J. Reuben Clark, Jr., and the American Approach to Foreign Policy

Robert S. Wood and Stan A. Taylor*

In a limited sense, the United States seems to be moving towards a situation comparable to that after World War I. The continuation of conflict as a normal pattern of international relations, growing disillusionment with the European Community, and the traumatic results of the attempt at "nation-building" in Southeast Asia—all these have combined with a pressing national agenda to resurrect feelings of distrust and moral censure, and desires to escape the contamination of power politics. And as in the past, this tendency to withdraw is sustained by the omnipotence of an illusion and the power of a very particular arrogance.

The illusion is that there exists a fundamental harmony in the moral-political world—that once the cold war is "over," peace will emerge; that the continuance of conflict is evidence of perverseness on the part of various states and leaders; and that continued participation in the game of international politics has and will continue to corrupt the American spirit. Newspaper columnists, senators, and academics declare that the re-ordering of American priorities and the resolution of its internal problems of social justice will have vast international as well as domestic consequences—that the light upon the mountain will be re-kindled as a beacon to the nations.

---

*Robert S. Wood is associate professor of political science at the Woodrow Wilson School of Government and Foreign Affairs, University of Virginia. He is the author of a number of books and articles on international affairs, including, *The Process of International Organization* and *France in the World Community.*

Biographical information for Dr. Taylor above.

The particular arrogance of this stance is that what is good for America is good for all other nations. It asserts that America is a model which is universally valid for all.

Within such a climate of opinion, it is hardly surprising that the 1920-1930 debate over the scope and character of America's international commitments should once again arise. The issue of isolationism which many had relegated to the archives of history has again been raised and revised to meet a malaise and disillusionment comparable to that which followed the Spanish-American and First World Wars.[1] And many of those who had earlier been condemned for their adherence to an outworn isolationist doctrine are now being "rehabilitated" and lionized as prophets whose vision outran the times. As the nation struggles to absorb the lessons of Vietnam and to define its role and policy in world politics, the scholarly world has begun the reassessment not only of the nation's present dilemma but of the conventional wisdom concerning its past. Martin B. Hickman and Ray C. Hillam's analysis of the isolationism of J. Reuben Clark is one such example.[2]

J. Reuben Clark is important in the present debate not only because his views were representative of practicing diplomats in the late twenties and early thirties (they indeed were), but because he became an important leader in the Mormon Church. It is a safe assumption that several generations of Mormon lawyers and political scientists looked upon Clark as a model who could inspire their own aspirations and endeavors—a man who excelled in the world of political and international affairs while remaining true to the faith. It is equally certain, however, that among those who were inspired by his example, many were uncomfortable with Clark's isolationist sentiments. In a period of expanding and apparently successful American commitments, J. Reuben Clark's analysis seemed at once archaic and naive. Confronted with the more recent political ambiguity and moral dilemmas of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, however, those same individuals who were attracted by Clark's example, if not his advice, are now able to accept much of his non-interventionist philosophy. It is probable that educated opinion in the Mormon Church,

---

[1]For an excellent example of this renewed debate, see Robert W. Tucker, *A New Isolationism: Threat or Promise?* (New York: Universe Books, 1972).

[2]Martin B. Hickman and Ray C. Hillam, J. Reuben Clark, Jr.: "Political Isolationism Revisited," *Dialogue* 7:37-46 (Spring 1972).

as in the nation generally, is turning toward a more non-interventionist attitude. J. Reuben Clark's thought is likely to provide the scripture for this transition, and descriptions such as that of Hickman and Hillam the instrument.

It is helpful at this kind of time, however, to view J. Reuben Clark's attitude towards American foreign policy not as an approach whose time had not yet come, nor as prophetic vision which ran counter to the American mainstream, but rather as an integral part of the mainstream of American thinking. It is true that Clark wrote and spoke at a time when U.S. foreign policy was very internationalist and interventionist; however, the post-World War II period must be viewed as a temporary aberration from the traditional American approach. Thus Clark's philosophy represents not so much a break with the attitudes of the past thirty years as an alteration of themes within a single American foreign policy tradition. J. Reuben Clark is personally important for countless individuals who saw in his life a pattern. However, his philosophy generally is not unique but representative of one important strand in U.S. foreign policy—a strand which seems destined for renewed importance. To understand the nature of Clark's contribution, therefore, it might be well to assess that tradition.

