

For A New Isolationism

by Murray N. Rothbard

It is with a heavy heart that I enter the lists against the overwhelming majority of my friends and compatriots on the Right; also with a sense of futility in trying to combat that tough anti-Soviet foreign policy to which the Right is perhaps even more dedicated than it is to anti-Socialism. But I must try, if only for the reason that no one else has done so (if, indeed, there are any outright isolationists left anymore).

To begin with, I wish to put my argument purely on the grounds of American national interest. I take it for granted that there are few, if any, world-savers on the Right of the Wilson-FDR stamp, who believe in the moral obligation of the American government to enforce "collective security" all over the world, and to make sure that global Ruritania has no government which we do not like. I assume that the reason that the Right favors a "tough" foreign policy against the Soviet bloc, is that it believes that only such a policy will secure and promote, American national interests. And this is the argument which, I maintain, is open to serious challenge.

There is, in the first place, an obviously serious omission in the arguments of the partisans of a policy of "liberation," who constantly denounce the doctrine of mere "containment" to which the Administration, both Democratic and Republican, has been roughly committed for over a decade. In opposition, the Right talks grandiosely but very vaguely about "ultimatums" on Quemoy, Berlin or any other issue that comes up; but precisely *what* it really has to offer as a positive program is never mentioned. In all the reams of material written by the Right in the last decade, there is never any precise spelling-out of what a policy of ultrafirmness or toughness really entails.

Let us then fill in this gap by considering what I am sure we would all agree is the *toughest possible* policy: an immediate American ultimatum to Khrushchev and Co. to resign and disband the whole Communist regime; otherwise we drop the H-bomb on the Kremlin. What about this policy of maximum toughness, which would certainly accomplish one thing: it would bring about a quick showdown between East and West? What is wrong with this policy? Simply that it would quickly precipitate an H-bomb, bacteriological, chemical,

global war which would destroy the United States as well as Russia. Now, it is true that perhaps this would not happen. Indeed, if we accept the favorite Right-wing credo that the Soviet leaders will *always* back down before any of our ultimatums, and will never fight if we are only tough enough, then maybe it is true that the Communist leaders will quickly surrender, perhaps on promise of asylum on some remote Elba. But are you, Mr. Right Winger, willing to take this risk? It seems to me that this is the only logical conclusion of the vague talk of toughness that we have adopted for so long. As for me, it seems clear that, since it is almost certain that the destruction of the United States would follow such an ultimatum, we must strongly oppose such a policy. The fact that Russia would also be destroyed in the holocaust would be cold comfort to someone who holds the national interest of the United States uppermost.

But if we concede that this ultimate and decisive ultimatum must be rejected, then, I contend, we must revise our views on foreign policy as a whole. Perhaps then we should think twice about sending ultimatums about Berlin, Quemoy, or the countless other trouble spots which are bound to erupt in an unending series of crises, so long as we continue the policy of the cold war. If we are not prepared to go the whole way in a program of liberation, then it makes little sense and creates great risks to keep inching forward part of the way, each time proclaiming our supposed certainty that Russia will not fight.

What, then, of the old policy of containment, which is the only logical alternative to all-out liberation that has been offered? We have so far been more or less containing for over ten years, seemingly doomed forever to huge and crippling armament budgets, an unending chase-your-tail arms race with periodic cries of alarm about the "crisis year" coming up when Russia will be ahead of us in something or other, and an eternal series of hot-spot crises each of which may touch off a global holocaust. In short, we are sitting on top of an ever-more menacing powder keg. We have all tended to forget the basic rationale of containment as expounded by George Kennan when he was "Mr. X." That is, that time will bring either a revolution inside Russia, or a "mellowing" of Soviet power; at any rate, that with a little time, the Soviet menace to the United States would dissolve.

As for the "mellowing," some of us had high hopes after the famous Khrushchev speech of 1956. For here, for the first time, the Communists were denouncing their own hallowed leader, Stalin. Yet, it is certainly clear by now that no mellowing is in the offing; that the Communist Parties, far from shaken, have absorbed this shift in line as they have absorbed so many others, and that the so-called "liberal" Communism of the Gomulka stripe is just the same old totalitarianism in another guise. The failure of the Communist regime to crumble after the anti-Stalin shift should be a lesson to all of us proving that people in power never voluntarily give it up; that they must be blasted loose. In short, the Marxists are right when they say that the "ruling class" (in this case, the Communists in Russia) will never relinquish power voluntarily.

