

THOUGHTS ABOUT PANAMA AND WORLD HISTORY

(Originally published August 1974)

For some time now, competent philosophical observers have been convinced that Western civilization is not only disintegrating, but also rapidly eroding its own foundations. History, while repetitive, continues its course, and the implication is that as democracies decline, the controlled, totalitarian societies will eventually become dominant. That experienced and wise British commentator upon humanity's foibles, Malcolm Muggeridge, blames the efforts of intellectual, liberal and progressive elements in the West, always addicted to self-deception, with speeding up the process.

About six weeks ago, we listened to an interesting paper and discussion on the upcoming crisis of Panama and the Panama Canal. Before long the United States will be faced with the problem of giving up our sovereignty, turning over to the Panamanian Republic the canal and our territory there and maintaining our interest and investment (over six billion dollars since 1904) on a lease basis, subject to the rule and whim of a small, nationalistic government.

Historically, this is U.S. property: purchased for \$10,000,000 plus yearly payments of \$250,000, held in perpetuity and obtained by legitimate treaty in much the same manner as we got Florida from Spain, Louisiana from France, California from Mexico and Alaska from Russia.

Our changing policy in this affair is in line with and follows the global trend that followed World War II wherein colonialism and protectionism have retreated and turned over governing responsibility to new and independent nations, among others, the cases of India (Britain), Algeria (France) and the Philippines (U.S).

Actually, to return the Panama Canal and adjacent territory to its original owner, we should not overlook Colombia, from whom Panamanian rebels, aided and abetted by the U.S. Government under Roosevelt I, wrested it by revolution in 1903 so that we could make the treaty, which had been refused earlier by Colombia.

There is no doubt that our policy in recent years has been altered to conform with a general, worldwide acceptance of universal independence in accordance with United Nations idealism. In holding this policy, it would be magnanimous and proper for us to follow through honorably in the case of Panama. Relinquishing our sovereignty to the Panamanian Republic would demonstrate our faith in the popular concept of freedom and home rule for all.

All this would be fine, and perhaps will be, but we should keep in mind some

practical observations about the present. We are now supposedly one of the three major world powers, and it would be reassuring if all three powers were equally dedicated to the same ideals of freedom and benevolence. We must face the fact, however, that both Russia and China are totalitarian dictatorships, and in this game of world politics, we are dealing with two powers which are not perhaps so altruistically inclined as we. In fact, both of these world giants—Russia since the Bolshevik revolution in 1918, and China since the Maoist takeover in 1949—have been repeatedly and brutally suppressive toward their own citizens, have acted in a consistently aggressive fashion toward neighboring nations and have remained strongly nationalist rather than globalist in their outlook.

It would seem that much of our new foreign policy attitude presupposes that both Russia and China will eventually change and mellow enough to become imbued with the same one-world idealism as we. Yet we know, from past performance records that both are aggressive, pragmatic and calculating, governments that not only have taken advantage of all opportunities to exploit the weaknesses and generosity of Western democracies but which also, apparently, count upon our progressive, self-weakening efforts to promote their own ambitions.

One can applaud our reversal of policy, our scrapping of Cold War attitudes, our belated recognition of China and our attempts at detente toward Russia as steps in the right direction toward a goal of lasting world peace, and an idealism we should all welcome. However, the reservation remains that while what we of the West have been doing now fulfills the hopes of UN idealism and is the fashionable thing to do, we may also be proceeding along the very course—and giving up our right to the Panama Canal is but an additional step along the way—that both Russia, for a long time now, and China, a late comer to power, have always hoped we would follow.

Whether or not, ten, twenty or forty years from now, we will be praising Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger for their brilliant diplomacy, or damning them for their utter stupidity, may depend entirely on what these two totalitarian powers choose (or have already chosen) as long range objectives in world history.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "Doctor's Lounge", Aug 1974, Vol. XXI No. 8, p.10