For this purpose we will identify two images which form a vital part of the American foreign policy tradition of which J. Reuben Clark's thought is but a variation. These are the *consensual* image and the *destinarian* image. In the first instance, the whole thrust of American social thought is in the direction of what one might call consensual politics. That is to say, politics is seen as being based on the postulate of a common human reason and universally and naturally-based precepts of right. The ultimate harmonization of political interests is hence guaranteed by the existence of universal and common rationality. If conflict persists, therefore, whether in the domestic or the international sphere, it can only be the result of ignorance, misunderstanding, or perverseness. The idea of legitimate, yet irreconcilable, interests is thus largely eschewed within this framework.

This approach is by no means unique to Clark or to the American perspective, but rather constitutes a fundamental thread in traditional western liberal thinking. An important tenet in western thought is that domestic and international

order are the products, not only of a common convergence of interests or utilitarian calculations, but also of a convergence of reason on universal standards of right. The whole world is seen as being governed by a universal natural law discovered by rational faculties common to all men and binding upon their acts at all political levels. Hence, mankind constitutes a natural legal community. This "community of nature" is thus dependent in theory on a universal symmetry of reason and in practice on the actual exercise of such reason and a willingness to heed its dictates. Moreover, in such liberal thought there is not only confidence that reason will be so employed and obeyed, but that obedience to rational precepts is also compatible with the tenets of self-interest.[3]

If it is true that this approach to politics is not primarily an American phenomenon, it is also clear that the relative absence of the United States from the interplay of power politics during the critical period of its growth, as well as the particular vision which Americans had of themselves, strongly reinforced this perspective. The accident of geographical separation, the abundance and territorial dimensions of its natural wealth, and the good fortune of British maritime protection, all combined to obscure politics of scarcity and politics of irreconcilable interests. By contrast, the Europeans were viewed in this image not so much as the unfortunate actors in an historical and geopolitical situation objectively different from that of the United States, but as the victims of their own self-inflicted addiction to Machiavellian intrigues and conflict. It was perversity, not propinquity, which defined the dilemma. To an extraordinary degree the United States became an embodiment of the thought of John Locke and the Lockean approach to politics.[4]

Locke posited a real community of mankind which is prior both in time and in status to the interstate community. Locke admits that the demands of self-preservation gave rise to the state. And, indeed, he indicates that there was probably a

---

[3]For an extended discussion of the importance of traditional western liberal thinking to international relations, see Robert S. Wood, "History, Thought, and Images: The Development of International Law and Organization," *Virginia Journal of International Law* 12:35-65 (December 1971).

[4]For an analysis of the Lockean and Rousseauistic approaches to international relations, see Robert S. Wood, *France in the World Community* (Sijthoff, 1973). An excellent study of the domestic implications of Lockean thought can be found in Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

chain reaction—that the establishment of one state led by the logic of self-preservation to the establishment of others. He, in effect, admits the existence of the "security dilemma" and the mutual balance of hostilities in interstate politics. However, Locke was insistent that whatever the voluntarist or positive basis of the domestic or the interstate system, it could never submerge the natural or rational community of mankind. His discussion on revolution and on the executive power of rulers in international affairs is instructive in this regard. Unlike Hobbes, the dominant value was for him, less order than justice. And, although he counseled prudential restraint (i.e., weigh the balance of forces), Locke recognized the right of revolution and of intervention even in the domestic affairs of other states in the interest of the prior rights and duties of the natural community.

In interstate affairs Locke recognized that an international legal community arose from calculations of reason and interest and was expressed in such instrumentalities as alliances, pacts, or customs. In addition to this international legal community there existed the *legal* community of mankind. Locke refused to draw a clearcut distinction between international law and international morality. The moral demands of nature indeed have "legal" status, a status derived not from a consent, but from the will of God, and rendered harmonious with all men's reason, properly exercised. Moreover, the sanctity of the positive law of nations was founded on the Natural Law rule *pacta sunt servanda.* In the state of nature where force and right are never certainly joined, the demands of the Natural Law and the tightness of the community of mankind are never as sure as the positive law and community. They are, nonetheless, "real" and impose "real" demands on the rulers both internally and in their dealings with other states and peoples.