The only way for the Communist regime to crumble from within, therefore, is by internal revolution. Now I know that Mr. Eugene Lyons has been valiantly predicting for many years now an imminent revolution inside the Soviet Union. I fervently hope that he is right. But to base a foreign policy on expectation of revolution seems to me foolhardy. The Soviet regime has been in power, after all, for some forty-two years, and unfortunately, there are still no signs of revolution on the horizon. Don't misunderstand me: we must all hope and pray for such a revolution, but we cannot count on its arrival. The present regime seems more stable than any since Stalin's death.

If neither liberation nor containment is sensible, what is the alternative? Simply a genuine policy of peace, or, what is the same thing, a return to the ancient and traditional American policy of isolationism and neutrality. This is a policy which I think the Right should understand, in view of the Right's gallant fight against the disastrous Roosevelt maneuvering of the United States into World War II. This means total disengagement in Europe and Asia, "bringing the boys back home," and all the other aspects of that policy of sturdy neutrality which used to be America's pride.

But, I will hear from every side, everyone knows that isolationism is obsolete and dead, in this age of H-bombs, guided missiles, etc. But is it really? It is my contention that our national interest calls for the following policy: *a program of world disarmament up to the point where isolationism again becomes militarily practical*. Specifically, America is threatened now in a way in which it was not threatened a generation ago: by those weapons, H-bomb missiles, disease germs, chemical gases, which can span the old blessed protection of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. We are *not* threatened by Russian tanks or machine guns or infantry. It is, therefore, the principal task of an American foreign policy truly devoted to American interests, to bring about a universal scuttling of the new weapons. If we all returned to no more than the old "conventional" weapons, and preferably even to the muskets of yore, then America would no longer be endangered. This does not mean, of course, that America should unilaterally disarm. But it *does* mean that America should try its best to effect a disarmament-agreement with Soviet Russia, whereby all the nuclear etc. weapons that could injure us would be dismantled. Khrushchev's speech at the United Nations should not be arrogantly ignored.

I have no fears that a workable inspection agreement cannot be hammered out, if our leaders only have the will that they have so far lacked. In fact, the quite obvious fears of Right-wingers that Russia *will* consent to a viable disarmament program, shows that they agree with me that the Russians *are* truly sincere in wanting nuclear disarmament. They are sincere, of course, not because the Communist leaders are altruists or humanitarians; but simply because it is also to their best interests to adopt nuclear disarmament.

Here, the Right-winger will stop short and say: Aha, how can a policy be both to the Communist interests and to ours? Simply because neither side should want to be destroyed, and therefore each side will

gain by the mutual disarming of the only weapons (nuclear, etc.) by which each can be mortally hurt. Secondly, mutual nuclear disarmament will certainly leave the Soviet Union in a military advantage *vis-à-vis* its neighbors: since it will have the preponderance of conventional arms. Here, the Right-winger thinks he really has me. Isn't the fact that Russia will gain a great arms advantage by nuclear disarmament a clear proof that this policy is unwise?

In the first place, I do not think it at all obvious that Russia will immediately attack the other nations. Believing as it does in eventual internal Communist triumph and fearing an American return to a cold-war policy, it will most likely refrain from any military attack. And, secondly, we can relieve ourselves of even more of the crippling and wasteful economic burden of armaments, as well as take the unilateral propaganda play for peace away from the Russians for a change, by suggesting to them further disarmament of even conventional weapons, perhaps eventually stripping down completely to bows and arrows. But let US assume the worst, and suppose that the Russians will really proceed to attack their neighbors with conventional arms once nuclear disarmament has been attained. What then?

I maintain that the only answer we can give to this hypothetical problem is the inelegant: "so what"? Let us not forget our initial axiom: that we first and foremost pursue American national interests. In that case, while we would personally deplore a Communist takeover of foreign countries, we would also adhere to the old isolationist principle of doing nothing about it, because it would not be of official national concern. Deprived of nuclear, etc. arms, Russia might be a military menace to Europe or the Middle East, but it would no longer be a menace to the United States, our primary concern. The Russian and Chinese hordes will not be able to swim the oceans to attack us.

