to stand up against their coming. But, when we examine the nature of empires, what their purpose is, and how they are formed, we realize that God hasn't a thing to do with them. They are purely man-made. In spite of their acquired pomposity, they are in fact pretty mean, sordid, and brittle affairs.

If folks knew exactly what an empire is, and resolutely refused to have anything to do with the business, its advocates would have to turn to decent pursuits for a living. The need of popular support is proven by the cheerleader technique of imperialism. The current slogan "Stop Communism!" is a case in point. In the early years of our country somebody put us on the path of plunder with a call to "manifest destiny," just as the British Tommy was long impelled by the "white man's burden" to commit murder or suicide, and Napoleon's grand army marched into the Russian refrigerator shouting "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!" Even that forthright empire builder Alexander the Great said something about carrying Greek culture to his "barbarian" victims, and we can be sure that in the kitbag of Genghis Khan was a phrase like "to make the world safe for democracy." This is standard equipment in imperialism.

LAND, LABOR, AND EMPIRE

What is an empire? It is a lot of people who are under compulsion to hand over a good part of what they produce to a handful of people who employ the soldiery that does the compelling. There never was an empire of a different character; so, we are justified in calling this an overall definition. Noteworthy and instructive is the fact that all empires are built out of land and people, the two factors of production, showing that imperialists are pretty good economists. Barren and semibarren areas may be included in the framework simply because they are "strategic"—meaning that they afford access to the people under exploitation. The British lifeline was the path traversed by the tax-collecting soldiery.

Speaking of a tax-collecting soldiery, we come to the heart of this something-for-nothing scheme. In olden times, when empire builders were at least picturesque, the business was done with simplicity and directness. There were silks and rare spices in the East to be had, diamonds to be picked up in Africa, gold asking to be taken in America, backward peoples everywhere needing civilization so that they might be the better exploited. For which noble purpose the ancient counterpart of the marines was sent. When the marines had the situation "well in hand"—signifying that the natives had resigned themselves to their fate—the higher-ups instituted the reliable double-barreled scheme of regularized loot; first, they levied a tax on production; next, they fixed up titles to land necessary for production and charged the workers rent for the use of it. Eventually the taxes and the titles were recorded in leather-bound volumes, which, having been blessed with resounding words by solemn professors, achieved reverential status. Black-robed

gentlemen infused "justice" into the adjustment and traditional acquiescence dubbed it "law and order."

The process was facilitated in the olden days by common acceptance of a predatory "upper class." Nobody questioned the purposes or the prerogatives of these demigods. Primitive honesty also condoned the picking up of a little loot by the common soldier, so that he too had an economic interest in empire building. However, such square-toed methods had to be abandoned with the advent of the printing press, which encouraged the habit of reading, which in turn aroused querulousness. Naturally, the people took to reading moralisms which flattered their egos—namely, the phrases of democracy—and lest this should stimulate any predisposition against plunder, the proper kind of reading had to be provided. Thus, propaganda was added to the arsenal of empire building.

CAME THE CARTEL

The ingenuity of man is coterminous with his cupidity. Out of the claptrap of law came the confusion-confounding device of corporate ownership. Thereby a man-made person, utterly soulless and therefore without moral identity, nevertheless serves to absorb the personal responsibility of moral beings. That this contraption prospers by virtue of an imperialistic venture must be sheer accident; for, surely, one cannot associate the stockholding widow with the exploitation of some worker in Iran or India. Nor can the directors be individually charged with moral turpitude, since they act only in a collective capacity and everybody knows that a collectivity is without moral responsibility. In Russia the cartel, or trust, has attained beatification by way of "common ownership," thus absolving all and

sundry, especially the commissars, from conscious complicity in the exploitation of Finnish miners or Polish peasants. If "everybody" is an imperialist, nobody is.

Which brings us to the imminent American succession to Britain's imperialistic position. Who is behind the plan? Is there any such plan? After all, the only definite proposal is that financial aid be given the governments of Greece and Turkey in their fight against the scourge of communism. Although the exact words have not yet been used, we have been told "again and again" that the money will not be followed by armies, not even to do a little collecting on the loans. Polite usage bans even the suggestion of imperialism. Nobody thinks of it.

When what was later recognized as American imperialism first stepped off the continent into the Caribbean, the prime purpose was to "help our little brown brothers," the secondary one was to "remember the Maine." That our sugar interests profited, that some of our bank stocks likewise prospered, must be put down to sheer coincidence; no evidence of premeditated complicity is adducible. And so, if we go through with this empire-succession business, it is quite possible that certain oil and mining stocks will "hit new highs," certain communications systems will improve their financial position, certain investment trusts will pay out bigger dividends. But that there is any conspirational connection between such a result and the loans to Greece and Turkey will always be an unprovable conjecture. Such is the genius of the cartel.