The important task for Locke in defending the real status of this natural community was to demonstrate the possibility of a broad convergence of opinion and belief on fundamental rights and duties. The convergence could not be simply the product of the social order, although it might contribute, but it must have some "natural" basis. This is particularly necessary if one is to maintain the idea of a community of mankind across national boundaries. Locke, in effect, posited a common symmetry of reason between all men which would be rendered even more certain once the "moral state" (i.e., liberal, lim-

ited) comes into being. Moreover, the security dilemma of the individual is mitigated by the establishment of the civil community and the state, thus rendering it possible for the community of mankind to assert itself across national boundaries. It seems crucial to the actual maintenance of this community, however, that there be a certain equality of conditions among states and that the state be limited. Otherwise, war, which had been conceived as a disturbing incident, may become a permanent condition.

Viewed through this consensual image, the American commitment to self-determination becomes for Clark not only a basis for domestic politics but also a principle of international relations. It must be emphasized that the Lockean approach to "state-building" is personal and universal rather than ethnic and particularistic in character. That is to say, the contract which binds society together takes its legitimate character from an affirmation of the individuals composing the community, not from a shared history or ethnic identity. At the same time, these individual citizens are seen as being bound together in a community of reason with citizens in every other polity. Both the individual and the universal community of reason are prior to history, ethnocentricity, and the national group. National groups have the right to realize their communal aspirations within their own state, but the claim of national self-determination ultimately derives not from some special status of groups but from the individual right of association. Nationalism was in analytical terms a convergence of individuals, not a submersion of the will. It is possible for Clark, for Woodrow Wilson, and for all who share this image, therefore, to assume that nationalism and peace are compatible—and, indeed, that it is thwarted nationalism and self-determination or perverted leadership which gives rise to conflict. The organization of groups into separate states is thus in this view compatible with both the universal community of mankind and the principles of constitutional democracy. Thus American nationalism for Clark is both individualistic and universalistic in character: the principles of its regime are considered the universal principles of politics, and the distinction between internal and external politics is one of degree, not quality.

Thus, Americans have tended to assume consensus, and to ignore or downgrade historical and ethnic influences. It must not be assumed, of course, that emphasis on consensus has

meant that violence in thought and in practice is eliminated from American life. Indeed, the traditional American approach to force is intimately linked to its consensual vision. As has often been noted, American thought tends to make a sharp distinction between peace and war, with the former considered as the "natural" condition. If there is a divergence of positions, a search for "facts" and a "reasoning together" should eliminate the causes of conflict. If the sides are irreconcilable after such attempts, there is a *prima facie* case of perverseness on one side or the other or both. In a conflict involving the United States, a judgment that the other side is "perverse" is a signal that peace has given way to war. Constraint replaces conciliation and force replaces diplomacy. Diplomacy and strategy are classically seen not as interrelated aspects of a single policy, but as two distinct phenomena. If peace is the natural condition, then battle, once engaged, is total, and surrender is to be unconditional. Once the source of perversion is removed, peace will emerge.

One of the great revolutions in thought arising out of American involvement in world politics since World War II has been the erosion of this traditional image. The protracted character of the cold war and the travail of alliance maintenance have led to a wide-ranging concentration on the intimate linkages between diplomacy and strategy. The impact of the works of such diverse personalities as Hans Morgenthau, Thomas Schelling, Kenneth Boulding, Anatole Rappoport, and Henry Kissinger on both the analysis and practice of U.S. foreign policy testify to the importance of this intellectual revolution. At the same time, however, past habits and traditional thought are still remarkably strong in the attitudes of both the American public and government. Widely diverse viewpoints betray assumptions of ultimate consensus and of the qualitative distinction between "peace" and "war." Clark's recommendations for withdrawal from foreign policy commitments and his call for the decisive battle often involve similar perspectives. If fundamental harmony is assumed, one can recommend reliance either on "historical forces" and the international impact of exemplary behavior at home, or engagement in the final and decisive initiative, battle, negotiation, etc. After nearly thirty years of protracted, often unsatisfactory conflict, as well as deep internal divisions, one is startled to see how little "historical melancholy" and despair have overtaken the Americans,

and how deep the strain of optimism still runs. The consensualist image in foreign policy still constitutes a remarkably stable element in the American orientation, and Clark's views as well as their recent rehabilitation is evidence of this.