At this point, my opponents are sure to trot out that old saw which was used so effectively by interventionists who sobbed about the terrible world that would ensue if Hitler won the war in Europe: perhaps we would not be militarily in danger, the slogan runs, but then America would be an island, forced to a heavy arms budget, and not able to trade with the hostile rest-of-the-world. In the first place, this argument, never very sensible, is absurd today when we are groaning under the fantastic budgets imposed by our nuclear arms race. Certainly, our arms budget will be less than it is now, especially since it would take far less to protect us from military attack. And we could, as I have said, propose further and progressive disarmament.

We are left with the argument about trade. This strikes one of the oddest notes of all, coming as it does from the very same people who are now fiercely opposed to any current trade with the Communist countries. The basis of all trade is benefit to *both* parties. There is no need for the traders to like each other for each to gain by the trade. There is no reason, therefore, why the Communists, even if in charge of most of the world, would not be willing to trade with us, just as they are willing and eager to trade now.

A return to old-fashioned isolationism, then, is paradoxically the only really practical foreign policy that we have. It is precisely because we are living in the terrible technology of the nuclear age that we have a sound basis for a workable disarmament agreement with the Russians. And, with such an agreement, we would be back to the military realities of the pre-nuclear age when even our present Right-wing interventionists agreed that isolationism *was* practical.

One thing I would like to make quite clear: I am *not* proposing a program of large-scale foreign aid to the Soviet government, or a joint UN slush fund for the backward nations. In fact, adoption of a true isolationist program would finally end, once and for all, the blackmail wheedling of foreign countries that they will go Communist if we don't come across with a suitable bribe. We can now tell the foreign nations to paddle their own canoes at last, and take full responsibility for their own actions.

There is, in short, an eminently sound alternative to the loudly trumpeted policies of either pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet interventionism. And that is a new policy of enlightened and realistic isolationism, sparked, as it needs to be in our day, by general nuclear disarmament of the world powers. Abandoning foreign meddling, we need neither continue the cold war nor pretend that the Communist leaders are our "heroic allies." We need only adopt again that stance of splendid isolation which once made peaceful and free America the beacon-light of the world.

Postscript. As Rothbard might have expected, *National Review* did not wish to re-open debate on the fundamentals of foreign policy. Rothbard expressed his reaction in a letter of May 19, 1959, to a colleague:

"... I thought you might be interested in the enclosed article, 'For a New Isolationism,' which was, predictably, turned down by Bill Buckley. (Bill loftily though in friendly fashion declared that I should have refuted Burnham, W. H. Chamberlin, and Janeway; I think I did anyway, but even if I had specifically dealt with them, it is clear Bill would not have published it.) In this article, I don't at all deal with the moral-libertarian reasons for pure isolationism such as I had treated in the 1954 Faith and Freedom symposium, but solely on the grounds of 'national interest' [thereby meeting] the Right-wingers on their own terms, with their own weapons.

"I can think of no other magazine which might publish this, though I might fix it up a bit and try one of the leftist-pacifist publications. The thing is that I am getting more and more convinced that the war-peace question is *the key* to the whole libertarian business, and that we will never get anywhere in this great intellectual counter-revolution (or revolution) unless we can end this Verdante cold war – a war for which I believe our 'tough' policy is largely responsible. Suppose, for example, that an enormously unlikely thing would happen and Nixon

would (a) become converted to purism, and (b) would be elected President. As long as the cold war continued, and we had a \$40 billion or more arms budget, what good would it really do? The fact that we might spend a few billion less on public housing or on farm support no longer thrills me. Nothing will mean much without a radical dismantling of the State apparatus, and this cannot occur without radical disarmament, and an end to the cold war policy;

"I think that, when I get some spare time, I will write a little book on this war-peace question, incorporating moral-libertarian and realist-national defense arguments, to work out a theory of isolationism. I know that this will make me highly unpopular on the Right without increasing my rating on the Left, but this is a job I am convinced has to be done, and it looks as if I'll have to do it, precisely because nobody else is. As grand old Tom Barber said years ago, in the forward of his libertarian book: 'It will be asked: Who is the author?... Why should he undertake to write such a book? The answers are quite simple. I have written this book because I felt it should be written for the benefit of the United States, and because I am the only person I have available to write it.'" "Cordially, Murray"

~ Joseph Stromberg, Rothbard Archivist