

4th article:

“The Self-Determination of Peoples”

By William R. Polk

In this fourth article on terrorism, I turn to the one that is both the most common and paradoxically the one that lends itself best to solution. It has its origins in a widespread feature of our world -- the existence of groups of people who share so much in common with one another that they regard themselves as separate *nations* but who live in *states* that they regard, and in which they are regarded, as alien.

The tension between their feeling of unity and their feeling of alienation produces a powerful desire to combine nationhood with statehood, that is, to become self-governing members of the international community. This desire for self-determination has fired dozens of wars throughout the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries in Europe, Asia and Africa. Some continue to this day, and more can be expected in the years ahead.

Demonstrably, over the past three centuries nationalism has been the most pervasive and persuasive creed, far more potent than any ideology or religion, and remains one of the most powerful forces at work in the world today. Why is it so strong and why does it give rise to terrorism? The answers are both simple and complex.

Nationalism is not just political, as many have historians have written, but is a far broader concept beginning at the very foundation of personal identity; blending language, religion, customs, neighborhood and ethnicity or race, it creates a community imbued by an emotional force transcending ideology, logic or reason. Even when, apparently, it is not the determinant of politics, it rests, barely submerged below the surface, ready to appear when challenged.

It has, moreover, a legal aspect in our world of nation-states. To be a member of a stateless nation is to be beyond the law -- literally to be an outlaw. Without a passport, one is depersonalized, often relegated to a file or serial number, restricted in movement and employment, attached to public institutions only on sufferance or charity, consigned to a timeless limbo in which individual attributes count for little. In the affluent and “progressive” West, we like to think that we have transcended statehood and are moving toward “One World,” or toward such groupings as the European Union, but for many of the world’s people, the fact is quite otherwise: for them legal identity is still achieved only in the matrix of the state.

Fortunately, a large part of the world has consummated the marriage of nation and state. Bringing this about, sometimes peacefully, has been one of the great triumphs of the Twentieth century statesmen. Where it has happened, wasteful social disruptions, guerrilla wars and terrorism have dramatically declined or ceased. There is much to be proud of. Regard the process: at the end of the First World War, when the victorious nations assembled in Paris to make the peace, they considered the world as being composed of only about two dozen sovereignties. Today, there are some 200 members of the United Nations. Area after area which was mired in violence, notably in the former British, French, Dutch and Russian empires, have joined the community of nations. But, the very success thus achieved has made those who are still not members of the club of nations the more desperate to join.

Who are these still unfulfilled nations? The answer is imprecise since their own perception of themselves is dynamic. At the present time, the best known are the Kashmiris, Çeçens, Kurds and Palestinians. Doubtless, as education spreads, as

television and the internet penetrate more and more remote areas of the Earth, other nations which are now more or less quiescent will join their ranks.

There are large numbers of candidates. China, which appears from the outside so uniform grew over the centuries by absorbing hundreds of distinct “nations” and still today, after centuries of “homogenation,” still has 56 minority communities of which at least two, the Tibetans and the 8 million Turkic-speaking Uighurs, have long been struggling for independence.

Even after the Soviet Union devolved into its major constituent states, the largest of them, Russia, still contains somewhere between 20 and 50 groups that aspire to independence. How many more there will be in the future, only they can determine. In the Caucasus alone, there are at least 28 significant potential nations -- that is, distinct groups with populations in the thousands.

Every Indian government since independence has lived with the dread of India, a virtual empire, being shattered into states. Like the former Soviet Union, it is composed not only of the existing states but of less organized, and so far unrecognized, communities. Not all these are candidates for nationhood, but their variety is stunning. They are composed of groups speaking over 50 languages and divided among Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity with a variety of subdivisions of each. In neighboring Burma, which was a part of the same British system, there are seven recognized minority states, but several other “nations” that have not achieved this status.

In Africa, the residue of the imperial system has left states that have little “national” rationale. There, not only are dozens or scores of societies divided among states, with part in one state and part in another or even a third, but even more live states where they feel themselves to be and are treated as alien. Some, like the Ibo in Nigeria

and the South Sudanese, particularly the Dinka and Nuer, have fought long and disastrous wars to try to achieve self determination. Others have suffered savage repression in Zanzibar, Kenya, Uganda, the Congo and elsewhere. While we hardly remember their names, we may be sure that we have not heard the last of them.

