
EDITORIAL

A few months ago the president, responding to a reporter's suggestion that mutual deterrence had kept the peace for forty years, insisted that it was only the American "monopoly" of nuclear weapons that had kept the Soviet Union at bay. "You have to ask yourself," the president said, "how many nations in the world could have the monopoly that we had and not have taken advantage."

What kind of hubris is it that finds cause for self-congratulation because the United States has chosen not to visit the USSR with the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? that associates total power with righteousness? that grants itself absolution by announcing to the applause of assembled evangelical authorities that "the glory of this land has been its capacity for transcending the moral evils of our past"? It is the hubris that springs from capitalist fantasies about power: to have a "monopoly" upon the most illimitable and destructive power known to history—not to want to share in the burden of that power but to have it all. Even the god of Genesis who had carried out his vow to "blot out man" and "to make an end of all flesh" would later promise Noah "neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done."

All societies cultivate power as a condition of collective existence but very few societies have created a durable culture of power in celebration of what the philosopher Hobbes calls "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in Death." The Nazi nightmare lasted a decade, no more. The Soviet tyranny persists but it is a suffocating rather than a dynamic system of power. The United States has its own culture of power: restless, durable, and Hobbesian. Nuclear supremacy is its telos, and a line from Livy awaits as its epitaph: "in love with death, both individual and collective."

While many of the world's peoples live in apprehension of America's economic and military domination, Americans mostly refuse to look very deeply into the system of power in which we are all complicit. Seeing little or no oppression at home and believing that constitutional guarantees of liberty and free elections are intact, Americans assume that the existence of these freedoms automatically precludes the possibility that our society might also have been busy accumulating greater power than any previous society in history. The truth is that the American idea of freedom is and has been less of a restraint on power than a necessary condition of its development.

The American idea of freedom is a demand to be left alone, to be unhindered. American power is the idea of joining technological innovation with economic productivity, igniting that mixture with a promise of quick and large economic rewards that attract energy and skill, and then promoting the product. Capitalism is America's way of organizing power. As the unabashed agent and representative of corporate capitalism, the Reagan administration has attempted to unify corporate and state power. It is not that the administration is probusiness—this could be said of almost all administrations since 1789—but that it represents a culmination of changing capitalist attitudes toward state power.

Beginning with the Nixon presidency, but now perfected by the Reaganites, an incoming administration does more than replace Democratic officeholders with Republicans. It seeks to colonize government offices and agencies with ideological loyalists whose values, instincts, and skills are derived from corporate models. The result has been to blur the line between public and private domains, between the political and the corporate—distinctions that, at best, have enjoyed a tenuous existence throughout the history of the republic.

When Reagan appointees are asked about the difference between working for the government and for private business, their principal response is that in business an executive can expect an order to be obeyed promptly, while in government an executive encounters only frustration. As far as one can tell, this difference occasions no reflections about whether the nature of public power in constitutional systems does not require a considerable frustration of executive power. Perhaps this is because business executives measure power by what it takes to get a job done rather than by what it means to nurture justice and equality. The differences have become blurred because the meaning of public and private have both changed. The public domain has increasingly become the domain of bureaucracy, and bureaucracies work mostly in secret: and so the public has become more private. The private domain, in turn, is now dominated by corporations that have spent considerable sums on public activities, from education to culture, to persuade the people that they are public-spirited and socially responsible: and so the private has become more public.

The consequences of the inversion of public and private are evident in the recent scandal about the Environmental Protection Agency. It is a scandal that concerns the particular form of corruption for which the Reagan administration is most responsible. It is not about simple bribery, like Watergate. It is about the corruption of public vocations by private corporations; and it is about the connection between freedom and corporate power.

“The primary constituents of this administration,” according to a memo by the agency's late and unlamented assistant administrator for solid waste and emergency response, are “the business community.” Several top officials in the agency were freshly arrived from corporations that EPA is supposed to regulate. The leaders of the agency had made it clear from the beginning that they intended to

interpret environmental safeguards so as to free businessmen from "excessive" regulations. Their pronouncements seemed like good old laissez-faire doctrine about getting government off the backs of businessmen by deregulating their activities. But what looks like a reduction in government power turns out to be an increase in corporate power. Relaxed standards and deregulation reduce the impediments to corporate freedom of action. What appears as an increase in freedom has the opposite result: it puts more power in the hands of the powerful and enables the powerful to influence our lives more effectively. Our costs, their benefits.

Deregulation and the recruitment of corporate loyalists are only a few of the means of increasing forms of business power. Ignoring the letter, spirit, and intent of statutes; reducing the funds of "uncooperative" agencies or refusing to fill positions are some of the others. And, of course, there are the bald-faced giveaways of power by Secretary Watt. Public lands and resources are made over to private exploitation as though that last restraint of nature was especially galling to this form of power.

