

1-1-1961

National Purpose;Note

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Kenneth, "National Purpose;Note" (1961). *Natural Law Forum*. Paper 64.
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NATIONAL PURPOSE

Americans in the seventh decade of the twentieth century show signs of profound concern with the state of the union. A President's Commission on National Goals and a *Life-New York Times* series on the National Purpose intended no doubt to sound a call for thoughtful re-examination of what we are as a nation and what we strive to become. Brilliant and creative individual scholars like Hans J. Morgenthau in *The Purpose of American Politics* are likewise turning attention to basic issues. The columnist Walter Lippmann writes: "The critical weakness of our society is that for the time being our people do not have great purposes which they are united in wanting to achieve." Some speak of lost or forgotten purposes, while others summon us to discover new goals. Many wait, perhaps in vain, for resounding and ennobling affirmations that might provide something of the grand framework of documents like the Declaration of Independence. It may be that contemporaries run the risk of forgetting that the national heritage is as often the slow deposit of experience as the outcome of broad decrees. Nonetheless, widespread discussion of great issues could be a fruitful enterprise and serve to raise the sights of a people preoccupied with more immediate and selfish goals.

I. THE TIMELINESS OF THE URGENT SUMMONS

Most serious writers are agreed that the United States today as "the Rome and Athens of the West" faces tasks and responsibilities unprecedented in its history. No longer can it withhold its influence and strength until the eleventh hour. The stability and equilibrium of international relations is inherent in the immediacy of American commitments. We cannot stand aside politically, morally, or militarily. Yet the irony of our position is that American society is judged by standards it must claim for itself but can never fulfill. Even if the republic should be *primus inter pares* among states, it remains a state. It must strive for the attainment of universal goals while recognizing that its vision is national and particular. It can aim, in the words of Washington's Farewell Address, to "give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence." It must know, however, that the form and content of its benevolence will be colored by its conception of national destiny. Time and circumstance shape its virtue. The exalted justice of Washington's "no entangling alliances" became neither just nor exalted in Wilson's or Roosevelt's administrations.

Nations and no less their nominated spokesmen must guard against the twin perils of cynicism and moral pretentiousness. Perhaps the risk of cynicism is greater. While we are a positive society disposed to put ideas forward in an affirmative mood, we are also a comparatively recent heir of world leadership and as such oftentimes oppressed as we weigh our mounting burdens. A spirit of negativism creeps in and infects young and old. The more sophisticated among us grow bored with general notions and skeptical about their observance.

Philosophies that once stormed the world are tame and colorless when taken for granted. If young people are seized by apathy, the cause is often underlying cynicism and despair. Since no ideal fits all the confusing aspects of collective life, each in turn is dismissed as irrelevant and men and nations in resigning themselves are tossed to and fro like driftwood awash on the seas of fate.

Moral pretentiousness is the other disease from which men suffer. All the recent discussion of national purpose conceals a deep-rooted national tendency. It is the tendency to erect narrow national goals into wider universal purposes. At one level, the relating of national to universal ends is essential to the transcending of vulgar materialist aims. No critic of the pretentiousness of American moral claims should obscure this important fact. It may even be that all the talk of American national goals distorts understanding by implying that these goals are unique. Further thought should tell us we share these purposes with people in many parts of the world and in a very fundamental sense. They are goals that Americans inherited as the largesse of history, purposes that have evolved from some 2000 years of discussion of the political consequences of the nature of man. Belief in the dignity of man, the rights of the individual and the consent of the governed are not unique American purposes but basic human goals. If Americans lecture one another too repeatedly on American national purposes, they pass over this truth — a truth that did not escape Thomas Jefferson and John Marshall, architect and interpreter respectively of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. For the first Chief Justice could write, "There are principles of abstract justice which the Creator of all things has impressed on the minds of His creature man, and which are admitted to regulate in great degree the right of civilized nations." Affirmation of great principles of course makes no less urgent the search for forms of mundane application in this revolutionary age.

