

Also by
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THE STRUCTURE OF NATIONS AND EMPIRES

THE IRONY OF
American History

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CHAPTER VII

The American Future

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NATIONS, as individuals, may be assailed by contradictory temptations. They may be tempted to flee the responsibilities of their power or refuse to develop their potentialities. But they may also refuse to recognize the limits of their possibilities and seek greater power than is given to mortals. Naturally there are no fixed limits for the potentialities of men or nations. There is therefore no nice line to be drawn between a normal expression of human creativity and either the sloth which refuses to assume the responsibilities of human freedom or the pride which overestimates man's individual or collective power. But it is possible to discern extreme forms of each evil very clearly; and also to recognize various shades of evil between the extremes and the norm.

The temptation to disavow the responsibilities of human freedom or to leave human potentialities undeveloped usually assails the weak, rather than the strong. In

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the Biblical parable it was the "one talent" man who "hid his treasure in the ground." Our nation ought, therefore, not to take too much credit for having mastered a temptation which assailed us for several decades. It was a rather unique historical phenomenon that a nation with our potentialities should have been tempted to isolationism and withdrawal from world responsibilities. Various factors contributed to the persuasiveness of the temptation. We were so strong and our continental security seemed so impregnable (on cursory glance at least) that we were encouraged in the illusion that we could live our own life without too much regard for a harassed world. Our sense of superior virtue over the alleged evils of European civilization and our fear of losing our innocency if we braved the tumults of world politics, added spiritual vanity to ignoble prudence as the second cause of our irresponsibility. We thought we might keep ourselves free of the evils of a warring world and thus preserve a healthy civilization, amidst the expected doom of a decrepit one. This hope of furnishing the seed-corn for a new beginning persuaded moral idealists to combine with cynical realists in propounding the policy of power without responsibility.

However, human life is healthy only in relationship; and modern technical achievements have accentuated the interdependence of men and of nations. It therefore became apparent, that we could neither be really secure in an insecure world nor find life worth living if we bought our security at the price of civilization's doom. This knowledge came to us during and after the Second World War and marked a fateful turning point in our national life. Some of our friends and allies still profess uncertainty

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about the reality of our conversion from an irresponsible to a responsible relation to the community of nations. But, whatever may be our future errors, it is fairly safe to predict that we have finally triumphed over the temptation to "hide our talent in the ground."

We will not, however, take too much credit for this achievement if we remember that the temptation, over which we triumphed, is one which assails the weak rather than the strong. Indeed, a part of the resource for our triumph was our gradual realization that we were not weak, but strong; that we had in fact become very strong.

Significantly the same world which only yesterday feared our possible return to adolescent irresponsibility is now exercised about the possibilities of the misuse of our power. We would do well to understand the legitimacy of such fears rather than resent their seeming injustice. It is characteristic of human nature, whether in its individual or collective expression, that it has no possibility of exercising power, without running the danger of overestimating the purity of the wisdom which directs it. The apprehensions of allies and friends is, therefore, but a natural human reaction to what men intuitively know to be the temptations of power. A European statesman stated the issue very well recently in the words: "We are grateful to America for saving us from communism. But our gratitude does not prevent us from fearing that we might become an American colony. That danger lies in the situation of America's power and Europe's weakness." The statesman, when reminded of the strain of genuine idealism in American life, replied: "The idealism does indeed prevent America from a gross abuse of its power.

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But it might well accentuate the danger Europeans confront. For American power in the service of American idealism could create a situation in which we would be too impotent to correct you when you are wrong and you would be too idealistic to correct yourself."

Such a measured judgment upon the virtues and perils of America's position in the world community accurately describes the hazards of our position in the world. Our moral perils are not those of conscious malice or the explicit lust for power. They are the perils which can be understood only if we realize the ironic tendency of virtues to turn into vices when too complacently relied upon; and of power to become vexatious if the wisdom which directs it is trusted too confidently. The ironic elements in American history can be overcome, in short, only if American idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue. America's moral and spiritual success in relating itself creatively to a world community requires, not so much a guard against the gross vices, about which the idealists warn us, as a reorientation of the whole structure of our idealism. That idealism is too oblivious of the ironic perils to which human virtue, wisdom and power are subject. It is too certain that there is a straight path toward the goal of human happiness; too confident of the wisdom and idealism which prompt men and nations toward that goal; and too blind to the curious compounds of good and evil in which the actions of the best men and nations abound.