Not only does the impersonal corporation serve the purpose of conquest while absolving particular persons of culpability, but it also facilitates an established imperialistic process. In olden times, whenever a roving swashbuckler made life precarious for a tribe or a prince, it was good practice for that tribe or prince to court the protective custody of a strong-armed

neighbor. Such things are not being done in these days of international protocol. The British, for instance, could hardly be expected to apply for a secondary position in the big American Union; not only is national pride against it, but the cartel system makes such a crudity unnecessary. Through the orderly process of the securities markets, American participation in the profitable oil, rubber, tin, and other concessions will be allowed to infiltrate, so that the cartels may become sufficiently American in character to warrant the protective arm of a government capable of standing up against Russian aggression. Through stock transfers and interchange of directorships the transition from one flag to another is done without offense to national sensibilities or tradition. In some respects, this migration of capital is comparable to the transfer of wealth from tottering Rome to the burgeoning Byzantine Empire, in the third and fourth centuries; the modern cartel obviates the use of a moving van.

FUNCTIONAL FEAR

And so, as American "interests" enter new "spheres of influence," as our economy becomes adjusted to the rents, royalties, and taxes provided by peoples enjoying our benevolent exploitation, the American empire will take its place in the historic up-and-down parade. That will require the maintenance of a considerable law-and-order enforcement agency. Empires are made and maintained by armies; armies of conquest are followed by armies of occupation which by self-propulsion become armies of further expansion. From an opposite direction comes the "aggressive" army of a competitive empire and a mutually "defensive" war ensues. But neither logic nor the rules of evidence can point to the cartel as a cause, or even a

contributory cause, of the conflict. All we can say is that the profits of imperialism, which in ancient times accrued to a well-defined social group, now flow to the coffers of the amorphous legal contraption.

Putting aside purpose, the methods of empire building require the active cooperation of the nationals who must foot the bill, in blood and dollars. In this country, unlike Russia, where the Communist party has attained that status, the doctrine of an omniscient upper class is without force, and the necessary cooperation must be gained by suasion. The ways of getting people to do that which they are disinclined to do comes under the general head of propaganda, of which the most effective is that which arouses fear. Currently, fear of communism, fear that it will engulf Europe, fear that it will eventually penetrate this country and destroy the cherished American "way of life," is seeping into our consciousness as if by the force of truth; and, as a consequence, belief in an inherent bestiality of communists is growing. Those we fear we hate, and those we hate automatically fall into a lower category of humans. This churning process is quite familiar to anyone who can remember back ten years.

If we will, we can still save ourselves the cost of empire building. We have only to square off against this propaganda, and to supplement rationality with a determination that, come what may, we will not lend ourselves, as individuals, to this new outrage against human dignity. We will not cooperate. We will urge noncooperation upon our neighbors. We will resist, by counterpropaganda, every attempt to lead us to madness. Above all, when the time comes, we will refuse to fight, choosing the self-respect of the prison camp to the ignominy of the battlefield. It is far nobler to clean a latrine than to kill a man for profit.

COMBATING COMMUNISM

Very well, then, let us begin by scrutinizing the spreading fear propaganda. If we don't help Greece and Turkey, we are told, European culture must give way to this horrible communism. But the fact which that scare head obscures, and which is sustained by a mounting mass of evidence, is this: *communism is already the religion of Europe*. It is the desperation of hopeless poverty which makes converts to communism, and to this desperation our national policy has made its contribution. By preventing the people from producing, by destroying the tools of production, by condoning wholesale robbery, and by rooting up populations, our politicians and our generals are the unwitting missionaries of communism. If we would kill that strange cult, we must abandon the policy which creates the conditions on which it thrives. Bayonets, or dollars to pay for bayonets, will only aggravate these conditions. The only antidote to communism is to let the people of Europe produce and exchange. If communism thrives on scarcity, plenty will destroy it. Hence a policy which leads to unlimited production is the one which we should pursue if we would do what loans to Greece and Turkey are ostensibly intended for. Such a policy would include the removal of our own trade restrictions so that Europeans may be able to buy our surpluses with theirs. Above all, we must take our armies off their backs. The way to stop communism, to put it briefly, is to let the people alone.

If it is argued that such a hands-off policy does not take into account the ruthless and malevolent Russian military machine, that our departure from the scene would leave the people its helpless prey, let us admit the possibility of that consequence and consider the outcome. Suppose Russia imposes on the peoples of Europe the slavery conditions prevailing within her

borders. Without arguing the point that these conditions have so reduced her own economy that the robbery of subject peoples has become a policy of necessity, we must admit as a matter of experience that slaves are poor producers, and we can predict the collapse of communism in Europe from lack of production. There is the added fact that, unlike the Russians, Western Europe did experience a measure of freedom, the memory of which will engender subversive activity, further slowing up the productive machinery. In short, the slave economy will bring about primitive conditions (such as Morgenthau envisioned), and the vulture state will die from lack of sustenance. It is poor prospect for the next generation of Europeans, to be sure, but is it any worse than another war? Something might survive a spell of communism, while the result of another war, no matter which side wins, will be annihilation.