If preoccupation with narrow or selfish aims is one of the risks Americans run, the other lies in claiming too much for direct application abroad of national goals and local institutions. If other nations and peoples suspect a government that is lacking in ideals and purposes, they resent one whose principles are forever being packaged and marketed for export. The resentment is compounded when the exporter is self-righteous. The American system is endowed with enough of the universal to tempt its leaders to put it forward for the rest of the world. Yet the world has many mansions, and the conditions under which democracy flourishes may be peculiar to no more than a few societies. Through patience and inventiveness, the social preconditions of free government may multiply and grow. Those Americans who would speed this growth by lecturing other peoples on free elections or the two-party system are more likely to impair than foster such growth.

Thus while the broad notions and principles embodied in documents like the Declaration of Independence are not peculiarly American, neither is the temptation toward national self-righteousness. Cynicism and moral pretentiousness equally imperil a steady sense of national purpose. An urgent summons to take up the cudgels in behalf of national goals must face the dual problems of cynicism and self-righteousness, and the flood of current proposals must be measured by the yardstick whether or not they flounder on these shoals. I

suspect it is precisely at this point that the ancient discussions of natural law have lessons for present-day spokesmen.

II. THE CONFUSION OF MEANS AND ENDS

Many who engage in the current debate run the risk of confounding means and ends. The risk is considerably aggravated by the nature of the present crisis. The West in its struggle with world communism is called upon to be specific if its counsels are to carry weight, for the communists have ready-made solutions alluring in the simplicity of their appeal to the peoples of Asia and Africa. All goals are subordinated to a single purpose; every policy is rationalized by its link with the end of economic development and social justice. The temptation is nearly overpowering to put forward an equally simple and specific design for the world. Since we have lost a good measure of the subtlety and depth of our earlier philosopher-statesmen, we fall prey to the perennial disease of giving grand and utopian answers to complex, practical issues and offering this as our national purpose.

The conflicts and contradictions that result come quickly to the surface. Thus one interpreter of national purpose would rally Americans to a massive counterpolitical strategy making use of trained cold war specialists. He sees a Political West Point or a Liberation Force "drawn largely from among refugees from captive nations" as instruments in "a strategy for victory." At the same time he rather piously declares: "Whenever the United States tried to act without moral conviction or contrary to our basic beliefs, it found itself inhibited and ultimately had to rechart its course."

The mediating role of prudence, that ancient political virtue known to the classical philosophers and to many of the "Founding Fathers," finds no place in a strategy which supplants ends with autonomous moral means. The function of those who plot concrete political strategies is more modest but no less essential than that of the moral philosopher. They must search for ways of balancing competing moral and political claims, never losing sight of ultimate purposes. Yet at the point they assert too sharply the prerogatives of the moralist they debase both the virtue of their humble task and the credit of the ultimate ends of society.

In practical politics, a realm of intermediate moral and political purposes exists, each serving a valued moral function. In this realm, the sensitive conscience of the responsible leader must grapple with himself and the harsh realities to chart a course that is morally responsible within a set of existing circumstances. In the book *The National Purpose* published under the auspices of *Life*, the first clear statement of this problem appears only on page 96. At that point, Mr. Albert Wohlstetter writes:

the limitation of the questions raised so far is that they ask for very general answers, for a statement of ends without any explicit weighing of means or costs. They sometimes seem to imply . . . that our difficulties are not really complex, deep or particular, and that they can be solved by a simple reaffirmation — and of some one thing at that.

Mr. Wohlstetter, after arguing that what is needed at the working level is hard analysis of what we want and what we can do and the efforts needed, then concludes: "While we may talk about national purpose in the singular, the first thing to observe about our aims is that we have many of them. They are connected; some depend on others; many conflict."

