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The American Tradition in Foreign Policy, by Frank Tannenbaum

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BOOK REVIEWS

THE AMERICAN TRADITION IN FOREIGN POLICY. By Frank Tannenbaum. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 1955. Pp. xiv, 178. \$3.50.

Many recent American writings on international affairs have been soul searching re-evaluations of American foreign policy which reveal an uneasy state of mind about the leadership role cast upon the United States since the turn of the century. These books frankly express a dissatisfaction with the premises upon which American world policy has been formulated.

In this book, Frank Tannenbaum, a distinguished Columbia University historian, attempts an analysis of the tenets upon which this policy has been based, and takes exception to the conclusions and preachments of some of his fellow assessors. Professor Tannenbaum, who is an established authority on Latin American affairs and the author of books in sociology, protests vigorously against the flood of "realist" literature, so called because of its charge that the American approach to international relations has been perverted by legalistic, moralistic, utopian, and sentimental considerations. In his eyes the "realist" writings, characterized by the books of Professor Hans J. Morgenthau, of the University of Chicago, and George F. Kennan, a retired career diplomat, are frankly amoral and aim at the abandonment by the United States of its humanitarian and pacific traditions with regard to other peoples, and the replacement of these traditions by the doctrine of the balance of power.

The American Tradition in Foreign Policy is written lucidly and with force. Unfortunately, it is a combination of wishful thinking, a lopsided interpretation of American and world history, and an example of poor insight into the political process. Nevertheless, it is an effective statement of a point of view by no means uncommon today in the United States, and by virtue of this deserves serious consideration.

The thesis running throughout Tannenbaum's statement is that there has existed a distinct and unique moral quality pertaining to the American people, and which has been expressed by them in their relations with other people. This "exuberant and restless power, so recognizably descriptive of the United States"¹ has been characterized by self-sacrifice

1. P. 4.

and sympathy for the weak, and has been the dominant theme of American foreign relations since the inception of the nation. This continuing motif, which Professor Tannenbaum identifies as the dominating reality of American foreign policy, is the principle of the "co-ordinate state," the belief in the equality of all states and in the dignity and worth of all peoples. He finds examples of its operation in the American colonial demand to be treated on a plane of equality with the inhabitants of the British Isles, in the United States constitutional provision protecting the equality of all members of the Union, and in the understanding reached on the admission of new states to be formed out of the western territory on an equal basis with the original thirteen. He also associates with the doctrine of the "co-ordinate state" the multilateralization of the Monroe Doctrine and, indeed, its original promulgation, the Open Door Policy of John Hay, Woodrow Wilson's advocacy of the League of Nations, the rise of the Organization of American States, US entry into the United Nations, and, in general, what he believes is United States support for the principle of the equality of all states. Similarly, and somewhat contradictorily, he also describes the "co-ordinate state" principle as underlying the British Commonwealth, the Swiss state, and other international federations. He urges the retention by the American people of the "co-ordinate state" thesis and the rejection by them of the advice offered by the "realists."

Professor Tannenbaum's analysis of the "realist" position is unfair, and his characterization of American foreign policy and of the principles underlying international organization is inaccurate and contradictory. His consideration of the "realist" literature is emotional. The Columbia professor sets up a straw man which he proceeds to demolish with cavalier ease. He presents both Kennan and Morgenthau as diabolical disciples of Machiavelli and credits them with a desire to sweep away all that is good in past American diplomacy. He thereupon denounces Machiavelli, defends Woodrow Wilson and idealism and feels that he has justified his position. Any person, however, who has read the works of Morgenthau and of Kennan recognizes that Tannenbaum's statement of their views is actually an overstatement and a misrepresentation. At best the two publicists assert a truism; at worst one of them is open to the charge of using caustic language in a provocative manner. But neither is explicitly wicked as Tannenbaum makes out. Both Kennan and Morgenthau urge that foreign policy should be based on a calculated estimate of "national interest" and not upon a vague idealism which defies the actual distribution of power in the name of a "principle" or of a "cause." Morgenthau objects, for example, to "intoxication with moral

abstractions . . . which . . . has become the prevailing substitute for political thought.”² Similarly, Kennan is bothered by the reliance in American thought upon utopian schemes for rushing the initiation of super or international institutions which lack a real sociological base for the solution of material and cultural differences which are both real and pressing. He attacks, therefore, past policy formulations:

“As you have no doubt surmised, I see the most serious fault of our past policy formulation to lie in something that I might call the legalistic-moralistic approach to international problems. This approach runs like a red skein through our foreign policy of the last fifty years. It has in it something of the old emphasis on arbitration treaties, something of the Hague Conferences and schemes for universal disarmament, something of the more ambitious American concepts of the role of international law, something of the League of Nations and the United Nations, something of the Kellogg Pact, something of the idea of a universal Article 51 pact, something of the belief in World Law and World Government.”³

The truism which Kennan and Morgenthau both advance is that national interest should be the determinant of a nation's foreign policy. The phrase “national interest” is itself an abstraction which contains meaning only as applied in specific instances. An assessment of what is “national interest” must be made on an ad hoc basis. Neither Kennan nor Morgenthau can be charged *a priori* with being either immoral or amoral. In fact, the latter argues that for a statesman to ignore the interests of his constituents in behalf of a subjective idealism is itself immoral. Kennan, furthermore, reveals a broad-gauged understanding of the factors which must be taken into account in determining national policy. He takes a long-range enlightened view rather than the narrow stand Tannenbaum would have his audience believe.

