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HISTORY AS PROPHECY

THERE ARE TWO GENERAL WAYS of approaching a major historical event. One is to regard the event as unique, not tied to past or to future events by any inescapable chain of cause and effect. This method regards as of fundamental importance the decisions of a few key individuals who, in each crisis of human events, actually have the power to make history. On their decisions depends the course that the event will take. An unwise decision may mean a long period of misery for the victims of history; a wise decision may usher in a period of felicity. Mankind is divided into two groups—a very small but immensely significant minority who are the Makers of History, and a very large but essentially insignificant majority who are the victims of history.

This is the "Great Man" theory of history, and a typical exponent of the method would be Thomas Carlyle, who expounded his theory in *Heroes and Hero Worship*, and attempted to prove it in his lives of Oliver Cromwell and Frederick the Great.

A contrary view is excellently set out by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. He regarded the stream of events which we call history very much as a sort of river, pulled inexorably onwards by forces as impersonal as the force of gravity; the speed of its current and the deflections of its course are determined by a sort of extraneous geology. In a river, these would be, for example, mountain barriers, ribs of rock, and beds of gravel. In human societies this external environment includes persistent racial memories, environmental or psychological blocks, as well as geographical and technical factors, all impersonally directing the flow of human events. In such a view of history, the Great Man is really unimportant—a bit of driftwood, floating on the stream of events and appearing to dominate it, "the mimic monarch of the whirlpool, king of the current for a minute", as one poet expressed it.

Tolstoy's classic example (for he was, after all, writing a novel about Napoleon's invasion of Russia) is in the career of Napoleon himself. No one realized

better than Napoleon the insecurity of his mammoth Empire, and he knew that only the defeat of England could ensure its permanence. Equally well, he realized that for the conquest of England he required a firm alliance with Russia, to avoid the danger of a war on two fronts and to free all his resources for the major effort in the West. Napoleon was clearly a Great Man: he saw what was necessary, and he ordered that it be done. From his headquarters for a period of eighteen years flowed a steady stream of orders, memoranda, and instructions, all directed to the same ends—the securing of a stable alliance with Russia on the one hand, and the overwhelming of England by invasion or by commercial ruin on the other.

A great many of his orders and recommendations were actually carried out—those which were compatible with the direction in which the stream of history was flowing. His final objectives, however, were incompatible with the current of history, and no matter how skilfully he planned or how imperatively he commanded, these objectives could not be attained.

The first of these views of history might well be called *the tragic view*. In the Great Man theory, history is essentially biography. The interest lies in the spectacle—the confrontation of an heroic individual by stupendous obstacles, which he either overcomes with Herculean strength and cunning and audacity, or by which he is overwhelmed, through a tragic defect in his own character—the lack of that final modicum of greatness which makes a man the master of his fate.

The second view of history can be called *the prophetic view*. If we can understand the nature of the force that drags onward the stream of human history, and if we can chart the mountains and valleys, the rapids and shoals of the human environment, then history becomes the spectacle, not merely of past events, but of future events as well.

The most remarkable attempt to use history as prophecy was undertaken a little over a century ago by Karl Marx, who used a prophetic view of history both to explain the past and to predict the future. Everyone has a reasonable idea of what the Marxians call “the materialistic conception of history”, but for the sake of precision we can restrict the meaning of the term to the definition set out by Engels in his preface to the 1888 English edition of the *Communist Manifesto*:

In every historical epoch the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently the whole history of mankind . . . has been a history of class struggles . . . that the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolution.

This excerpt from Engels' definition (the original is a single remarkable sentence

of 150 words) may not do complete justice to his meaning, but it is the method, rather than the meaning, that is at the moment being explored.

The uncompromising opening sentence of the original 1848 edition of the *Manifesto*, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles", and the development of that theme to the triumphant (if inaccurate) conclusion: "What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable"—these illustrate both the strength and the dangers inherent in the prophetic method.