At the level at which he writes, his conclusion seems unexceptionable. The proximate aims and purposes of the American republic are manifold and inter-related. Some oppose others; thus while we seek the "common defense," we likewise search for present satisfaction. If Mr. Wohlstetter is right, "reducing the chance of our demolition is at odds with getting the utmost in production of civilian goods and services." Similarly "we would like to increase democracy everywhere, but this conflicts with our desire not to interfere with the internal affairs of other nations." It will not do to insist that no conflicts exist, that policy-makers are free to choose peace over justice or national self-determination over noninterference. Common sense should tell us that "to make fundamental choices, we must understand specific means as well as general ends." We should expect to be faced with unpleasant and even tragic judgments. Failure to admit this accounts for the rather pious and irrelevant nature of so much of the discussion of national purpose.

I sense at the heart of the debate a vast and perhaps unbridgeable gap between those who would affirm the final ends of society and let it go at that and those who strive to relate means and ends. It is no distortion of truth to point to sacred texts like the Declaration of Independence as the American dream. Yet men like Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Niebuhr are also right in saying that professing devotion to historic goals does not exhaust our responsibility in a changing world. Somehow, doctrines of a radical individualism or American messianism are not sufficient to the hazards and opportunities of the cold war. New formulae, policies and programs are called for, and innovation is as vital now as in the days of Lincoln, Wilson, or the two Roosevelts. In Walter Lippmann's words:

The innovator for whom the country is waiting will not come with a new revelation of the ultimate ends and commitments of our society. The ultimate ends are fixed. They are lasting and they are not disputed. The nation is dedicated to freedom. It is dedicated to the rights of men and to government with the consent of the governed. The innovation . . . will be in the means, in the policies and programs and measures, by which the ultimate ends of our free society can be realized in the world today.

Affirming our ultimate ends, like standing erect at the playing of the national anthem, may bring a flush of moral self-satisfaction, but it is hardly a substitute for giving content to purposes in a changing context.

Furthermore, greater attention to means alongside devotion to ends might safeguard us against self-righteousness in lecturing other peoples and especially newly independent states on the goals they should follow. The great strength of a society that is rigorous and flexible in the way it pursues its goals stems from the breadth of its vision of the manifold institutions and measures through which states seek their goals. It is the beginning of wisdom for Americans to know

that the problem of individual rights which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries involved protecting the individual from the state today has become the issue of making individual freedom compatible with national stability and justice for the collective interests of classes and races. Knowing this, the light of our national experience illuminates far more the problems of new nations than would the mere recitation of national texts. The great virtue of discussing the means and policies by which national ends are pursued lies in their tentative, pragmatic and evolving character. Since all nations suffer periods that Professor Walt W. Rostow has called "neurotic fixations of history" when, confronted by radically new situations, they cling to time-worn policies increasingly divorced from reality, the realm of means enjoys benefits that the more sanctified domain of ultimate ends cannot boast.

III. PURPOSE AND LEADERSHIP

For the most part, the national purpose finds expression in the words and deeds of its historic leaders. The goals of American life have not been given us on tablets of stone. They have rather been plucked out of the ebb and flow of national existence by leaders who gave them form and content. James Reston wryly observes: "if George Washington had waited for the doubters to develop a sense of purpose in the 18th century, he'd still be crossing the Delaware." The Declaration of Independence, Emancipation Proclamation, and the Four Freedoms were existential, not philosophical, statements. The large ideas that comprise national purpose were extracted from the national experience by leaders who could demand the full attention of the American people. They dipped down, as it were, into the stream of experience and brought forth classic statements of lasting truth about immediately relevant problems of our collective life. If we say that the people become bored with the glittering generalities that infect much of the discussion of national purpose, we should remind ourselves of two features of the great historic statements. First, they were propositions linked closely to urgent needs and problems. Second, they resulted from attempts by responsible leaders to help men frame the issues and better understand the choices before them. The powers of the Presidency in fixing national attention should never be underestimated. In Woodrow Wilson's words: "His is the only national voice in affairs. Let him once win the admiration and confidence of the country and no other single force can withstand him. . . . His is the vital place of action in the system." The evidence is impressive that once the President expresses the national need, his propositions affect the spirit and direction of the nation. When the sense of purpose lags, the likelihood is greater that the President has failed to call on the people than that they have refused to do what they have been asked to do.