Corporations are interested in power because power is a condition of profitability. Power enables a firm to outbid, out-perform, and outproduce rivals. Profitability can, in turn, be converted into power. It allows a firm to purchase skills, equipment, influence, and favors that can be used to generate more power. From a strictly business point of view, it seems impossible to have too much power. But power devoted to meeting needs is limited to meeting needs. Corporate power has to accumulate beyond what is needed, to acquire surplus power. Surplus power, power untied to needs, allows the possessor to impose his will. The frustration of the drive for surplus power is behind the administration's stubborn refusal to retreat on the defense spending issue. The president and his Secretary of Defense are probably sincere. They *do* find it incomprehensible that a nation would trade power for slightly lower deficits, much less that it would prefer welfare projects that have little or no power-value. For similar reasons they look upon the antinuclear movement as vaguely unpatriotic because no patriot would knowingly seek to reduce American power.

The quest for surplus power merges insensibly into a quest for unlimited power. "Our security is based on being prepared to meet all threats," the president declared recently. Thus committed to a conception of total power, one is never an aggressor but only a defender against the have-nots. "The defense policy of the United States is based on a single premise: the United States does not start fights. We will never be an aggressor," the president promised.

The attention recently given to the Report of the President's Commission on Strategic Forces has focused exclusively on recommendations about the MX missile system. It is also revealing of the logic of unlimited power. Although the

report acknowledges that "historically the Soviets have not been noted for taking large risks," its basic premise ignores the qualification in order to present an uncomplicated image of the USSR as an "aggressive totalitarianism" and to argue that the United States cannot rely on a simple theory of deterrence with its implication that an equilibrium might be established between the two superpowers. Deterrence, the Commission warns, is "not an abstract notion amenable to simple quantification." It is, instead, "the set of beliefs in the minds of the Soviet leaders." This means that the Soviets are not "going to be deterred by exactly the same concerns that would dissuade us." It will require not only a nuclear and conventional arms capability that will convince the Soviets absolutely of the damage they will suffer if they "choose to attack" or threaten to attack, not only "an overall program that will so confound, complicate, and frustrate" Soviet planners as to make them helpless, but it also requires of us as a nation that we display a "national will and cohesion" that will never leave in the Soviet mind the slightest misconception about our resolve and willingness to use nuclear weapons or about our determination to use force "at any level of confrontation."

This vision of politics as a contest of wills is as disturbing for its domestic implications as for what it commits us to in foreign policy: counter-revolution at home and abroad. If national survival depends on the Soviets having as unambiguous a perception of our will to fight as we are required to have of their will to conquest, then dissent and criticism have no more place in our system than in theirs. Divided wills are not the stuff of which power and surplus power are made. Thus their totalitarianism justifies our increasing authoritarianism—which is perhaps why we should read Jeane Kirkpatrick as we would Aesop.

To say that America is embarked on a course that promises increasing authoritarianism is not to court sensationalism or to indulge in the sort of national self-mutilation that reactionary writers insist is the radical's secret form of autoerotism. It is only to claim that when the destructive power of capitalism, which even its defenders have been forced to acknowledge, is combined with the annihilatory potential of nuclear weapons/energy, one may be properly awed by the human ingenuity responsible for the achievement; but the capacity to invent world-destruction and the possibility of space-wars extended to the outermost reaches of the accessible universe do not guarantee a capacity to control the inventions for the common benefit, especially not when the capacity is yoked to the service of a social philosophy whose first commandment is "There shall be no free lunches," and whose second is, "There shall be no free riders." The fact of more power than can be handled has the consequence of making ruling groups apprehensive of political freedom and popular power. Desperate at their own inability to control the effects of technological as well as nuclear proliferation, they become positively terrified at the prospect of their fragile system becoming the property of all. So they want to tighten up and tamp down. The same impulse is at work in

systems of state socialism that emphasize central planning and bureaucratic initiatives. The reach of present forms of power is beyond our grasp, whether that grasp be capitalistic or socialistic.

We have, then, to think differently about power and act upon different assumptions. The elements of an alternative understanding do exist and they are the basis of real movements.

The element of democratic participation has taken on new life since the 1960s. The operative effect of participation is to limit power. Participation means more than taking part or sharing; it requires deliberation among equals. If one respects others as equals, then one has to listen to them in their diversity, take their differences seriously and try to incorporate them so that genuine agreement emerges. Participation thus complicates the practice of power, preventing it from operating directly, defeating the crude, efficiency-oriented use of persons and things, and preventing power from hiding behind impersonal facades. Participation and equality are inconsistent with the scales that have made corporate and bureaucratic power possible.

The second element is indebted to the environmental movement. It has developed a nondestructive conception of power. It has taught us the value of taking care of things. The lesson applies to human as well as natural beings, to natural objects as well as social artifacts, to our urban places as well as to our forests. There lies within this approach a conception of power that no longer speaks in the language of exploitation. For the moment it is only a vocabulary rather than a language. Some of its words are "concern," "care," and "wonder."

The third element has many names. "Justice" is the most familiar. Legal protection and fairness are its form but not its substance. In our era it has been taught to us by blacks and Hispanics—earlier immigrants taught the same lesson—and feminists. Its principle is simple: there can be no genuine democratic community when there are outsiders who are defined by race, ethnicity, gender, or class.

Democratic power has for its telos devolution rather than concentration of power, and for its epigraph Paul rather than Livy: "the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another."

—Sheldon S. Wolin
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