

cion. A great statesman does not seduce his people into a need-less war; he keeps them out of it.

When the Soviet Union dissolved by peaceful secession, it was only 70 years old—the same age as the United States when it dissolved in 1860. Did Gorbachev fail as a statesman *because* he negotiated a peaceful dissolution of the U.S.S.R.? Likewise, if all states west of the Mississippi were to secede tomorrow, would we praise, as a great statesman, a president who refused to negotiate and launched total war against the civilian population merely to preserve the Union? The number of Southerners who died as a result of Lincoln's invasion was greater than the total of *all* Americans killed by Hitler and Tojo. By the end of the war, nearly one half of the white male population of military age was either dead or mutilated. No country in World War II suffered casualties of that magnitude.

Not only would Lincoln not receive Confederate commissioners, he refused, for three crucial months, to call Congress. Alone, he illegally raised money, illegally raised troops, and started the war. To crush Northern opposition, he suspended the writ of *habeas corpus* for the duration of the war and rounded up some 20,000 political prisoners. (Mussolini arrested some 12,000 but convicted only 1,624.) When the chief justice of the Supreme Court declared the suspension blatantly unconstitutional and ordered the prisoners released, Lincoln ordered *his* arrest. This American Caesar shut down over 300 newspapers, arrested editors, and smashed presses. He broke up state legislatures; arrested Democratic candidates who urged an armistice; and used the military to elect Republicans (including himself, in 1864, by a margin of around 38,000 popular votes). He illegally created a "state" in West Virginia and imported a large army of foreign mercenaries. B.H. Liddell Hart traces the origin of modern total war to Lincoln's decision to direct war against the civilian population. Sherman acknowledged that, by the rules of war taught at West Point, he was guilty of war crimes punishable by death. But who was to enforce those rules?

These actions are justified by nationalist historians as the energetic and extraordinary efforts of a great helmsman rising to the painful duty of preserving an indivisible Union. But Lin-

coln had inherited no such Union from the Framers. Rather, like Bismarck, he *created* one with a policy of blood and iron. What we call the "Civil War" was in fact America's French Revolution, and Lincoln was the first Jacobin president. He claimed legitimacy for his actions with a "conservative" rhetoric, rooted in an historically false theory of the Constitution which held that the states had never been sovereign. The Union created the states, he said, not the states the Union. In time, this corrupt and corrupting doctrine would suck nearly every reserved power of the states into the central government. Lincoln seared into the American mind an ideological style of politics which, through a sort of alchemy, transmuted a federative "union" of states into a French revolutionary "nation" launched on an unending global mission of achieving equality. Lincoln's corrupt constitutionalism and his ideological style of politics have, over time, led to the hollowing out of traditional American society and the obscene concentration of power in the central government that the Constitution was explicitly designed to prevent.

A genuinely *American* conservatism, then, must adopt the project of preserving and restoring the decentralized federative polity of the Framers rooted in state and local sovereignty. The central government has no constitutional authority to do most of what it does today. The first question posed by an authentic American conservative politics is not whether a policy is good or bad, but what agency (the states or the central government—if *either*) has the authority to enact it. This is the principle of subsidiarity: that as much as possible should be done by the smallest political unit.

The Democratic and Republican parties are Lincolnian parties. Neither honestly questions the limits of federal authority to do this or that. In 1861, the central government broke free from what Jefferson called "the chains of the Constitution," and we have, consequently, inherited a fractured historical memory. There are now *two* Americanisms: pre-Lincolnian and post-Lincolnian. The latter is Jacobinism by other means. Only the former can lay claim to being the primordial American conservatism. c

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## The Steward

by Timothy Murphy

*Lord, thou deliveredst unto me  
five talents; behold, I have gained  
five talents more.  
—Matthew XXV, 20*

Pheasants and sharptail grouse  
nest near his modest house.  
Pronghorn antelope  
graze on a Rosebud slope.

Morris no-till drills  
pulled by three Versatiles  
keep the soil from blowing  
off his communal hills—

hills that the bison haunted  
and his Sioux forbears hunted,  
fields where the cocks are crowing  
and his green sons, growing.

# Mr. Wilson's Wars

## Devolution or Revolution?

by Scott P. Richert

“National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. ‘Self-determination’ is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.”

Woodrow Wilson’s words, recorded in the *New York Times* on February 12, 1918, defined the 20th century and guaranteed that World War I would not be the “war to end all wars”; they provide an important gloss to his Fourteen Points, delivered in joint session of Congress just a month earlier. As Winston Churchill would later write, the idea of national self-determination was neither original nor new but “will rightly be forever connected with the name of President Wilson.”

The phrase still resonates today, perhaps not least among those of us who believe in the organic nation and who desire to govern ourselves. Of course, states are also the product of history, but while the construction “nation-state” may roll easily off the tongue, we tend to see a tension between the first element and the second. Because of the centralization of power in America over the past 140 years, we may find ourselves more kindly disposed toward the claims of the nation, hoping that they will help keep the power of government in check. But by adopting the language of national self-determination, the state has successfully co-opted national identity for its own centralizing purposes. As Lord Acton wrote in July 1862 (reflecting on the American Civil War), “Whenever a single definite object is made the supreme end of the State, be it the advantage of a class, the safety or the power of the country, or the support of any speculative idea, the State becomes for the time inevitably absolute.”

Since 1789, the twin principles of revolution and national self-determination have marched forward with an almost demonic intensity, before which the actions of men and of states have seemed powerless. A half-century before Woodrow Wilson proclaimed national self-determination the highest political good, Lord Acton predicted the great political dynamic of the 20th century:

[A] nation inspired by the democratic idea cannot with consistency allow a part of itself to belong to a foreign State, or the whole to be divided into several native States. The theory of nationality therefore proceeds from both the principles which divide the political world—from legitimacy, which ignores its claims, and from the revolution, which assumes them; and for the same reason it is the chief weapon of the last against the first.

If national self-determination is the chief weapon of revolution against legitimacy, then we can rightly say that Wilson and his successors have institutionalized revolution. Until we abandon the Wilsonian ideal, we can expect a future of continual

war. Every time national populations spill over the boundaries between nation-states, national self-determination demands that we change those boundaries so that the nation and the state become coextensive once again. We have seen this dynamic begin to play out in Kosovo, under the force of American weapons; we may see—sooner rather than later—the same happen in the American Southwest.

Wilson concluded his speech to Congress by defining America’s role as that of the world’s policeman, ensuring the right of self-determination to all nations:

Unless this principle be made its foundation no part of the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no other principle; and to the vindication of this principle they are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything they possess. The moral climax of this the culminating and final war for human liberty has come, and they are ready to put their own strength, their own highest purpose, their own integrity and devotion to the test.

But the doctrine of national self-determination is dangerous not only because it binds us to endless foreign interventionism, but because it strengthens the central state here at home, while frustrating the patriotic—rather than national—aspirations of regions and states for self-government. After decades of unfettered immigration throughout the West, various nationalisms—particularly Mexican nationalism in the American Southwest—are competing for power within the boundaries of historic nation-states. By denying, on the basis of a Jacobin idea of national unity, the legitimate patriotic aspirations of regions and states to govern themselves, the partisans of national self-determination legitimize the very principle under which the invaders hope to annex parts of our country to a foreign nation-state.

The ordered liberty of historic states is under constant attack. Globalism and the New World Order represent just one pincer of that assault; the other pincer—the institutionalization of the revolutionary principle of national self-determination—may represent a greater threat, because it strikes where we least expect it—from within.



Il. Ward Sterett

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