

■ “Not Left, Not Right, But a Vital Center”

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Author: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

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Summary Overview

While working on his book *The Vital Center*, historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. had this essay printed in the *New York Times Magazine*. Summarizing many points of the larger text, Schlesinger focused on the need for American politicians to continue to follow the liberal democratic movement, which had been the basis for the creation of the American republic. An activist historian, Schlesinger had witnessed the devastating effects of fascist movements on the right, such as the Nazi Party in Germany, and of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, on the left. In the early post–World War II era, there were some political groups within the United States that were attempting to push the nation toward one of these extremes. In this essay, and in his later book, Schlesinger sought to move American society toward a liberal future.

Defining Moment

Both before and after the First World War, many people in the United States were isolationists, preferring to ignore the political movements and conflicts unfolding in Europe. Many remained so even as dictatorial fascist governments gained hold in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere, and as a dictatorial communist regime gained control in Russia/the Soviet Union. After Pearl Harbor, most isolationist sentiment dissipated and Americans were proud of their hard-won victories in Europe and the Pacific. By 1948, with fascism having been discredited, fears continued to grow regarding the “communist threat” and how communism might make inroads in the United States. Internationally, because of the postwar division of Europe, many saw a real threat of communist expansion beyond the Eastern European countries. The same month Schlesinger’s article was published, President Harry Truman announced the Truman Doctrine, aimed at repelling the expansion of communism. The Marshall Plan, a major U.S.-financed reconstruction program for Europe, was launched four months later. The Cold War had started in earnest, with the United States in the position as presumed leader of the Free World.

With the 1948 presidential election approaching, there were nationally recognized candidates running to both the left and the right of both the Democratic



Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. in 1961. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

and Republican nominees, ranging from Henry Wallace on the far left to General Douglas MacArthur on the far right. Schlesinger felt compelled to draw people's attention to the political philosophy he believed should be (and, he considered, was) the foundation of American democracy. "The Vital Center" was Schlesinger term for this political stance. He saw the liberal democratic tradition as being true to the Founding Fathers' vision but also as a set of values for people to incorporate into their lives. While in the upcoming decade Schlesinger particular choices of presidential candidates did not always win, the outlook demonstrated in this article did generally prevail.

Author Biography

In 1917 Arthur Schlesinger Jr. was born into an academic family in Columbus, Ohio. While his father

was a professor at Harvard, Arthur Jr. earned a bachelor's degree in 1938, spent a year as a Fellow at Cambridge University, and then returned to be a member of the Harvard Society of Fellows. During World War II he worked in the Office of War Information/Office of Strategic Services, predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). At war's end, he published a Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Age of Jackson*. From 1946 to 1962, he held positions at Harvard University. Friends with John F. Kennedy, he joined Kennedy's administration, documenting it in another Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. After 1966, Schlesinger taught at the City University of New York, and advocated for liberal politicians and causes. He died in New York City in 2007.



Historical Document

“Not Left, Not Right, But a Vital Center”

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

4 April 1948

The nobles, walking into the French Assembly of 1789, took their traditional place of honor on the president's right. The Third Estate grouped itself defiantly on the left. Thus arose the division which, at first a question of protocol, was soon converted into a question of politics and emotion. As parliamentarianism reached its height in the nineteenth century, chambers tended to divide instinctively and aggressively into Right, Center and Left. Today, by extension, these terms cover all political activity.

Left and Right, indeed, have become the characteristic political terms of our time. Without specific color or content, they define the polar ends of the political spectrum in which the word Center, fashionable a generation or two ago, is harder and harder to find. Yet the terms themselves have bred a new confusion. They were adequate to the political simplicities of the nineteenth century, when the Right meant those who wished to preserve the existing order and the Left meant those who wished to change it. But the twentieth century, here as elsewhere, introduced new ambiguities.