One almost suspects that part of the criticism heaped upon both Morgenthau and Kennan, whom Tannenbaum and others perhaps identify wrongly as of one opinion, for in given instances the two may and probably do disagree as to what constitutes “national interest,” stems from the sharpness of Morgenthau's pen. Tannenbaum asserts that Kennan's argument has “a kind of urbanity, a kind of sensitivity for the values and shortcomings of the American milieu and a kind of compassion for human frailty that robs it of much of its sting. It is so

2. MORGENTHAU, IN DEFENSE OF THE NATIONAL INTEREST 4 (1951).

3. KENNAN, AMERICAN DIPLOMACY 1900-1950, at 95 (1951).

gently, so persuasively stated, that the reader finds himself carried along almost to the point of agreement until he realizes that this modest and restrained presentation is, in fact, a repudiation of every value we hold."⁴ No such compliment, left-handed as it is, can be given to the University of Chicago professor. Might part of Tannenbaum's hostility to the writings of the "realists" be an emotional tropism triggered by the lack of finesse with which Morgenthau blasts away many entrenched shibboleths? Perhaps Tannenbaum would profit from reading anew Kennan's *The Realities of American Foreign Policy*.⁵ He may then find that he has more in common with the "realists" than is admitted between the covers of *The American Tradition in Foreign Policy*.

One great difference, and a crucial one, which distinguishes Tannenbaum from the "realists" is his optimism about human nature. Whereas Tannenbaum seeks out the moral virtues of the American people, Morgenthau and Kennan also examine the shortcomings in human nature. They express reservations about man's conduct in the past and caution those who would assume that man will act differently in the future. Tannenbaum, employing rose-colored glasses, selects only those achievements out of the past which to him illustrate the unique moral qualities of those who inhabit the central portion of North America.

Thus, in Tannenbaum's book, there is implicit a double standard which fails to survive close scrutiny. Tannenbaum informs his readers in a chapter entitled, "The American Commitment,"⁶ that the feudal and monarchical experiences through which Europe has passed have left an indelible mark on the political ideals and practices of its nations. He feels that the United States, born as a reaction to European authority, intolerance, and violence has nurtured a different set of values. In this manner he justifies as uniquely American the doctrine of the "co-ordinate state" which is seen by him as merely the extension to international affairs of the ethical premises of American democracy. Yet, perhaps, unwittingly, by applying the doctrine of the "co-ordinate state" as a general rule governing the constitution of federations, Tannenbaum contradicts himself. Certainly the Swiss and British are of the Old World, and the United States was created as a reaction to British behavior. How then did the Swiss federation and the British Commonwealth come into being? Also, is it not true that the ideological foundation for the American revolution was largely British and partly French?

4. P. 164.

5. Princeton University Press (1954).

6. Pp. 3-37.

An examination of American history fails to support the author's claims about American foreign policy. How justified, for example, is he in projecting myths held in the United States about domestic affairs to the realm of international relations? Apart from the desirability of conducting a foreign policy upon such premises, has in reality American foreign policy reflected American domestic political ethics? Tannenbaum asserts that the variations in United States policy from the ideal of the "co-ordinate state" are "side currents at the edge of the broad stream of our foreign policy."⁷ He amasses a large selection of quotations in support of his view, citing such individuals as John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, Charles Sumner, William H. Seward, James G. Blaine, John Hay, Elihu Root, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Charles Evans Hughes, Reuben J. Clark, Cordell Hull, and Franklin Roosevelt. Yet how many of these persons were oblivious to the forces operating in international affairs? It is proper to quote the oratorical phrases and high sounding idealism of American statesmen, but one must also examine their policies in practice. The Monroe Doctrine was promulgated not solely, if at all, because American statesmen were interested in the independence of the Latin American states, but because these statesmen were concerned with the preservation of the independence of the United States. The doctrine was multilateralized, not because of faith in the doctrine of the "co-ordinate state" but because it was convenient just before the outbreak of the First World War in Europe to associate the ABC countries of Latin America in the dealings of the United States with Mexico. It lessened the burden and vitiated criticism of the United States in Latin America, criticism which did not make investments there particularly welcome. Certainly among some circles there was a sense of guilt about Roosevelt's big stick, but unilateral American intervention in lands to the south, although supposedly repudiated in 1930, has never really been abandoned. Merely, more refined techniques have been employed. American policy makers, for example, did not refrain from bringing about a change in Guatemala when they felt that United States interests were being undermined by the existing regime.