The two aspects of our historic situation which tend particularly to aggravate the problems of American idealism are: (a) That American power in the present world situation is inordinately great; (b) that the contemporary international situation offers no clear road to the achievement of either peace or victory over tyranny. The first aspect embodies perils to genuine community between ourselves and our allies; for power generates both justified and unjustified fears and resentments among the relatively powerless. The second aspect embodies the temptation to become impatient and defiant of the slow and sometimes contradictory processes of history. We may be too secure in both our sense of power and our sense of virtue to be ready to engage in a patient chess game with the recalcitrant forces of historic destiny. We could bring calamity upon ourselves and the world by forgetting that even the most powerful nations and even the wisest planners of the future remain themselves creatures as well as creators of the historical process. Man cannot rise to a simple triumph over historical fate.

In considering the perils of our inordinate power it would be well to concede that it embodies some real advantages for the world community. It is quite possible that if power had been more evenly distributed in the non-communist world the degree of cohesion actually attained would have been difficult. Many national communities gained their first triumph over chaos by the organizing energy of one particular power, sufficiently dominant to suppress the confusion of competing forces.

Thus, dominant city-states in Egypt and in Mesopotamia were responsible for the order and cohesion of these first great empires of human history. The preponderant power of America may have a similar role to play in the present international scene. There is, furthermore, a youthful belief in historic possibilities in our American culture, a confidence that problems can be solved, which frequently stands in creative contrast with the spiritual tiredness of many European nations as also with the defeatism of Oriental cultures. Our hegemonic position in the world community rests upon a buoyant vigor as well as upon our preponderant economic power.

Nevertheless, great disproportions of power are as certainly moral hazards to justice and community as they are foundations of minimal order. They are hazards to community both because they arouse resentments and fears among those who have less power; and because they tempt the strong to wield their power without too much consideration of the interests and views of those upon whom it impinges. Modern democratic nations have sought to bring power into the service of justice in three ways. (a) They have tried to distribute economic and political power and prevent its undue concentration. (b) They have tried to bring it under social and moral review. (c) They have sought to establish inner religious and moral checks upon it.

Of these three methods the first is not relevant to the international community, as at present inchoately organized. The relative power of particular nations must be accepted as fateful historic facts about which little can be done. The idealists who imagine that these dis-

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proportions of power would be dissolved in a global constitutional system do not understand the realities of the political order. No world government could possibly possess, for generations to come, the moral and political authority to redistribute power between the nations in the degree in which highly cohesive national communities have accomplished this end in recent centuries. Furthermore, even the most healthy modern nations must be content with only approximate equilibria of power lest they destroy the vitalities of various social forces by a too rigorous effort to bring the whole communal life under an equalitarian discipline. The preponderance of American power is thus an inexorable fact for decades to come, whether within or without a fuller world constitution than now prevails. If it does disappear it will be eliminated by the emergence of new forces or the new coalition of older forces, rather than by constitutional contrivance.

The strategy of bringing power under social and political review is a possibility for the international community, even in its present nascent form. It is a wholesome development for America and the world that the United Nations is becoming firmly established, not so much as an institution, capable of bridging the chasm between the communist and the non-communist world (in which task it can have only minimal success), but as an organ in which even the most powerful of the democratic nations must bring their policies under the scrutiny of world public opinion. Thus inevitable aberrations, arising from the pride of power, are corrected. It will be even more hopeful for the peace and justice of the world community, if a fragmented Europe should gain the unity

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to speak with more unanimity in the councils of the nations than is now possible. It is impossible for any nation or individual fully to understand the peculiar circumstances and the unique history of any other nation or individual, which create their special view of reality. It is important, therefore, that the fragmentary wisdom of any nation should be prevented from achieving the bogus omniscience, which occurs when the weak are too weak to dare challenge the opinion of the powerful. Such a tyrannical situation not only within, but between, the communist nations must finally destroy the community of that world.

It is also to be hoped that the Asian world will gain sufficient voice in the councils of the free nations to correct the inevitable bias of western nations in the same manner.