The Fascists, for example, were not conservative in any very meaningful sense. They did not wish to preserve the existing order, or even to turn back the clock to some more stable century. They purposefully planned to transform the existing order into a new and all-absorbing authoritarianism, based upon the energies and frustrations of modern industrialism. The Fascists, in a meaningful sense, were revolutionaries. Yet their totalitarian ideal hardly fitted into the pattern of the Left, which had been the traditional home of greater freedoms and more generous aspirations. So, after boggling and uncertainty, they were assigned positions on the far Right.

At the same time, new complexities were overtaking the Left. The declarations of the Rights of Man, the spirit of the French Revolution, the legacy of 1848—all pointed in the direction of the enlargement of individual freedom. Yet one group on the Left, which clinging to the eventual hope of the withering away of the state and the liberation of the individual, had committed itself to methods of terror, violence and dictatorship; and in practice the methods seemed not only to defer but to corrupt and destroy the presumed objective. The libertarian tradition of the Left, in short, hardly squared with the

development of communism into a police totalitarianism. Yet the Communists clearly did not belong to the Right or Center; so they have been allowed to retain positions on the far Left.

The rise of fascism and communism illustrated vividly the fallacies of the linear conception of Right and Left. In certain basic respects—a totalitarian state structure, a single party, a leader, a secret police, a hatred of political, cultural and intellectual freedom—fascism and communism are clearly more like each other than they are like anything in between. This dilemma drove Prof. DeWitt C. Poole to an inspired suggestion. Right and Left, he said, should be conceived, not in terms of a line, but in terms of a circle, with the extremes of Right and Left—fascism and communism meeting at the bottom. You can then look at the circle in two ways: with respect to property, fascism and the moderate Right are side by side against communism and the moderate Left; with respect to liberty, the moderate Right and moderate Left are side by side against fascism and communism.

PROFESSOR POOLE'S ingenious solution does not reformulate the Right-Left classification in terms which correspond to the complexities of this ghastly century. But the Poole formula does not lend itself particularly to the shorthand of mass communications—to the simplifications of the headline writer, for example, who hardly has time or space to plot his characterizations with a compass along the circumference of the circle. Newspapers will doubtless continue to refer to Walter Reuther as the leader of the Right wing of the CIO, whereas, as every automobile manufacturer knows, Reuther is to the Right only in the sense of being profoundly pro-democratic and anti-Communist.

FOR popular purposes, then, it may be well to look at the phrase that has appeared to identify a new and significant political actuality—the non-Communist Left. I am inclined to believe that if Americans will understand and adopt this conception (along with its natural colleague, the non-Fascist Right), we will take vast strides toward increasing the clarity of our thought and action in world affairs.

The distinction between the Communists and the non-Communist Left had its roots in the nineteenth century. It rose over the fundamental question of the method of proletarian triumph; could the working classes gain power by peaceful and democratic means or were violence, terror and dictatorship inevitable? Marx remained Delphic on this basic point and can be quoted plausibly on either side. He probably held the sensible view that the need for violent revolution depended on local circumstance.

The political and intellectual experience of Marxists in the generation after Marx began to disclose, however, crucial differences. Doubtless antagonisms of temperament as well as philosophy played their role. But soon the followers

of Marx were splitting into two clearly defined groups: those who argued that the power of capitalism had made terror and dictatorship the necessary instruments of social change; and those who, committed to gradualism, believed that social change must be accomplished without destroying individual liberties and disrupting the entire social fabric.

THE leader of the first group was Lenin, and the Russian Revolution gave Leninism the prestige of being, at the very least, a highly efficient means of acquiring undisputed power. The Social Democrat, in the meantime, displayed through the Twenties, such weakness and indecision, even when backed by an electoral majority, that many Leftists lost faith in gradualism. Communists and Socialists carried on during this period an interminable and somewhat sterile polemics intermingled with moments of uneasy alliance. The Communists, for example, were denouncing the Socialists as “Social Fascists” in 1933, only to discover them two years later to be comrades in the struggle against fascism and to embrace them with an iron grip during the rime of the United Front.