The Open Door Policy, cited by Tannenbaum as an example of the operation of the "co-ordinate state" doctrine, is actually proof of just the opposite. The bluff perpetrated by John Hay at the turn of the century was concerned not with "our commitments to the ideals of equal status and the moral integrity of the nation"⁸ but with the possibility that

7. P. 141.

8. P. 97.

investments of American citizens would be excluded from the Asian mainland, and with the possibility that a China divided among the European states would serve as bases for the expansion of these states into areas deemed important to United States security.

Even if the existence of the doctrine of the "co-ordinate state" is left unproved, is it nonetheless necessarily a desirable basis upon which to conduct foreign policy?

The concept of the equality of states, Tannenbaum's views notwithstanding, had its origin not in the United States but in Europe in the writings of the international lawyers. When it was first advanced it was rationalization of monarchical power. Today, however, the doctrine runs counter to the growing economic and cultural interdependence of the world. In the past, it has served as an argument to protect the rights of certain peoples against their neighbors, and undoubtedly will still be used for this purpose. Yet, it can and also has been used to frustrate the policies of the majority of the earth's inhabitants. If, as Tannenbaum wishes, international organization develops upon the principle of the equality of all states (and international organization has not developed in that way) that minority of people occupying the miniscule political jurisdictions and the under-populated regions will be in a position to frustrate the common endeavor of the more populated lands. Why, it may be asked, should Lybia or Afghanistan have as much a voice in international relations as either India or the United States? Clearly, the concept of the equality of states if useful is only useful in a limited manner. There is no evidence to support the belief that the recognition of the "co-ordinate state" principle in the face of the actual inequality of existing political units is either a step forward in international relations or morally superior to the non-recognition of such a principle.

At one point, the author declares that an adoption of the "co-ordinate state" thesis within the League of Nations would have saved the League and would have brought Italy to its knees in the Ethiopian crisis.

"It can surely be argued that the principle of collective security failed under the League of Nations precisely because the League was not built upon the principle of the co-ordinate state. If all the members of that body had had an equal voice, Italy's attack upon Ethiopia would have been defeated, and sanctions, both economic and military, would have been effectively applied."⁹

9. P. 165.

Such a statement reflects a clear lack of realization that authority carries with it a degree of responsibility. No paper majority, in and of itself, could have converted the great powers to support sanctions against Italy. In this instance, as in many others, *The American Tradition in Foreign Policy* presents an unsophisticated picture of the political process which presupposes the existence of a powerful sense of community among nations, when, in fact, such a community is still struggling to be born. In this respect it follows in the tradition of the old-line peace advocates who objected to the intrusion of "politics" into international relations and who cherished as an ideal international cooperation and a federation of the nations upon the basis of a universal international legal norm, but who failed to appreciate the primitive nature of international law.

Thus, in numerous ways *The American Tradition in Foreign Policy* obscures with slogans vital issues which require consideration. The book suffers, furthermore, from being loosely organized and inexcusably redundant.¹⁰

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THE LEGAL ASPECT OF MONEY. By F. A. Mann. Second Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1954. Pp. xi, 488. \$6.15.

The enormous depreciation, and in several instances complete collapse, of numerous currencies, together with the great disequilibrium of international balances of payment and other economic changes which have emerged from the two great wars, have brought to the forefront the importance of monetary law. The gold standard toppled. What was believed to be its automatic mechanism safeguarding the stability of the value of money was supplanted by legislative fiats.¹ In numerous countries gold and other valuation clauses were outlawed.² Severe exchange control restrictions, and discriminatory trade practices frequently curtail

10. Tannebaum stated his case more effectively in an article, of which this book is an expansion. See, for example, *The Balance of Power Versus the Co-ordinate State*, 67 POL. SCI. Q. 173 (1952).

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1. For some of the writings on this subject, see NAT'L INDUSTRIAL CONFERENCE Bd., *SHALL WE RETURN TO THE GOLD STANDARD—NOW?*, STUDIES IN BUSINESS ECONOMICS No. 43 (1954); KENT, *MONEY AND BANKING* 21, 22, 59 (1951); BEYEN, *MONEY IN THE MAELSTROM* 37-39 (1949).

2. 48 STAT. 112, 31 U.S.C. § 463 (1952); Gold Clause Act, 1937, 1 GEO. 6 c. 33 (Canada); Gold Clause Act, 1939, 3 GEO. 6 c. 45 (Canada). With respect to other countries, see NUSSBAUM, *MONEY IN THE LAW* 280-83 (1950).