It is now generally acknowledged (to give an example of the salutary character of such discipline) that American policy in regard to the rearmament of Germany was too precipitate and too indifferent toward certain moral and political hazards of which Europe was conscious in that undertaking. There were, on the other hand, fears in Europe which might have prevented the inclusion of Western Germany in the full community of the non-communist world and the concomitant grant of the right, and acknowledgment of the responsibility, of common defense of that community. The tolerable solution of this problem was achieved by compromises between the American and the European position. Thus a creative synthesis was achieved despite the hazards of disproportionate power.

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If there should be, as many Europeans believe, too great a preoccupation in America with the task of winning a war which Europe wants to avoid; and if there should be in Europe, as some Americans believe, so desperate a desire to avoid war that the danger is run of bringing on the conflict by lack of resolution, it is to be hoped that a similar creative synthesis of complementary viewpoints will take place. The real test of such a synthesis will occur at the point in time when American preparedness has reached its highest possibility and the fear of the rapid outmoding of modern weapons and the consequent economic burden of ever-new preparedness efforts might tempt American strategists to welcome a final joining of the issue. In that situation many Americans would, of course, strongly resist the temptation to embark upon a preventive war. But their resolution will be strengthened and their cause have a better prospect of success if the decision lies not with one powerful nation but with a real community of nations.

The third strategy of disciplining the exercise of power, that of an inner religious and moral check, is usually interpreted to mean the cultivation of a sense of justice. The inclination "to give each man his due" is indeed one of the ends of such a discipline. But a sense of humility which recognizes that nations are even more incapable than individuals of fully understanding the rights and claims of others may be an even more important element in such a discipline. A too confident sense of justice always leads to injustice. In so far as men and nations are "judges in their own case" they are bound to betray the human weakness of having a livelier sense of their own

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interest than of the competing interest. That is why "just" men and nations may easily become involved in ironic refutations of their moral pretensions.

Genuine community, whether between men or nations, is not established merely through the realization that we need one another, though indeed we do. That realization alone may still allow the strong to use the lives of the weaker as instruments of their own self-realization. Genuine community is established only when the knowledge that we need one another is supplemented by the recognition that "the other," that other form of life, or that other unique community is the limit beyond which our ambitions must not run and the boundary beyond which our life must not expand.

It is significant that most genuine community is established below and above the level of conscious moral idealism. Below that level we find the strong forces of nature and nature-history, sex and kinship, common language and geographically determined togetherness, operative. Above the level of idealism the most effective force of community is religious humility. This includes the charitable realization that the vanities of the other group or person, from which we suffer, is not different in kind, though possibly in degree, from similar vanities in our own life. It also includes a religious sense of the mystery and greatness of the other life, which we violate if we seek to comprehend it too simply from our standpoint.

Such resources of community are of greater importance in our nation today than abstract constitutional schemes, of which our idealists are so fond. Most of these schemes will be proved, upon close examination, to be indifferent

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toward the urgencies and anxieties which nations, less favored than we, experience; and to betray sentimentalities about the perplexing problems of human togetherness in which only the powerful and the secure can indulge.

3

The second characteristic of the contemporary situation, which challenges American idealism, is that there are no guarantees either for the victory of democracy over tyranny or for a peaceful solution of the fateful conflict between two great centers of power. We have previously noted how the tragic dilemmas and the pathetic uncertainties and frustrations of contemporary history offer ironic refutation of the dreams of happiness and virtue of a liberal age and, especially, of the American hopes. Escape from our ironic situation obviously demands that we moderate our conceptions of the ability of men and of nations to discern the future; and of the power of even great nations to bring a tortuous historical process to, what seems to them, a logical and proper conclusion.

The difficulty of our own powerful nation in coming to terms with the frustrations of history, and our impatience with a situation which requires great exertions without the promise of certain success, is quite obviously symbolic of the whole perplexity of modern culture. The perplexity arises from the fact that men have been pre-occupied with man's capacity to master historical forces and have forgotten that the same man, including the collective man embodied in powerful nations, is also a

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creature of these historical forces. Since man is a creator, endowed with a unique freedom, he "looks before and after and pines for what is not." He envisages goals and ends of life which are not dictated by the immediate necessities of life. He builds and surveys the great cultural and social structures of his day, recognizes the plight in which they become involved and devises various means and ends to extricate his generation from such a plight. He would not be fully human if he did not lift himself above his immediate hour, if he felt neither responsibility for the future weal of his civilization, nor gratitude for the whole glorious and tragic drama of human history, culminating in the present moment.