THERE is no point in reviewing here the tedious disillusionment which has followed every Socialist experiment at collaborating with the Communists. The mystique of the Resistance-the experience and memory of the common underground war against nazism-produced one final attempt at such collaboration in 1945 and 1946. But this attempt failed, as the non-Communist parties to be more than ever the unprotesting tools of Soviet totalitarianism; and this failure ended even that deep inferiority complex which had caused Socialists to defer so long, against their own better judgement, to the one true workers’ state.

In the last two years the Socialists’ misgivings, so long lurking above and below consciousness, have crystallized in the solid conviction that a serious difference in means makes it inevitable that the ends will differ seriously too. The difference between those who believe in political and individual freedom and those who favor the police state is now considered too fundamental to be denied-except by the embattled bloc of the invincibly self-deluded-the Nennis, Fierlingers and Henry Wallaces. If the conception of the non-Communist Left has held sway over the minds and hearts of men of good-will in the century after 1848, the conception of the nonCommunist Left may similarly hold sway for the generations after 1948.

LAST fall the Socialist Government of France was struggling for its life, with deGaulle to the right, Thorez to the left, volleying and thundering. In a courageous speech Léon Blum, the veteran Socialist leader, pointed to the twin dangers of communism and reaction. What we need in France, he cried, is a Third Force, committed against both totalitarian extremes and in favor of affirmative programs for political freedom and economic stability. The Third Force!-the idea caught the imagination of people across the continent fighting

to escape being crushed between the millstones. The only hope lay in the revival of democracy as a fighting faith.

The foundation of the Third Force is clearly the free Socialist parties. But, in a larger sense, the Third Force can by no means be a movement of Socialist sectarianism. The issues uncovered by the challenge of Soviet totalitarianism are much broader than questions merely of economic organization. Just as capitalist America has come to recognize that democratic Socialists are our best allies against communism, so democratic Socialists have come to recognize that liberal capitalists may also have a serious stake in the preservation of free society.

The democratic Socialists, moreover, are still under the curse of that feebleness that pursued them in the period between wars; and it seems unlikely that they could, by themselves, command powerful mass support. The Third Force has thus come to signify a coalition of all those-non-Communist Left, Center and moderate Right-who believe in political freedom and in the democratic control of economic life-a coalition affirming a rigorous faith in constitutional and democratic methods against any form of terror or dictatorship.

The mobilization of the Third Force in Europe has presented the United States with tough problems. A long tradition of ignorance concerning European politics has not equipped us for grasping nice distinctions between a Socialist and a Communist. So eager a student of foreign affairs as Harold Stassen can describe socialism and communism as "two peas from the same confining pod: and reject them equally. Senator Ball of Minnesota was only the first of too many Senators to express horror at the idea of American subsidies to European socialism under a foreign-aid program. The fight to make ERP aid contingent upon the renunciation of further nationalization has not yet been beaten in the House.

BUT the American Right could hardly have been expected to rush up and shake hands with the non-Communist Left of Europe. The greeter's job should properly have been one for the American Left. Yet the performance of American liberals and labor during 1945 and 1946 was generally shocking. Instead of backing the non-Communist Left as the group in Europe closest to the American progressive faith in combining freedom and planning, the CIO for example, maintained a disturbing silence over foreign affairs; and altogether too many liberals followed Communist cues in rejoicing at every Soviet triumph and at every Socialist discomfiture. The Wallace Doctrine of non-interference with Soviet expansion prevailed in these years. Under the urging of men like Wallace, American liberal sand labor seemed ready for a moment or two to sell the non-Communist Left down the river.

As a consequence of the natural ignorance on the Right and the calculated confusion on the Left, the recognition of the importance of the

non-Communist Left was reserved for such an unlikely place as the United States Department of State. It is a matter of peculiar but exact fact that, while the CIO was still paralyzed concerning foreign policy, the brightest people in the State Department had already developed a rounded philosophy of the non-Communist left. The very phrase, indeed, had been reduced in the Washington manner to its initials; and they mystic designation “NCL” was constantly used in inner State Department circles.