A second fundamental aspect of the American foreign policy orientation might be designated the destinarian image. This concept refers to the sense of destiny or "chosenness" which has impregnated American attitudes since Puritan days. If the Calvinist view of America as a "New Zion" gave way to a more secular perspective, the sense of election and unique historical mission has been extraordinarily tenacious. Alexis de Tocqueville reflected the "New Zion" theme when he pictured the American haven for Europe's persecuted peoples as being a land which "had been kept in reserve by the Deity and had just risen from beneath the waters of the Deluge." The American experiment in constitutional democracy was viewed not only in domestic, but in universal terms—and, indeed, the Constitution was given a status not dissimilar to that of the Bible.

Destinarianism tended to fluctuate between relative non-involvement in international politics, on the one hand, and messianic engagement on the other. In the first case, one heard the argument that external political entanglement would risk moral contamination and that exemplary behavior at home would act as a beacon and redeeming model for the rest of the world.

Moreover, such a concept sustained very strongly the new nation's pragmatic interests. In his farewell address, George Washington argued both that America's interests were remote from those of Europe and that a favorable geographical situation allowed the new republic to escape involvement in European controversies. A sense of distinctness from Europe and its separate states was furthermore essential if the new nation was not to be divided by European disputes. And, as Tom Paine shrewdly noted in *Common Sense,* "As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial connection with any part of it." Moral perspectives, political calculations, commercial considerations, and geographical separateness—all contributed to the formulation of the doctrine of non-entanglement.

In addition, the involvement of the European powers in the French Revolutionary-Napoleonic wars both weakened the involvement of many of the European states in the Americas,

and increased the independence of the new republic by the territorial expansion of the Louisiana Purchase. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Washington's advice seemed both realistic and supportive of the national sense of destiny: "If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may defy material injury free from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel."

In an important sense, the Monroe Doctrine represents the capstone for nineteenth-century American foreign policy—not because it demanded heavy external involvement, but because it symbolized both the conception and the possibility of American separateness. The Louisiana Purchase extended the material base for American non-entanglement and gave the national interest a hemispheric conception. The British opposition to the restoration of Spanish control in Latin America, as well as its conception of maritime commercial trade, converged with American interests without requiring a formal entanglement with the United Kingdom. The unilateral declaration by President Monroe "denying" the Americas to further European colonization thus met America's broadened interests but at the same time maintained non-entanglement. And, finally, the national identity was reaffirmed as distinct from European "tyranny" and power politics.

J. Reuben Clark voiced perhaps the epitome of this general notion when he said that "... political isolation will bring us the greatest happiness and prosperity, the greatest temporal achievement not only, but the highest intellectual and spiritual achievement also, the greatest power for good, the strongest force for peace, *the greatest blessing to the world.*[5]

If "exemplary" non-involvement defines one important aspect of American destinarianism, so messianic engagement describes another. Harking back to the consensual theme in U.S. foreign policy, messianism has tended to replace non-involvement when the "natural" condition of peace gave way to war. The wars which entangled the United States in world

[5]J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *Stand Fast by Our Constitution* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1962), p. 77.

politics were easily viewed as "crusades" and the outcomes were naturally seen as restoring the status quo, i.e., peace and withdrawal. World War I fit neatly into this pattern. American engagement in Europe was soon seen in redemptive terms. The "perverse" enemy was defeated and the American order was to be writ large. At the same time the first major involvement in European politics proved to be something of a traumatic experience, for the moral ambiguity and political complications of power politics reinforced the "legacy of distrust and moral censure." As Stanley Hoffman has noted:

> One can argue that the return to isolation after involvement —i.e., the repudiation of Wilson—was in part a reaction by men who saw in the kind of involvement implied in the Versailles Treaty and League of Nations not the opportunity to fulfill Wilson's exhilarating vision of leadership for principles and altruism, but a nightmare of contamination by Europeans unwilling to accept so lofty a vision and so disturbing a leadership.[6]

Clark clearly fits into this category.