But it is easy to forget that even the most powerful nation or alliance of nations is merely one of many forces in the historical drama; and that the conflict of many wills and purposes, which constitute that drama, give it a bizarre pattern in which it is difficult to discern a real meaning. It is even more difficult to subject it to a pre-conceived order. We have previously considered the ironic nature of the fact that the chief force of recalcitrance against the hopes of a democratic world should be furnished by a political religion, the animus of whose recalcitrance should be derived from its fanatic belief that it can reduce all historical forces to its conception of a rational order. The fact that this religion should have a special appeal to decaying feudal societies, which have been left behind in the march of technical progress of the western world is one of those imponderable factors in history, which no one could have foreseen but which can be countered only if we do not try too simply to

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overcome the ambivalence and hesitations of the non-technical world by the display of our power, or the claim of superiority for our "way of life."

We have enough discernment as creators of history to know that there is a certain "logic" in its course. We know that recently the development of an inchoate world community requires that it acquire global political organs for the better integration of its life. But if we imagine that we can easily transmute this logic into historical reality we will prove ourselves blind to the limitations of man as creature of history. For the achievement of a constitutional world order is frustrated not merely by the opposition of a resolute foe who has his own conception of such an order. It is impeded also by the general limitations of man as creature. The most important of these is the fact that human communities are never purely artifacts of the human mind and will. Human communities are subject to "organic" growth. This means that they cannot deny their relation to "nature"; for the force of their cohesion is partly drawn from the necessities of nature (kinship, geography, etc.) rather than from the realm of freedom. Even when it is not pure nature but historic tradition and common experience which provides the cement of cohesion, the integrating force is still not in the realm of pure freedom or the fruit of pure volition. Thus, the "Atlantic community" is becoming a reality partly because it does have common cultural inheritances and partly because the exigencies of history are forcing mutual tasks upon it. The assumption of these mutual responsibilities requires a whole series of clear decisions. Yet it is not possible even for such a limited international

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community to be constituted into an integral community by one clear act of political will. Naturally a more unlimited or global community, with fewer common cultural traditions to bind it and less immediate urgencies to force difficult decisions upon a reluctant human will, will have even greater difficulty in achieving stable political cohesion.

All these matters are understood intuitively by practical statesmen who know from experience that the mastery of historical destiny is a tortuous process in which powerful forces may be beguiled, deflected, and transmuted but never simply annulled or defied. The difficulty, particularly in America, is that the wisdom of this practical statesmanship is so frequently despised as foolishness by the supposedly more "idealistic" science of our age. Thus the conscience of our nation is confused to the point of schizophrenia; and the inevitable disappointments, frustrations and illogicalities of world politics are wrongly interpreted as nothing but the fruit of "unscientific" blundering. A nation with an inordinate degree of political power is doubly tempted to exceed the bounds of historical possibilities, if it is informed by an idealism which does not understand the limits of man's wisdom and volition in history.

4

The recognition of historical limits must not, however, lead to a betrayal of cherished values and historical attainments. Historical pragmatism exists on the edge of opportunism, but cannot afford to fall into the abyss. The difficulty of sustaining the values of a free world must not

prompt us, for instance, to come to terms with tyranny. Nor must the perplexities confronting the task of achieving global community betray us into a complacent acceptance of national loyalty as the final moral possibility of history. It is even more grievously wrong either to bow to "waves of the future" or to yield to inertias of the past than to seek illusory escape from historical difficulties by utopian dreams.

