

EDITOR'S NOTE

Invisible Inheritance

1968 is back. Its fiftieth anniversary has produced a flood of books, articles, memoirs, even performance art. The dramatis personae in these narratives rarely vary: along with the inescapable public figures there are recurring representatives of the restless young—the SDS, the Yippies, the self-styled Maoists, the devotees of Che. I seldom see myself or anyone I knew in these accounts, though I turned twenty-one in 1968 and was profoundly affected by the events of that era.

I was at the University of Virginia, where in the spring of 1968 two idiosyncratic anarchists won seats on the Student Council and white boys in coats and ties (I was one of them) ran up the steps of Jefferson's Rotunda chanting "no more racism." This occasionally risible hubbub was fundamentally serious. To me, at least in retrospect, it shows that political education in the sixties took many forms and transformed the lives of many people (including myself) who never went near an SDS meeting.

One key figure in my own political education was a professor of history named Paul Gaston, a soft-spoken Alabaman with a rolling baritone voice. He was active in the civil rights movement locally, and had been beaten up while trying to integrate a Charlottesville diner. He also looked a little like Burt Lancaster. But his real magnetic power lay in his lecturing. He was a rhetorician who wore his rhetoric lightly. His lectures could be easily summarized and transcribed into perfectly organized notes in my spiral notebook; but they also could be savored for their wry humor, their understated eloquence, their ethical seriousness, and their compelling ideas.

The most compelling idea (or at least the most memorable to me) came at the end of Gaston's last lecture of the semester, in which he addressed the unfolding calamities of the Vietnam War and the nuclear arms race. I recorded it faithfully on the last page of my spiral notebook: "the possession of unprecedented power requires the exercise of unprecedented restraint." This idea did not, I later realized, originate with Gaston; it was his characteristically crisp formulation

of a powerful intellectual tradition that included Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, and J. William Fulbright—all of whom had emerged by the late 1960s as cogent critics of the Vietnam War and the nuclear arms race—and that became the core of my own developing views of American foreign policy.

In recent years, I've taken to calling this tradition of restraint a pragmatic realist tradition, even though both those words are problematic and easily misunderstood. By *pragmatic* I simply mean what William James meant—committed to evaluating ideas and policies by their likely consequences. Pragmatic judgments are based on historically informed questions, such as, what are the chances of successfully combating an anticolonial nationalist movement by allying one's country with the remnants and proxies of the colonial elite? Such judgments are also sensitive to empirical evidence, even if it runs counter to conventional wisdom—that is what makes them *realistic* as well as pragmatic. Historians like Gaston and his colleague Bill Harbaugh (who taught me twentieth-century US history) demonstrated that anticolonial nationalism (whether directed against the Chinese, the French, or the Americans) had deep roots in Vietnamese history. They taught me that Communism was fragmented and diverse, not monolithic, and that the conflation of American power and American virtue was a destructive illusion. Their own moral vision was more capacious, more judicious in its capacity to make ideological distinctions and historical explanations.

The pragmatic realist worldview I'm describing was not the realism of political science textbooks, obsessed with *realpolitik* and devoid of ethical concerns. On the contrary, I have rarely met any men more ethically engaged than Gaston and Harbaugh, nor encountered more eloquent moral critics of US foreign policy than Lippmann, Kennan, and Fulbright. They bore witness against an unjust war and acknowledged the justice of the Vietnamese resistance to imperial rule. But they never sentimentalized revolutionary violence, as the Maoists and Guevarists on the New Left did. They were not pacifists, but they recognized war as the *summum malum* of international affairs. The pragmatic realist tradition, as I came to understand it, aimed to

transcend the sweeping ideological formulas of US imperialism and its revolutionary opponents, without losing sight of larger values and sliding into the debased pragmatism that subsumes ultimate purposes in short-term aims.

In our own time, as in the 1960s, pragmatic realism can perform a crucial task by promoting a foreign policy of restraint—by encouraging policymakers to try to understand foreign actors on their own terms before embarking on reckless world-saving crusades. Missionary zeal—the need to create enemies and overcome them—continues to cloud the American perception of foreign relations, as it did during the Cold War. The clearest contemporary example is the recent transformation of Vladimir Putin from ally to menace, which occurred in less than two decades, and which David Foglesong examines with convincing detail in this issue. Both Foglesong and Patrick Lawrence, in his essay from a longer view, are engaged in what Lawrence calls “discernment”—the effort “to look intently, and then to consider carefully all it is we see.” This includes understanding the various contexts for Putin’s actions, which are so often perceived through the missionary lens as hostile to “the West.” Putin is a complex and powerful man (though not as powerful within his own country as his critics claim); his cooperation with the United States is essential if we are to secure a safer world. Discernment and restraint are interdependent.

Why discernment of Putin should be considered odd—perhaps even disloyal—is one of the most baffling mysteries of our troubled time. Whether my mentors from the sixties would share my bafflement is an open question, but somehow I think they would. Their stance of humane restraint remains, for me, a part of the legacy of the 1960s that we should try not to forget.

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