If the Americans entered World War I with a passion for redemption, the entrance into World War II betrayed not only past reprobation, but an unwelcome diversion from the task of internal reconstruction. Unlike the post-World War I period, however, withdrawal after the conflict, though desired and even attempted, was no longer possible. The relatively protracted involvement of the United States in international politics since World War II has been indicative of both a reaffirmation of past attitudes and an increasing subtlety in America's political vision. The reconstruction of Europe provided an almost perfect outlet for America's moral dynamism and the cold war sustained the view that peace only required the elimination of the perverse outlaws. At the same time, it would be wrong to ignore the increasingly sophisticated perspective on international politics which developed as a result of this prolonged involvement. The simple assumption of consensus, the self-confident assurance of one's mission, and the simple dichotomy of war and peace have clearly been eroded. It might be noted, however, that much of this erosion stems not so much from America's experience within Europe as elsewhere. The tasks of *reconstruction* of states

---

[6]Stanley Hoffman, *Gulliver's Troubles or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), p. 98.

sharing, after all, similar moral and political assumptions, and of *containment* of a reasonably clear threat, probably proved far less damaging to American assumptions than the task of *nation-building* and *limited war* in the rest of the world. It has become evident that a far more real division in world politics is not that between the United States and Western Europe, but beween those units and much of the rest of the world.

What should be evident in this brief survey of American foreign policy perspectives is the remarkable consistency of certain images throughout American history. The recent renewed interest in isolationism and its associated "revisiting" of J. Reuben Clark needs to be viewed then as a return to a more traditional approach to foreign policy. Clark clearly shared these images of consensus and destiny. Belief in the ultimate harmonization of political interests and a sense of destiny or "chosenness" are integral elements of both Clark's philosophy and U.S. foreign policy, with the exception of the post-World War II period.

Two questions remain, neither of which are answerable in clear terms within the framework of this essay. The first has to do with what Clark meant by the term "isolationist." There is some evidence that, despite Clark's rhetoric, he was not an isolationist in the extreme sense. For example, although Clark could declare that he was a "political isolationist in the *full sense* of the term,"[7] he nowhere spells out what it is that he wants to be isolated from in any terms other than foreign conflict. Robert Tucker argues that isolationism is not to be identified with "quitting the world" or with an "absence of all significant relationships," but rather with an absence of certain *kinds* of relationships.[8] Clark's constant concern with entangling treaties and his refinement of that concern in terms of automatic military obligations suggest that he may not be as pure an isolationist as he thinks he is.

Finally, there remains the question of whether isolationism, in whatever sense one wishes to define it, is either in the best national interest of the United States or in the best interest of international stability. That the resurgence of cries for isolationism coincides with the apparent termination of a long, and rather unpopular war should be cause for immediate sus-

---

[7]Clark, *Stand Fast,* p. 76.

[8]Tucker, *New Isolationism,* p. 12.

picion. History is full of examples of nations who, their vision somewhat biased due to a recent experience, have pursued attitudes and policies geared to prevent the war which, in fact, has just ended. In other words, those whose affection for isolation stems from a belief that such a posture would have prevented Vietnam may be right in that assumption. But whether it will discourage or encourage a particular future conflict is still a legitimate question.

I have always thought that one of President Clark's greatest gifts was a sound understanding—the product of a superior mind, an abundance of common sense, and a prodigious capacity for and will to work. One must associate with him to appreciate the power of his intellect and the soundness of his judgment. With incisive penetration his mind quickly cuts through the irrelevant and superficial and goes to the heart of the matter at hand.

Pres. Marion G. Romney, 1959

Having spent my first twenty years in the Twentieth Ward, within two small city blocks of the Clark home, with its wonderful two story high library and study, I can say that most of the nights the light was burning in that study until after one o'clock. I used to wonder if it it ever went off.

With a whisper of his ever present dry humor President Clark complained to me: "Oscar, I can't work as hard as I did when I was seventy-five." He was then only eighty-five years old.

Oscar W. McConkie, Jr.