

# worldview

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## BETWEEN THE RIGHTEOUS AND MACHIAVELLI: THE POLITICAL ETHICS OF DEAN ACHESON

"The discussion of ethics or morality in our relations with other states is a prolific cause of confusion. The righteous who seek to deduce foreign policy from ethical or moral principles are as misleading and misled as the modern Machiavellis who would conduct our foreign relations without regard to them."

With these remarks, which opened an address he recently delivered at Amherst College, Dean Acheson established the defining limits of "Ethics in International Relations Today." He then proceeded to clear up some of the confusion which is so noticeable in present-day discussions of political ethics, and the method he found most appropriate was, apparently, that of demolition. Evidently he regarded the Machiavellians as the lesser threat today, for he trained his big guns on the "righteous," "those who seek to deduce foreign policy from ethical or moral principles."

Casting his own analysis into the traditional and useful categories of ends and means, he posited as the goal of U.S. foreign policy the preservation and fostering of "an environment in which free societies may flourish and underdeveloped nations who want to work on their own development may find the means to do so." But can policies which are designed with this admirable goal in mind be evaluated in moral or ethical terms? The answer that Acheson suggested, was *no*, since acts take on different moral coloration from their context, since the vocabulary of ethics is inadequate to test foreign policies and since standards which might enable us to make proper judgments are nowhere in evidence.

Making the charge direct, Dean Acheson said that "what passes for ethical standards for governmental policies in foreign affairs is a collection of moralisms, maxims, and slogans, which neither help nor guide, but only confuse decision on such complicated matters as the multilateral nuclear force, a common grain price in Europe, policy in Southeast Asia. . . ."

These delusive maxims include the "so-called" principle of self-determination, brotherly love, the prohibition against the use or threat of force by one state against another, and various statements inferred from the Golden Rule. In its story on Dean Acheson's speech, the *New York Times* said that he had thus swept aside the "publicly accepted and cherished tenets of United States policy under postwar Administrations."

Now there are, beyond cavil, people in our society who cherish moralisms and slogans that have little application to political affairs and others who believe that if sound moral principles are joined with a firm will they can easily cut through any Gordian knot of politics. If this group would attend to Dean Acheson's sharp cautions, his address should be salutary. For it is necessary to recognize, as Mr. Acheson insisted, that the criteria for political decisions should be hardheaded, that sound judgment can follow only upon proper appraisal of risks and dangers, of probable consequences, of gain and loss.

But far from constituting a majority or being in a position to determine the tenets of U.S. policy, the people who are the proper targets of Mr. Acheson's assault are in a distinct minority. However vocal this minority, it is difficult to discern what particular policies they determined under the administrations of Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy or Johnson. It is true that they did at one time—and to a lesser extent still do—sow confusion into our public discussion of political questions and thereby inhibited the execution of desirable policies. But they have been successfully admonished over the years by that school of political thinkers that has been labeled "realist," that school with which Dean Acheson's name has been prominently associated.

Now the admonitions of the realists are necessary, they must not be forgotten nor should their

value be slighted. But they are not sufficient. The weaknesses of any school of political theorists are likely to be more evident as that school gains the ascendancy. There are weaknesses in this school and they were clearly evident in Dean Acheson's own candid, direct address.

After positing as the admirable and generally accepted goal of our policy—"to preserve and foster an environment in which free societies may exist and flourish"—Dean Acheson said that we should then adopt a "strategic approach" to the means by which we achieve that goal. Moral considerations are largely irrelevant here, he said, as they were in making decisions about the Cuban crisis of 1962, in deciding to manufacture the bomb, in Lincoln's attitude to slavery relative to the Union. He could readily have multiplied the examples but his point was clear: in foreign policy the means are largely exempt from moral considerations.

Yet the mind rests uneasily on this hard premise and Mr. Acheson sought to soften it: "in foreign affairs, only the end can justify the means; this is not to say that the end justifies any means, or that some ends can justify anything." But we know the end, the goal of our foreign policy. What means can that end not justify? Once we

admit that some means are not justified then all means come under moral scrutiny in order that we may distinguish in ethical terms the acceptable from the non-acceptable, the undesirable from the even less desirable. Since people make different prudential assessments, judgments here will inevitably differ, but they *will* be made. This does not mean that the discussion concerning proper measures will be couched in moral terms. If moral awareness is absent at the time of decision it is not likely then to be provided. These assertions run directly counter, of course, to a major intent of Acheson's statement.

The fact that a person of Mr. Acheson's experience, knowledge and acuity has not led us out of the political wilderness, has not totally dissipated the confusion, is less a criticism of him than it is a proof of the complexity of the discussion and a sign that it should not die. For those who differ with Mr. Acheson never said that it was easy to show the relevance of ethics to foreign policy; they said that it was necessary and must, therefore, be made possible. As Jacques Maritain once wrote, in exactly this context, the means are, "so to speak, the end itself in its very process of coming to existence."

J. F.

## **in the magazines**

One view of relations between the "third world" and the West is provided by Brian Crozier in a review of several books recently published in England (*Spectator*, December 4). He reports that "an academic friend . . . wrote not long ago to suggest that it was my clear duty to write a book on how the West might rub along with the underdeveloped countries." But Crozier believes that the first order of business is for "someone to write a book telling the people of the underdeveloped countries how to rub along with the West." He suggests that "whoever it is might begin with a harsh reality: 'they' need 'us' more than 'we' need 'them.' Or, as Orwell . . . might have put it: all countries are interdependent but some are more interdependent than others."

What *should* inform the relationship between the two areas? Crozier contends that it is "in the enlightened self-interest of the richer countries that the poverty of the poorer ones should be reduced, just as it was in the enlightened self-interest of American capitalism that the workers should be

given purchasing power; if world poverty is not reduced as quickly as possible, the outcome can only be a deepening revolutionary chaos which, to the extent that it does anybody any good, will only help the West's enemies." And since development is also "an inescapable reality in countries that are overcrowded, as well as undernourished, such as India and China . . . in most cases . . . it is in the interest of poor countries, too, that they should grow richer; and in this, their interest coincides with ours. The principal sources of capital and know-how, however, are in the West."

It will then be "in the enlightened self-interest of the 'emerging' countries to stop attacking what they call neo-colonialism and welcome it with open arms," Crozier goes on to say. Certainly "the West could . . . make a bigger and saner contribution to third-world development than it now does. . . . But it would be so much easier to move in the direction of sanity if our underdeveloped friends stopped crying 'neo-colonialism' and we stopped crediting the third