The strength lies in the possibility of providing profound insights into past events; in the recognition of great historical forces operating in human societies and moulding these societies, sometimes through the agency of the great men of biographical history, more often in spite of the great men. Always, however— independent of the decisions of great men and little men—the historical forces are there, helping to shape events and largely determining human decisions about these events.

The weakness of the method lies in the temptation to rely on it too blindly, and to feel that, if the events do not conform to the theory, the defect lies in the facts and not in the theory. This defect exists whether the prophetic historian applies his method to explain past events or to predict future developments. Recently Mr. Stanley Ryerson has been writing a three-volume history of Canada, based on Marxian principles. Only the first volume has yet been published and, in this volume at least, the reader is bound to be disappointed. The events of the first two hundred years of Canadian history simply cannot be juggled into a pattern which permits a satisfying explanation in terms of class-struggle.

A second danger inherent in the prophetic method is the constant temptation which it dangles before the historian to embark on the search for universal explanations of his own. When an historian of international stature and awesome scholarship, a Spengler or a Toynbee, yields to this temptation the results can be very impressive, even when they remain highly controversial. Even when attempted by someone very much on the lower levels of the discipline, the prophetic method can yield results fascinating enough to tempt the unwary into a limited publication, such as is permitted in an article of this kind.

With due respect to the major prophets, and with no intention of parody, the following universal explanation of historical phenomena is modestly submitted. (Limitations of space as well as of scholarship prevent a full development of the thesis; and if at times the facts appear to have been slightly distorted to fit the

requirements of the theory, this is a practice not without precedent in the work of leading prophetic historians.)

Our major proposition, stated deliberately in dogmatic language borrowed from the *Communist Manifesto*, is that "The history of all hitherto existing societies is a function of the technique of warfare. Changes in military technique produce inevitable and predictable changes in political and social organization. The technical changes involved in twentieth-century warfare will have an inevitable and predictable impact on world organization within the lifetime of most readers of this essay."

This set of propositions rests on two general assumptions. The first of these is that "Every society eventually adapts its political and social institutions to military realities". The second is that "A technical change which favours attack over defence initiates a period of rapid social and political change; a technical development which favours defence over attack initiates a period of social and political stability."

These principles require only brief illustration.

The continent of Europe, north of the Pyrenees and the Alps, is naturally forested country. Human habitation in this area is based essentially on clearings in the forest, for the cultivation of food, and, if possible, for the development of other comforts and amenities of life. If these settlements can be easily defended, and law and order maintained over a wide area, the settlements multiply in number, villages become towns, towns become cities, and civilization emerges. If defence becomes difficult and law and order cannot be enforced, population dwindles, cities and towns are deserted, the forest rapidly encroaches on the cultivated land, and the number, area, and population of the clearings all diminish. Civilization, essentially a function of urban life, disappears; and rustic barbarism again becomes the accepted way of life.

For some five centuries under the Roman Empire, western Europe enjoyed the benefits of civilization. This was possible because the techniques of defence developed by the Romans enabled them to guard the frontiers, and to enforce law and order within these frontiers, by diverting to military purposes only a limited and tolerable amount of the wealth produced by society. Under Augustus, the *pax Romana* was easily enforced by a regular army not exceeding 100,000 legionnaires and auxiliaries.

The Roman techniques involved two important devices. One was the shrewd employment of natural or artificial barriers as defensible frontiers. The line of the Rhine and the Danube rivers was a virtually continuous and formidable barrier right across the continent. Where the line was weak, artificial barriers could be

constructed, like Hadrian's Wall in Britain, or the *limes* linking the Rhine and the Danube. The second device was the exploitation of mobility. A network of roads was constructed, criss-crossing the Empire, and facilitating the rapid concentration of force at any point on the frontier threatened by invasion, or at any point within the Empire where local discontent flared into revolt. The combination of mobility of forces with defendable frontiers enabled the Roman Empire to confront any local challenge to its authority with a defensive force numerically superior to that of the attacker. The resulting superiority of defence over attack ensured a period of political and social stability extending, with a few unimportant exceptions, during nearly half a millennium.

