

Might, right and U.S. influence

By Michael A. Weinstein

The overriding commitment of the Reagan administration to apply military pressure at every point of tension in the world threatens to cost the United States dearly as a new wave of popular participation sweeps the globe. The most delicate and serious issues in international relations today are moral, not military. We must be prepared to adopt a new strategy to meet a novel challenge.

Leopoldo Zea, the dean of contemporary Mexican philosophers, has thought deeply about the relations of the United States to the rest of the world. In his many books and articles he has repeated the wise observation that most revolutions in less-developed countries initially seek only to win the freedoms that the Western democracies value so highly. These revolutions and popular movements begin to take a totalitarian turn when they meet resistance from the industrial democracies, pre-eminently the United States. Zea wonders with chagrin why the United States is reluctant to let others share in the political goods it holds so dear for itself. What is sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander.

Zea's wisdom is a reminder of simple justice in an era of history in which we tend to become so embroiled in strategic calculations that we often lose sight of the principles we are pledged to defend. But his analysis goes deeper than a plea to our ethical sensitivities. Zea's most interesting and fruitful idea is that international affairs are ruled not only by a military balance of power, but, more important, by a balance of moral influence. He argues that through its repeated efforts to stem the tide of popular nationalism with force, the United States has lost its moral authority and will eventually see its political advantages erode.

Are Zea's thoughts merely the pious musings of an intellectual who happens to live in a country which has very little military clout? It might be convenient for our strategic planners to think so, but it would be a convenience nurtured on illusion. Strangely enough, Zea is the realist in our present circumstances. In times of popular quiescence the big stick often appears to be sufficient, but when democratic sentiments are mobilized it tends to recoil against its possessor.

The United States has gained very little and lost a great deal through a generation of subordinating diplomacy to might. In the period between World War II and the Vietnam War, the United States had sufficient economic and military supremacy to contain the forces for change around the world. The Cuban revolution was a warning that the days of innocence were over, but only Vietnam made it obvious that we really didn't have the heart to resist a national revolution.

Yet in subsequent years we did not take that lesson seriously and have continued to pursue the nostalgic fantasy of a pax Americana. In the process we have seen one of our most important allies on the Soviet rim, Iran, turn against us, and have witnessed a popular movement in Nicaragua drift toward Marxism. Our preponderance of weapons has not made up for our loss of moral authority.

The decline of America's place in the world can be

traced directly to a painful tension in our national psyche. If an astute observer and admirer like Zea can witness our moral conflict, we feel it from the inside even if we don't always acknowledge it. It might have been possible for us "to bomb Hanoi back to the Stone Age" and get away with it, but we weren't willing, as a nation, to do so. That is not a mark of weakness, but a testimony to our civility. And it's not likely that we will have the heart to undertake a bloody occupation of Nicaragua or to fight a brutal war with Iran. Even though there is an imperialist strain in our history, our national genius has not been to roll back popular movements.

But we also haven't been willing to acknowledge our better self wholeheartedly. Our intervention in Vietnam set in place a self-destructive pattern of international behavior that has been with us since then. Unwilling to pay the moral price of military victory over revolutions in weaker countries, we have adopted the neurotic compromise of attempting to bludgeon our adversaries to the negotiating table, beating them with the stick while we hold out the carrot. Any psychologist knows that this is the most counterproductive way to conduct a relationship. It only makes the opponent distrustful and truculent. But we don't even need to learn from elementary psychology. We can see the disastrous effects of blowing hot and cold all around the world.

It's time for us to start paying heed to our better self and to reverse our priorities. We should realize that we cannot play the bad guy convincingly and should start engaging in an honorable diplomacy which recognizes the right of popular movements and broad-based revolutions to exist. And then we should use our economic power and political advantage to open up paths of collaboration with them. We can still tip the balance of moral influence in our favor, but in an increasingly competitive and pluralized world, we don't have forever to do it.

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