Through the whole course of history mankind has, by a true spiritual instinct, reserved its highest admiration for those heroes who resisted evil at the risk or price of fortune and life without too much hope of success. Sometimes their very indifference to the issue of success or failure provided the stamina which made success possible. Sometimes the heroes of faith perished outside the promised land. This paradoxical relation between the possible and the impossible in history proves that the frame of history is wider than the nature-time in which it is grounded. The injunction of Christ: "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul" (Matthew 10:28) neatly indicates the dimension of human existence which transcends the basis which human life and history have in nature. Not merely in Christian thought but in the noblest paganism, it has been understood that a too desperate desire to preserve life or to gain obvious success must rob life of its meaning. If this be so, there cannot be a simple correlation between virtue and happiness, or between immediate and ultimate success.

While collective man lacks the capacity of individual man to sacrifice "the body" (*i.e.* historical security) for

an end which may not be historically validated, yet nations have proved capable of great sacrifice in defending their liberties against tyranny, for instance. The tendency of a liberal culture to regard the highest human possibilities as capable of simple historical attainment, and to interpret all tragic and contradictory elements in the pattern of history as merely provisional, has immersed the spirit of our age in a sentimentality which so uncritically identifies idealism with prudence that it can find no place in its scheme of things for heroic action or heroic patience. Yet the only possibility of success for our nation and our culture in achieving the historic goals of peace and justice lies in our capacity to make sacrifices and to sustain endeavors without complete certainty of success.

We could not bear the burdens required to save the world from tyranny if there were no prospects of success. The necessity of this measure of historic hope marks the spiritual stature of collective, as distinguished from individual, man. Even among individuals only few individuals are able to rise to the height of heroic nonchalance about historic possibilities. But while the nation cannot fulfill its mission in a given situation without some prospect of success, it also cannot persist in any great endeavor if it is so preoccupied with immediate historic possibilities that it is constantly subjected to distracting alternations of illusion and disillusion.

The fact that the European nations, more accustomed to the tragic vicissitudes of history, still have a measure of misgiving about our leadership in the world community is due to their fear that our "technocratic" tendency to equate the mastery of nature with the mastery of history

could tempt us to lose patience with the tortuous course of history. We might be driven to hysteria by its inevitable frustrations. We might be tempted to bring the whole of modern history to a tragic conclusion by one final and mighty effort to overcome its frustrations. The political term for such an effort is "preventive war." It is not an immediate temptation; but it could become so in the next decade or two.

A democracy can not of course, engage in an explicit preventive war. But military leadership can heighten crises to the point where war becomes unavoidable.

The power of such a temptation to a nation, long accustomed to expanding possibilities and only recently subjected to frustration, is enhanced by the spiritual aberrations which arise in a situation of intense enmity. The certainty of the foe's continued intransigence seems to be the only fixed fact in an uncertain future. Nations find it even more difficult than individuals to preserve sanity when confronted with a resolute and unscrupulous foe. Hatred disturbs all residual serenity of spirit and vindictiveness muddies every pool of sanity. In the present situation even the sanest of our statesmen have found it convenient to conform their policies to the public temper of fear and hatred which the most vulgar of our politicians have generated or exploited. Our foreign policy is thus threatened with a kind of apoplectic rigidity and inflexibility. Constant proof is required that the foe is hated with sufficient vigor. Unfortunately the only persuasive proof seems to be the disavowal of precisely those discriminate judgments which are so necessary for an effective conflict with the evil, which we are supposed to

abhor. There is no simple triumph over this spirit of fear and hatred. It is certainly an achievement beyond the resources of a simple idealism. For naïve idealists are always so preoccupied with their own virtues that they have no residual awareness of the common characteristics in all human foibles and frailties and could not bear to be reminded that there is a hidden kinship between the vices of even the most vicious and the virtues of even the most upright.

5

The American situation is such a vivid symbol of the spiritual perplexities of modern man, because the degree of American power tends to generate illusions to which a technocratic culture is already too prone. This technocratic approach to problems of history, which erroneously equates the mastery of nature with the mastery of historical destiny, in turn accentuates a very old failing in human nature: the inclination of the wise, or the powerful, or the virtuous, to obscure and deny the human limitations in all human achievements and pretensions.

The most rigorous and searching criticism of the weaknesses in our foreign policy, which may be ascribed to the special character of our American idealism, has recently been made by one of our most eminent specialists in foreign policy, Mr. George Kennan.*

He ascribes the weaknesses of our policy to a too simple "legalistic-moralistic" approach and defines this approach as informed by an uncritical reliance upon moral and constitutional schemes, and by too little concern for

*George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950*.