When we speak of communism spreading we have in mind, as a matter of habit, the Russian state as well as the ideology. We see Moscow as the capital of a continent, controlling the lives of hundreds of millions by means of a crafty secret police and a hobble-nailed army. In every hamlet, province, and national capital there will be, so the horror-story goes, cunning commissars whose ultimate allegiance will be to the Kremlin. The tale is well constructed, and credence for it is gained by the implication of a subnormal Russian character. We have not as yet been told that the Slav is a Mongolian of inherently low degree; that will come, as it did in 1941, when the campaign reaches the murderous stage. But the insinuation is already strong in news stories, editorials and radio commentaries, and is necessary to the fabricated fear complex.

Yet, when we analyze the horror story, we see how silly it all is. The more the Russian state spreads itself the weaker it must become; the further the central commissars are from their

agents, the more tenuous the tie; and the impact of foreign languages, customs, and traditions must undermine the cohesion necessary to centralized power. Russians are people. Like every other people, they want freedom, to live, to love, and to laugh. That is true even of Russian secret agents and Russian soldiers. Give them a little leeway, a little distance from the knout, a small opportunity to hide and run away, and they will indulge desires common to all mankind. The centrifugal force of expansion has a way of weakening political power at the perimeter.

LET THEM COME

Will a retreat from empire building bring the colossus to our homeland? (Shades of the Hitlerian hobgoblin!) Let us admit that danger. Since war is the state's escape from a collapsed internal economy, an intercontinental venture might suggest itself to the commissars. Well, then, would we not be better able to meet the challenge because we had been conserving our resources, building up our stockpile of military power? It is an established fact of modern warfare that victory is shaped in the nation's factories, not on the battlefields; hence our concentration on production while the Russian bear was hungering on the bare bones of its victims would put us in better position to deal it a deathblow. On the other hand, the cost of hacking out new areas of exploitation in the world will tell against us when the inevitable clash, with Russia nearer to her base, takes place.

The strength to ward off any such danger will come not mainly from our production lines, nor even from our military establishment; it will come from the general antipathy toward communism which prosperity engenders. The lesson our imperialists seem unable to learn is that this strange malady of the

mind is rooted in despair. Poverty, heavy taxes, unemployment, little to eat, and the uncertainty of eating—these are the environmental conditions which nurture that mental deformity. It should be plain, then, that the expenditure of wealth in imperialistic ventures must create home conditions very favorable to the purposes of the commissars. Russia's ally will be in our streets.

Thus, even if we accept at face value the worst forebodings our empire builders dish up, reason tells against carrying the fight to the communist's lair. There is, however, an even more vital argument in favor of minding our home affairs. If we go along with this poking into the business of Europe, what will happen to the liberty we have left in America? Already there is a "Red" witchhunt afoot, and experience tells us that when the exigencies of the situation require it the definition of *Red* will include every person who raises his voice against the going order. Mass hysteria will conveniently support such a definition. So that, in the shadow of the impending "emergency," the outlines of a crowded concentration camp can already be detected.

If war comes—and when did imperialism not bring it?—the worst of what we call communism will come with it. The essential dogma of this creed is that the individual exists only for the purposes of the state. In that respect it must be identified with all other forms of statism, from pharaohism to nazism. Now, when the existence of the state is at stake, even the fiction of individual liberty cannot be tolerated. This is particularly true under the totalitarianism necessitated by modern warfare. Therefore, when our imperialism comes to grips with the empire of the commissars, the very thing we are presumably fighting to preserve will go by the board. Automatically, our liberties will vanish into—communism.

This is what your historic periscope should show you. But since history is what people make it, the smashup which the lens suggests is not inevitable. What men can do, men can undo. We—you and I—can help to prevent it, if we will but assume the responsibility and accept the consequences. Even a losing fight for liberty is worthwhile, for there is always the profit of self-respect to be had.¹

¹ A peaceful alternative:

1. Economic internationalism—The elimination of friction by allowing the free flow of goods and services from where there is a surplus to where there is a need. The resulting interdependence breeds mutual respect. Since cultures follow in the wake of goods, free trade leads to understanding and appreciation, and a break in relations becomes unthinkable.
2. Nonintervention—How a people choose to order their lives is their own concern, and meddling by an outsider, even “for their own good,” arouses resentment. Since the internal affairs of any nation are never beyond reproach, invasion of the privacy of another is as presumptuous as it is mischievous. Political isolationism—minding one’s own business—is an essential of peace.