The Roman defensive system broke down during the fifth century A.D. It is not enough to explain this breakdown, as Gibbon did, in terms of "the growth of barbarism without and superstition within" the Empire. Barbarism had always flourished beyond the frontiers, and the "superstition" (by which Gibbon clearly meant Christianity) had been digested and absorbed into the Roman political system under Constantine, a century and a half before the final breakdown of the defensive system.

What had happened was a technical innovation that conferred on the barbarian invaders a mobility superior to that of the Roman legions. From at least 100 B.C. to 300 A.D., war was the business of infantry. Both the Roman and the barbarian soldier walked to battle and fought on foot. The Roman legion, as organized by Marius in 104 B.C., consisted of 6,000 infantrymen and no cavalry. Augustus, a century later, added 120 horsemen to each legion as despatch riders, not as combat troops. Twenty-five such legions deployed along the frontier, or in a few disorderly internal areas like northern Spain or the Nile delta, maintained the *pax romana* without difficulty.

About 160 A.D. barbarian warriors began to appear on horseback. Increasingly, they rode on saddles equipped with stirrups in which a rider could stand and fight with a definite advantage over his dismounted opponent. By the time of Constantine (c. 320 A.D.) at least 400,000 troops were required to guard the frontier, and their upkeep imposed a strangling load of taxation on the increasingly plundered provinces. The invaders were now able to outmanoeuvre the foot-slogging Roman legions, to avoid battle, to cut supply lines, and to pillage the country far behind the frontiers, evading pursuit. Rome failed to adapt to the new method of warfare, or adapted in the most dangerous manner possible by hiring as mercenaries to guard the frontier the very barbarian horsemen who had successfully broken through the frontier lines. Barbarian mercenaries came to make up the bulk of the Imperial

armies, became indistinguishable from the barbarian invaders, and the Roman Empire simply died out in western Europe.

The collapse of the Roman political order had been made inevitable by a technological advance. This advance robbed the defenders of their initial superiority by conferring a greater mobility on the attacking horsemen than had been possessed by the defending infantry.

For the next five centuries, the technique of attack remained superior to the technique of defence. This was the period of the Dark Ages, when the men on horseback were the most effective fighting units, and roamed throughout Europe pillaging one shrinking community after another. Population fell rapidly; cities and towns were largely abandoned. The forest encroached again over thousands of acres of cultivated land. In the patches of cultivation that remained, villagers huddled in their mud and wattle huts awaiting the periodic devastation inflicted by bands of marauding horsemen.

The anarchy of the Dark Ages was ended by another innovation in the art of war. This was the development of the stone castle. A few men inside a castle, with the drawbridge raised, with a plentiful supply of food and water on hand, and equipped with bows and arrows, boiling oil, Greek fire and similar devices, were easily a match for ten times their number attempting to storm the castle. There were hardly any castles in Europe before 900 A.D. Domesday Book, compiled shortly after the Norman Conquest, lists fewer than fifty castles in all England. Only seventy years later, by the time of the death of Stephen, the number of English castles exceeded 1100.

The development of the castle as a superb defensive weapon, and its combination with the mounted warrior as an offensive weapon, ushered in an astonishing period of relative political stability in western Europe—the period of the High Middle Ages, of the elaboration of the feudal system, and of the beginnings of a new civilization. European life still continued to be based on clearings in the forest, but now the forest was once again being pushed back, cultivation was increasing, population was rising, and wealth sufficient to support a standard of living above the barest subsistence level was beginning to accumulate.

The typical mediaeval manor continued to be a cultivated clearing in the forest. The cultivators continued to live in mud and wattle villages exposed to periodic devastation in local war. Now, however, at the threat of attack, a castle existed for their protection. Villagers rushed, with what possessions they could carry, driving their livestock ahead of them, into the security of the castle yard. The drawbridge was hauled up, and the defenders of the castle waited out the attack.

The attackers levelled the village, poked about in the ruins for scraps of loot, and rode away, having inflicted no permanent damage.