This feature of our constitutional system is often perplexing both to ourselves and to friends abroad. We tend to forget that "most of the great crises of the American past have been resolved, not by the zeal and purpose of the people, but usually by the will power or obstinacy of their leaders." James Reston has recently reminded us that "John Adams estimated that one-third of the population was against the American Revolution, one-third for it, and one-third in-

different." Democracy is not only compatible with strong leadership, it is dependent upon it. If this is true in a nation richly endowed with a cultured and self-conscious people, it should be yet more obvious in nations struggling to reach some minimum literacy. A remnant of leaders who loved wisdom and could bring together ideas and politics has been the fountainhead of national progress. They have stood above the "prosperities, idolatries, oppression, luxury (and) pleasures" of the majority and in so doing shaped lasting national purposes. They have not flinched at the responsibility of defining our tasks. In a world of two billion hungry people seized with the passion of rising expectations, statements of national purpose must be as real and meaningful for these problems as was the Emancipation Proclamation to the long-term needs of 31,000,000 Americans at the outbreak of the Civil War.

The opportunity that beckons is one of stating a national purpose that will be relevant here and abroad. As a great hegemonial power, we speak not alone for ourselves but for others: De Gaulle, who stakes his political life on the hazardous movement toward Algerian self-determination; Britain, which grapples with the baffling problems of the Central African Federation; and the new states which yearn for the beginnings of individual rights while they compress into years and months the achievement of order, economic growth, and social justice that required nearly two centuries within our borders. Is it any wonder that our leaders speak of new opportunities and purposes or assert that our national ends must become international in scope?

IV. NATURAL LAW AND CHANGING PURPOSE

Natural law at its best has much to contribute to the debate over changing national purpose. At its worst, it can impair understanding and progress. The perennial temptation of moderns is to fix proximate moral goals into rigid natural law categories. The imperatives of practical politics are sanctified prematurely as final moral truth. For this reason, contemporary writers all too frequently assert that natural law is irrelevant to present day problems, as when some of its champions call for a holy war to the death against the injustice of communism.

However, hidden away in at least some of the current debate are more legitimate references to natural law. Thus John K. Jessup maintains: "Democracy, though we have treasured it, is not the highest value known to man. Indeed, it is only because enough Americans have had still higher allegiances that we have made democracy work." Because democracy is at some points at least in harmony with a higher order, it enjoys a special moral sanction. Archibald MacLeish pays homage to this truth when he argues:

To be free is not, perhaps, a political program in the modern sense, but from the point of view of a new nation it may be something better. The weakness of political programs — Five Year Plans and the like — is that they can be achieved. But human freedom can never be achieved because human freedom is a continuously evolving condition. It is infinite in its possibilities — as infinite as the human soul which it enfranchises.

When James Reston speaks of "the outer, quieter America, which has either kept its religious faith or at least held on to the morality derived from religious tradition," he calls attention to the same dimensions the Founding Fathers conceived when they maintained that the moral idea came before the political.

The Higher Law has englobed American political life, defining the framework within which political debate and change were possible. Because there was agreement on ends, debate over means was possible. America could tolerate diversity because the bonds of unity had been forged — as, incidentally, they have not been forged in many parts of the world. The ends of American society are not difficult to discover. They touch the corporate ends of the nation and were first stated in our great fundamental documents like the Declaration of Independence. One of our ablest scholars, Professor Morgenthau, has described them as freedom expressed in equality. The same goals are restated in the Preamble and Articles I and II of the United Nations Charter. These great ideas have been illumined by "flashes of documentary lightning," but their sources lie buried in more than 2000 years of Western experience, thought, and reflection. For the United States, they were the slow deposit of English and Colonial experience but they also went back to the Greeks and the Romans. A 2000-year-old dialogue lay before and beyond them. In this historic sense, they were grounded in natural law and allied with Judaeo-Christian moral principles.

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