

“That The Good May Be Clever”

Essay by Mark Gibbs

The following essay appeared in Vesper Exchange, first quarter, 1979. Gibbs’ analysis of power – a theme he explored in greater depth in his final book, Christians With Secular Power (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) – is just as relevant today. So too is his call for “competent citizens.”

This is a most uncomfortable year. The shifts of power in the Far East and in Africa, the dangerous uncertainties in Iran and in Saudi Arabia: these demand that we shall lift our sights from personal and family preoccupations and face again some very unpleasant realities in world politics.

Citizens of Britain or of the Netherlands, of Israel or of Poland, those who live in most of the smaller countries of the world can but watch and hope that apocalyptic wars may be averted, that gasoline may be available, that the leaders of the great powers will neither by criminal intention nor by negligence and sloppiness blunder into major war. Citizens of the American Republic have a deeper responsibility. Their country is one of the major world powers – surely, even now, the most powerful of all. Their elected President and Congress must carry the burden of the world’s peace and stability upon their shoulders.

World Power Politics

To understand the dangerous world we now live in, we have to learn or relearn the basic facts of power politics. (To learn such facts is not, of course, necessarily to approve of them.) There are four major kinds of power: military, economic, political and religious or ideological. We may very much dislike even thinking about the use and misuse of some of these kinds of power; but to pretend that they do not exist is prissy and foolhardy. We need again to listen to and argue with such twentieth century prophets as Bertrand Russell, Reinhold Niebuhr and Henry Kissinger.

In particular, good, decent, moderate citizens – faithful writers and readers of *Vesper Exchange* – we have, I suspect, to rethink our understanding of the power of belief in the modern world. Some kinds of religious or ideological fanaticism are still very strong indeed; and they are mostly doing great harm rather than great good. The resurgence of some kinds of Islamic beliefs in Iran or Pakistan, the intolerant Christianities in South Africa or Northern Ireland, the extremist Judaisms in Israel, the fundamentalist Marxist faiths in Africa or Cambodia – these can be damnably powerful and cruel beliefs. We may claim, no doubt, that purer versions of such faiths ought to generate a true love for humanity and for our immediate neighbors; but the hard fact is

that in the twentieth as in the seventeenth century these corrupted beliefs persecute, tyrannize, and poison both national and international communities.

Military power seems easier to understand; though we are inclined to be too squeamish to reflect about the dreadful potential and also the limited utility of nuclear arms. World atomic war must be so appalling that its possibility will always pose a ghastly dilemma to politicians. How much of a defeat ought we to accept before we use the bombs?

Economic power is sometimes more difficult to assess. Anybody can see the unpleasant fact that the Western nations – especially of course the United States – now enjoy an economic system which depends on high oil usage, which in turn depends on oil imports from the Middle East. What is more difficult to analyze is the extent to which much of the world (including those same Middle East oil nations) are themselves now dependant on a style of economic and technological development which ties them to the West – or to the Soviet Union bloc, the only other source as yet of major industrial know-how. Political power – the democratic or authoritarian organization of peoples and of their military and economic strength – has unfortunately once more been downgraded in the eyes of many voters. To be a politician is a dangerous, ambiguous but (as Robert Kennedy was fond of saying) “an honorable profession”; and though many may question the stances and policies of a man like President Carter, none can deny that to be a “born again” president is as fine an ambition as to be a dedicated preacher.

Must the Saints Be Outwitted?

Indeed, questions of vocation, of honor, of decency, of morality are by no means at all to be excluded from a grimly realistic analysis of power in the world of 1979. The point is that intelligence and virtue and hard thinking have to go together: “if only the good were clever” is a heartfelt cry from the past centuries where the ordinary people have had to suffer simple saints and very skillful sinners. Here the thousands of churches and synagogues in the United States are particularly important. It is unfortunately true that many members of American religious bodies – including some of their most popular leaders and pastors – are still inclined to avert their eyes from disturbing world news bulletins, and to concentrate on “manageable” questions of personal and family morality. Such a purely private faith is as dangerous as a fanatically political one. This is exactly the time when we must be encouraged to face the unpleasant facts of world affairs, when we must learn not only to be well-meaning, but also competent citizens.

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