Castles, it is true, were occasionally taken by storm, but this was an immensely costly operation, requiring an advantage of at least ten to one in favour of the attacking force. Most castles proved impregnable for periods of a century at a time. Feudal society and its astonishing stability was essentially the result of a long-standing superiority of defensive technique over the technique of attack.

The walled towns which became the centres of the emerging mediaeval civilization were only a variant application of the same technique. Before the first Crusade, there were barely a dozen walled towns in all France. By 1100 A.D., there were several hundred such towns, generally as impregnable to attack as were the baronial castles. Behind their walls urban stability and civilization grew to match the degree of law and order which the advent of the castle had brought to the countryside.

Five hundred years of relative feudal stability were brought to a close by another revolution in the art of war—the invention of gunpowder and the development of artillery. As with many such major innovations, the consequences were only slowly revealed. The first recorded use of cannon was at the siege of Civitate in northern Italy in 1376, but (although made in Germany) these were very primitive weapons, and do not seem to have contributed to victory. Similarly, nearly half a century later, Henry V employed six cannon, each with a four-man crew, at the siege of Harfleur, but again the chronicler has nothing to say to indicate that these weapons were effective. The first really dramatic and decisive use of artillery was at the siege of Constantinople in 1452, when the Turks employed massive pieces, hurling projectiles weighing up to half a ton, to batter down the venerable walls that, with one doubtful exception, had successfully resisted attack for twelve centuries.

The development of artillery marked the end of feudal society, based on the relative impregnability of the stone castle and the walled town, but the old order was an unconscionably long time in dying. There were no blueprints of the society that would succeed feudalism, and much of the history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the chronicle of the obstinate resistance of feudal society to changes made inevitable by the changes in military technique.

In England, the change was fairly easily accomplished. Henry VII in 1487 was able to impose a law sharply restricting the size of garrisons that could be maintained in castles and walled towns. The fortifications themselves remained in existence, however, and proved dangerous strong points for resistance against the

national authority, until Cromwell undertook their systematic destruction in the middle of the seventeenth century.

In France, thirty years of civil war ended in 1598 with an apparent victory for the forces of local autonomy. The Edict of Nantes lists literally hundreds of feudal castles and walled towns, each of which was guaranteed the right to maintain its own fortifications, to garrison them by its own armies, and to enforce its own laws and customs. This, however, was only a temporary victory for reaction. Within another half-century, royal garrisons had replaced the local garrisons in all the key fortresses, and practically all the others had been dismantled. The possibility of feudal resistance to the forces of centralization had disappeared.

In Germany, the advent of the modern age was delayed for another two centuries. The Treaties of Westphalia in 1648 had guaranteed the continued independent existence of some 400 baronies, kingdoms, duchies, free cities, and other units, each with its own fortifications, armies, laws, foreign policy, money, weights and measures, and similar appurtenances of sovereignty. Germany survived even the Napoleonic period as a patchwork of small states, and was united into a modern nation only by Bismarck's policy of "blood and iron" in 1870.

Although the feudal system took some centuries to die out, its death was predictable, to the prophetic historian, from the moment that artillery became efficient and dependable. The small military force that could be maintained by any walled city or mediaeval barony, once it had been deprived of the relative immunity conferred by its stone walls, could not hope to survive against modern weapons operated by increasingly larger armies, supported by steadily widening areas of taxation.

Where national governments were able to seize the initiative as in England, and later in France, local autonomy was rapidly swallowed up by the national authority. Where the national authority was able to expand fairly rapidly to a defensible frontier, to the sea, to a rugged mountain range, or to a great river, the new national governments were able to maintain themselves, substituting the Pyrenees for a castle wall or the English Channel for a moat. Where no such defensible frontiers could be reached, barony after barony and kingdom after kingdom were swallowed up by their larger neighbours.

The inevitable and predictable political system that developed as the result of the invention of artillery was a series of great nation-states, relatively stable where they were able to reach and to fortify strong natural frontiers, fluid and unstable until such frontiers were reached.