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the effect of our policy upon other nations, and too little anticipation of the possible disruption of policies by incalculable future occurrences. In short, he accuses the nation of pretending too much prescience of an unknown future and of an inclination to regard other peoples "in our own image." These are, of course, precisely the perils to which all human idealism is subject and which our great power and our technocratic culture have aggravated.

Mr. Kennan's solution for our problem is to return to the policy of making the "national interest" the touchstone of our diplomacy. He does not intend to be morally cynical in the advocacy of this course. He believes that a modest awareness that our own interests represent the limit of our competence should prompt such a policy. His theory is that we may know what is good for us but should be less certain that we know what is good for others. This admonition to modesty is valid as far as it goes. Yet his solution is wrong. For egotism is not the proper cure for an abstract and pretentious idealism.

Since the lives and interests of other men and communities always impinge upon our own, a preoccupation with our own interests must lead to an illegitimate indifference toward the interests of others, even when modesty prompts the preoccupation. The cure for a pretentious idealism, which claims to know more about the future and about other men than is given mortal man to know, is not egotism. It is a concern for both the self and the other in which the self, whether individual or collective, preserves a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind," derived from a modest awareness of the limits of its own knowledge and power.

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It is not an accident of history that a culture which made so much of humanity and humaneness should have generated such frightful inhumanities; and that these inhumanities are not limited to the explicitly fanatic politico-religious movements. Mr. Kennan rightly points to the evils which arise from the pursuit of unlimited rather than limited ends, even by highly civilized nations in the modern era. The inhumanities of our day, which modern tryannies exhibit in the *n*th degree, are due to an idealism in which reason is turned into unreason because it is not conscious of the contingent character of the presuppositions with which the reasoning process begins, and in which idealism is transmuted into inhumanity because the idealist seeks to comprehend the whole realm of ends from his standpoint.

A nice symbol of this difficulty in the policy of even "just" nations is the ironic embarrassment in which the victorious democracies became involved in their program of "demilitarizing" the vanquished "militaristic" nations. In Japan they encouraged a ridiculous article in the new constitution which committed the nation to a perpetual pacifist defenselessness. In less than half a decade they were forced to ask their "demilitarized" former foes to rearm, and become allies in a common defense against a new foe, who had recently been their victorious ally.

We cannot expect even the wisest of nations to escape every peril of moral and spiritual complacency; for nations have always been constitutionally self-righteous. But it will make a difference whether the culture in which the policies of nations are formed is only as deep and as high as the nation's highest ideals; or whether there is a di-

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mension in the culture from the standpoint of which the element of vanity in all human ambitions and achievements is discerned. But this is a height which can be grasped only by faith; for everything that is related in terms of simple rational coherence with the ideals of a culture or a nation will prove in the end to be a simple justification of its most cherished values. The God before whom "the nations are as a drop in the bucket and are counted as small dust in the balances" is known by faith and not by reason. The realm of mystery and meaning which encloses and finally makes sense out of the baffling configurations of history is not identical with any scheme of rational intelligibility. The faith which appropriates the meaning in the mystery inevitably involves an experience of repentance for the false meanings which the pride of nations and cultures introduces into the pattern. Such repentance is the true source of charity; and we are more desperately in need of genuine charity than of more technocratic skills.

CHAPTER VIII

The Significance of Irony

1

ANY interpretation of historical patterns and configurations raises the question whether the patterns, which the observer discerns, are "objectively" true or are imposed upon the vast stuff of history by his imagination. History might be likened to the confusion of spots on the cards used by psychiatrists in a Rorschach test. The patient is asked to report what he sees in these spots; and he may claim to find the outlines of an elephant, butterfly or frog. The psychiatrist draws conclusions from these judgments about the state of the patient's imagination rather than about the actual configuration of spots on the card. Are historical patterns equally subjective?

Is the discernment of an ironic element in the history of the American nation or of modern culture merely the fruit of a capricious imagination? Is the pattern of irony superimposed upon the historical data which are so various that they would be tolerant of almost any pattern, which the observer might care to impose? In answering such questions one must admit the subjective element in historical judgments, but also insist upon the distinction between