With such diversity, sober statesmen can perhaps be forgiven for trying to avoid meeting demands for national self-determination. Is it even theoretically possible to think of a world in which such diverse and relatively small groups achieve some form of self-determination?

There are, I think, encouraging signs of possible answers from past experience.

In the Twentieth century, Great Britain has been the leader in “devolving” the nations that made up its empire. For the most part, it has accomplished devolution peacefully. Ireland was the major exception. It was Britain’s first colony having been invaded in the Twelfth century and intermittently fought, embargoed, starved and subjected to racial cleansing for centuries. Finally in 1921, Britain realized that it could not “win” and the cost of maintaining Ireland as a colony was too expensive to continue; so it granted most of Ireland independence. Republican Ireland, Eire, then became peaceful, because it became an independent nation-state, and that nation-state became a friend and trading partner with Britain. With this experience in mind, at the end of the Second World War, Britain set about fostering the transition from colonial to “dominion” status – a sort of loose federalism -- of most of its empire.

Or regard the French in North Africa. The French invaded Algeria in 1831. Like the English in Ireland, they took all the best land and pushed the natives away from the their schools, hospitals, government offices and modern economy, but unlike the English they also settled large numbers of aliens in their new colony. By the end of their

rule, about one in each twelve “Algerians” was of European background. Time after time, the natives revolted, were savagely repressed, and pushed further from the European society. Finally, in the 1950s, the natives began what became a sustained revolt. The only force they could organize never amounted to more than about 13,000 combatants. The only means they could employ was terrorism. By 1960, France had about 485,000 troops in Algeria, was engaging in unprecedented brutality with torture, internment in concentration camps and summary executions. Yet, France lost the war. Indeed, it almost lost itself: its army mutinied, *French* terrorists (of the “Secret Army Organization”) tried to kill the national hero, General de Gaulle, and France itself came close to civil war. France could have continued the war only at the cost of losing everything it treasured. It withdrew, but so late that it left behind a shattered society that was accustomed to violence. That society has, so far at least, proven unable to create domestic peace: the wounds of colonialism and war have not healed.

Consider also the Russian experience. Who of us ever heard of the Çeçens before a few years ago? Yet the Çeçens have been struggling against the Russians – Tsarist and Communist alike -- for four centuries. Their struggle for national self-determination began in 1732. Tsarist and Communist, the Russians engaged in brutal search and destroy campaigns against the Çeçens, burning villages and massacring or starving peasants. Defeated and seemingly facing annihilation, roughly half of the Çeçen population fled to the Ottoman Empire in the middle of the Nineteenth century. Stalin uprooted virtually the entire population and sent it to Siberia. Despite everything done to them, the Çeçens have fought on and sometimes even take the war to Moscow itself.

In these three experiences is a lesson we overlook to our peril: *force does not work*. Despite the overwhelming force and the most extreme forms of repression

employed by their adversaries, the Irish, the Algerians and Çeçens fought and lost and fought again, generation after generation. No matter how savage were the instruments and policies arrayed against them, they kept up their struggle.

That struggle usually has taken the form of terrorism against the security forces of the state. Why is this? The answer is simply that repressed minorities lack the means to “stand and fight” against armies and police forces: they cannot match the armed power of the dominant group. Terrorism is adopted by the weak because they have no other weapon.

If force cannot suppress this form of terrorism, how can it be dealt with? That is the subject of my next article.

© William R. Polk, February 12, 2004.

[1,656 words]

William R. Polk is the senior director of the W.P. Carey Foundation. After studies at Harvard and Oxford, he taught for several years at Harvard University. Then, in 1961, President Kennedy appointed him a Member of the Policy Planning Council of the U.S. Department of State. There, he was in charge of planning American policy for most of the Islamic world until 1965 when he became professor of history at the University of Chicago and founded its Middle Eastern Studies Center. Later he also became president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. Among his many books are *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace: The Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs*; *Polk's Folly, An American Family History*; and *The Birth of America*.