Natural frontiers and all existing nation-states became obsolete in the twentieth century. The successive inventions of bomber aircraft, atomic and nuclear weapons,

and ballistic missiles, created an absolutely unprecedented advantage for the attacker, and made nonsense of all political units based on defensible frontiers. There are no longer any defensible frontiers giving to the defenders an advantage of ten to one, of five to one, or even two to one over an attacking force.

In the Second World War in Europe, a few hundred young men in Bomber Command could break through the most elaborate defences that Germany could contrive along the "moat" of the North Sea, and could kill 40,000 men, women, and children in a single raid on Hamburg. A few months later, a score or so airmen of the USAAF could obliterate the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, each with a single bomb. Today, we are assured by the cheerful scientists of the RAND Corporation that "a statistically significant percentage" of the population of this continent might still survive at least the initial blow of an attack by nuclear weapons.

These are dramatic examples of how swift and how complete has been the collapse of any strategy based on defence. In the past, defence has been a possible strategy only when the defender could be assured of some reasonable and calculable advantage over the attacker. Today all advantage lies on the side of the attacker, and all defensive weapons and ministries of national defence belong with the dinosaur and the dodo.

This does not mean that our situation is desperate: every nation is in the same situation, for all nations are equally indefensible. Neither does it mean that there is no way out of our dilemma. Our problem, in fact, differs only in degree from the problem faced during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by all nations which had failed to secure defensible frontiers. Such nations had the choice of submitting to forcible absorption by their expanding neighbours, or of forestalling such absorption by a free association, preserving a degree of local autonomy but ending the possibility of war between the neighbouring states.

The military technology of the past few centuries required the formation of large states, able to extend their authority to reach defensible frontiers. The technology of the twentieth century, by abolishing all defensible frontiers, requires the formation of a world government. Unless such a world government is created, the technology guarantees the destruction of civilization and the return to primitive anarchy.

If such a government is to be created, it may come in one of two ways; either a single nation or combination of nations will impose its hegemony over the rest of the world by force and blackmail; or the nations will agree to some form of federation that will end the era of national armies and national fortifications, and replace these with a single world-force capable of maintaining law and order—a process pre-

cisely analagous to the supplanting of local feudal authorities by national governments and in no way more difficult. The development of the great federations, a process confined to the last two centuries, has indicated the method by which interne-cine war can be avoided while a very large measure of local autonomy is preserved for each of the confederating states.

Local autonomy secured by constitutional guarantees is a very fragile thing. The local autonomy guaranteed to the French baronies and walled towns by the Edict of Nantes disappeared within half a century. Similarly in the United States, where the constitution permitted each of the states to retain military forces, and to construct forts and arsenals for the protection of its autonomy, the result was a civil war which sharply curtailed that autonomy and ended the effective military power of the states. Local autonomy actually appears to survive best in countries like Canada, where the local governments possess no military force, and rely solely on law to preserve their autonomy.

There is, moreover, another rather remarkable military fact borne out by the experience of the twentieth century: a determined local resistance to external authority can make virtually impossible the suppression of local autonomy. The development of techniques of resistance—in Ireland and Palestine, in Crete, in Viet-Nam and Algeria—has demonstrated that any local population can win and hold a considerable degree of local independence, and can paralyse the authority of any external force that attempts to suppress that autonomy. Vastly superior military force and utterly ruthless methods seem to make little difference. Short of the complete extermination of a determined and rebellious population, external authority appears to have no alternative except to grant and to respect autonomy. To retain local liberty under a world federation will require vigilance and courage, but given these qualities, the prospect of a world state is much less dismaying than the alternative of nuclear war.

A single world state, holding a monopoly of military force, is the only form of political organization compatible with twentieth-century military technology. The question is not "Shall we have a world government?". That question is answered by the mere existence of the intercontinental ballistic missile and its nuclear war-head. The only relevant question is "How much local autonomy can be preserved within what kind of world government?"

A prophetic historian might close this survey of the watershed of history with a paraphrase of the closing words of a major work of unfulfilled prophecy: "Nations of the world unite: you have nothing to lose but your ineffectual weapons, and nothing to maintain but your autonomy."