

5th article

What to do about the unsatisfied nations.

By William R. Polk

As I have pointed out in my fourth article, all over the world, among peoples of every culture and religion – Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and pagans; Asians, Africans, Europeans, Americans – have struggled to achieve self-determination. Attempts have entailed horrifying costs: people have been uprooted, locked up in prison or concentration camps, had their dwellings destroyed, the means of earning their livelihood diminished; they were the lucky ones. They at least lived. The dead are beyond reckoning. Carrying out the struggle has also impacted upon the dominant powers: they have not only suffered many casualties and spent much treasure, but they have become brutalized by the very instruments they have employed. And, to their chagrin, their attempts to suppress the desire for independence have ultimately failed.

No one can even estimate how many Irish or Çeçens have died; it is believed that about 2 million Algerians perished in the last phase of their war for independence. Elsewhere the numbers are not so large because the populations were smaller. The struggle of the Hindu Tamils of Sri Lanka to achieve independence from the Buddhist Sinhalese has gone on for 20 years and has killed about 65,000 people; the Aceh rebellion on Sumatra against Indonesia has lasted for 26 years and cost about 30,000 lives; the 24-year-long struggle of the East Timorese has resulted in the deaths of about 200,000. The civil war in Guatamala from 1960 to 1996 caused that little country 200,000 dead. The struggle of the Moro rebels of the Philippines against the United States began a century ago and has resulted in the death of about 200,000.

Nor has the cost been only on the side of the rebels. While the rebels generally, have not done massive harm to their enemies, their actions have caused their enemies to do massive harm to themselves, their institutions, their very civilization. To take just two examples, a whole generation of Frenchmen were sullied by their fight against the Algerians and against one

another. Torture became “the cancer of the nation.” Many Frenchmen were horrified by what their army was doing: having just come out from under the heel of the Nazis, they found Frenchmen using the same tactics against the Algerians that the Nazis had used against them. In Israel, where the wounds from the Nazi horror were even deeper and more painful, some Israelis have written that they have found the Israeli fight against the Palestinians, in which in the 1980s, they even enrolled troops from the racist regime of South Africa, shocking and degrading.ⁱ

Everywhere we look, we see the simple fact is that force is ugly and does not work. Thwarted nations keep on fighting. They not only believe in their cause but in their tactics: they believe that by making oppression too costly to be maintained, those they regard as their oppressors will be forced to let them go free.

If suppression of the quest for national independence does not work and is so destructive to the lives and well-being both of those who use terrorism and those who use force against them, what can be done? We need not theorize: we have case history after history that shows definitively that allowing what President Woodrow Wilson at the end of The First World War called “the self-determination of peoples” does work. When people are allowed to express their political will, they do not resort to guns and bombs. Look at the contrast between an Algeria that was torn apart by war and neighboring Morocco which France finally allowed, more or less peacefully, to become independent. The struggle was so violent and so disruptive that the Algerians have still not recovered and terrorism and disorder still mark the society whereas neighboring Morocco, which did not have to undergo their horrifying experience, is a peaceful and prosperous country.

The list of success stories is a long one, but some nations remain “unfulfilled.” We can be almost certain that no matter what outsiders do, they will continue to struggle until they achieve what we have, independence.

This is a struggle we cannot view with indifference. Where it has suited our purposes, we have supported terrorists (as America, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other powers did in

Afghanistan when they were fighting the Soviet Union) and where it has not (as later in Afghanistan) we have sought to crush them.

Opportunism has caused us lightly to “toss our flags” over groups and regimes that are often determined enemies of our way of life and our beliefs. Every regime that wishes to suppress a minority will seek our approval (and our arms and money). The Chinese will tell us that the Tibetans and Uighurs are their terrorists as the Russians have already told us about the Çeçens. In *The Washington Post* (of October 18, 2001), Jackson Diehl suggested that the Israelis too will seek, as he said, to “hijack” the anti-terror campaign for their purposes. All of these pose the threat that nation after nation will perceive members of the European Union and the United States to be the enemies of freedom rather than what we think ourselves to be, the patrons of freedom.

To recapture that initiative now will be difficult: dominant states will not appreciate our advice that they let their alien peoples go. Even their recognition of their own best interests has rarely led any of them to this wise policy: India has spent billions of dollars trying to hold down Kashmir when it needed to spend its resources on schools and hospitals. Its policy has almost provoked a nuclear war with neighboring Pakistan. Having just bankrupted itself in Afghanistan, Russia seems intent in doing it all over again in Çeçnya.

Our collective objective must be the marshalling a “decent respect for the opinions of mankind” through the United Nations and such regional groupings as the European Community. It is a sign of what can happen that the European Court of Human Rights agreed on January 16, 2003 to hear complaints filed by the Çeçens against Russia. If Russia wants to benefit from European trade and investment, it will listen.

But what if this policy were to succeed – would we not have to live in a world composed of a host of immature and perhaps fractious states. Yes, I think we must concede this likelihood. But, carefully approached, even that can be made into an asset. The European Union offers a model: today such groups as the Bretons can *both live in* a state (France) *and by-pass it* on some

“national” issues by appealing over the head of the state directly to the European Union. In this way, even short of becoming complete nation-states, at least some nation-groups can achieve a satisfactory degree of autonomy within a reasonably secure supra-national framework. That model should spread.

What about economic viability? Will mini-nations be able to survive? Certainly most will not be able to do so completely separately, but, as we now know, not even large nation-states cannot either. Overarching state or regional associations, inspired by the European Union, are already spreading. Also necessary will be the continued transfer of assets from the rich “north” to the poor “south.” In the past, this has proven to be an inefficient and inadequate system and needs to be improved, but even if it remains wasteful and largely unproductive, it is cheap when compared to the vast outlay occasioned by military action.

Can we adjust to a world of scores or even hundreds of mini-states? The short answer is that we already have. The international order has evinced tremendous flexibility. It went from hundreds -- Germany alone was divided into some 900 sovereign states until the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia that ended the horrible Thirty Years War. It progressively shrank thereafter but the Germanic Confederation still numbered 36 until 1871 when Bismarck united them into the German Empire. As empires spread, the number of independent states declined to about two dozen at the end of the First World War. Now the trend has been reversed and we easily deal with about 200. There is no reason to believe that we cannot deal with a number more. And, already, we can see this trend being at least modified as states find it to their advantage to amalgamate many of their functions as the European Union has done.

Today, we may be at one of those remarkable turning points in history that will allow us to think soberly over the alternative routes ahead of us. The one, bumpy and difficult though it will certainly be, leads us up toward the assertion of our civilization with its respect for freedom, decency and human rights, a goal we have so painfully, laboriously and expensively struggled for

so long to reach. The other road, suppression through military force, leads not only to a garrison state but also to world prison beset by unending war.

ⁱ Among them is former Knesset member Uri Avnery and the President of the Israeli Supreme Court, Aharon Barak. On the South African troops employed in Israel and Israeli troops joining South African troops in Angola see *The Sunday Times Review* April 15, 1984 and James Adams, *The Unnatural Alliance* (London: Quartet, 1984).

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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*.