

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

Scott P. Richert is the executive editor of *Chronicles*.

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The Old Testament Foundations of Cultural Conservatism

by Jacob Neusner

The Hebrew Scriptures of ancient Israel (a.k.a. the Old Testament) are frequently quarried for proof-texts—pretexts, really—for leftist politics. In prophetic calls for justice, liberal Christianity and liberal Judaism claim ample support to legitimize big-government intervention into every area of life, and “Justice, justice pursue” is broadly interpreted as a divine endorsement of the platform of the Democratic Party. But the use of Scripture by the left to claim that God concurs with government solutions to the crisis *du jour* does not intimidate those of us on the right who value Scripture as well.

The difference lies in the context in which Scripture is invoked. Leftward-leaning exegesis finds verses that say what the exegete wants to hear; ripped out of cultural context, any verse can mean whatever you want to make of it. But divine revelation, taken whole and in context, shapes a culture of remarkably conservative qualities: continuity, tradition, and respect for received truth, for example. Indeed, it is no accident that those who value Scripture as God’s Word, not just good advice, derive from it the lesson that the new should be measured by the standard of the true, and truth derives from principle, reason, and the logic of history.

The social order that Scripture seeks to construct out of ancient Israel builds upon ancient foundations: the very creation of the world. The law of the Torah conveys God’s plan for the world He made. What could offer a more conservative conception of culture than the view, expressed by the ancient sages of Judaism in *Genesis Rabbah* (their commentary on the book of Genesis) that God looked into the Torah for guidance in creating the world? It follows that the law of the Torah may be interpreted diversely but never dismissed as ephemeral. Here is a sublime expression of this profoundly conservative philosophy of culture, rooted in God’s plan and will for creation:

“In the beginning God created” (Gen. 1:1):

R. Oshaia commenced [discourse by citing the following verse:] “Then I was beside him like a little child, and I was daily his delight [rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world, and delighting in the sons of men]” (Prov. 8:30-31).

[In the cited verse] the Torah speaks, “I was the work-plan of the Holy One, blessed be he.”

In the accepted practice of the world, when a mortal king builds a palace, he does not build it out of his own head, but he follows a work-plan.

And [the one who supplies] the work-plan does not build out of his own head, but he has designs and diagrams, so as to know how to situate the rooms and the



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doorways.

Thus the Holy One, blessed be he, consulted the Torah when he created the world.

So the Torah stated, “By means of ‘the beginning’ [that is to say, the Torah] did God create . . .” (Gen. 1:1).

And the word for “beginning” refers only to the Torah, as Scripture says, “The Lord made me as the beginning of his way” (Prov. 8:22).

Here is an explicit claim that the social order set forth by the Torah, with its emphasis on the critical role of the family in the formation of that order, is the foundation of civilization. Furthermore, Scripture is clear that capital punishment forms part of justice. The Talmud explicitly states that it is a means of atoning for sin, so that the felon may also inherit the world to come and eternal life at the resurrection of the dead. And to take a third component of the conservative philosophy of the social order—the preference for decentralized decisionmaking—Scripture offers devolution as the pinnacle of wisdom when Jethro advises his son-in-law, Moses, to provide for local decisions and to address only the most difficult matters himself. Hence, in matters of philosophy, Scripture read in context sustains conservative, and rejects disruptive, policies. It is only when interpreted out of context that Scripture can be read to oppose capital punishment, support non-natural “families,” and uphold the destruction of local communities through the centralization of power.

Jacob Neusner is Research Professor of Religion and Theology and Senior Fellow in the Institute of Advanced Theology at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.