AVERELL HARRIMAN’S appointment as Secretary of Commerce strengthened the NCL group. While his predecessor had determined to construe the U.S.S.R. in the vocabulary of brook Farm, successive appointments in Moscow and London had fully educated Harriman to the difference between communism and socialism. The recent State r pronouncement that the Socialists are “among the strongest bulwarks in Europe against communism” only made articulate what has been a premise of United States foreign policy for the last two years—even if a promise is not always respected by American generals and diplomats in the field.

In recent months the conception of the non-Communist Left has made headway in the United States. On the moderate Right, men like Senator Vandenberg and John Foster Dulles have recognized its validity. The fight against Communist influence in the CIO, culminating in Walter Reuther’s victory in the United Auto Workers and the discharge of Lee Pressman as CIO general counsel, has finally brought the CIO side by side with the AFL in support of the Third Force in Europe. The formation of Americans for Democratic Action has laid the foundations for a t Third Force in this country. And, in the meantime, the third-party candidacy of Henry Wallace has defined and isolated the pro-Communist Left in the United States.

Such developments make it urgent that, in the interests of clear thinking, we abandon the word Left. A united Left is an illusion: the question of freedom vs. totalitarianism cannot be compromised. When we talk about the Left, we mean either the proCommunist Left or the non-Communist Left, and when this vital distinction becomes part of our thinking, we will enormously sharpen our understanding of foreign affairs. If we will understand further that the non-Communist Left and the non-Fascist Right share a common faith in free political society—a faith that the differences between them over economic issues can be best worked out by discussion and debate under law—we might even stop talking of Left and Right as if nothing lay in between.

FOR hope of the future surely lies in the revival of the Center—in the triumph of those who believe deeply in civil liberties, in constitutional processes and in the democratic determination of political and economic policies. And, in direct consequence, the main target of both totalitarian extremes must be the Center—the group which hold society together. Neither fascism nor communism can win so long as there remains a democratic middle way, which unites

hopes of freedom and of economic abundance; so the destruction of the middle way becomes the first priority for both. Thus Gaullists and Communists vote together against the Third Force Government in France; thus Pappy O'Daniel and Glen Taylor sulk conspicuously in the midst of the ovation following Vandenberg's speech on the Marshall Plan. The pattern of the conspiracy against the Center is repeated through the world.

Yeats long ago had an apocalyptic vision: Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.

The problem of United States policy is to make sure that the Center does hold; and this can be done only by supporting it against all blandishments and all threats, from whatever direction they may come. The best must recover a sense of principle; and, on the basis of principle, they may develop a passionate intensity. We cannot afford to loose the blood-dimmed tide ever again.

[Source: pstrykken.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/schlesingervitalcenter.pdf.]



Glossary

Delphic: a reference to an ancient Greek oracle

John Foster Dulles: an advocate of strong, confrontational policies toward the Soviet Union; he served later as secretary of state under President Dwight D. Eisenhower

Nennis, Fierlingers and Henry Wallaces: Pietro Nenni (Italy), Zdenek Fierlinger (Czechoslovakia), Henry Wallace (United States) were individuals who held generally democratic socialist views but were willing to work with or merge with Communist groups

Pappy O'Daniel and Glen Taylor: O'Daniel was a very conservative senator from Texas and Taylor a very liberal one from Idaho; their more extreme positions were undercut by Vandenberg's (previously an isolationist) speech supporting the Marshall Plan

Third Estate: a term taken from French history, where it referred to the common people as against the clergy (the First Estate) and the nobles (the Second Estate)

Document Analysis

Throughout this essay, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. demonstrates not only his academic background in history but also his clear vision of forces at work in the world. He believed that those in the political center held the key to a free and prosperous society, not only for the United States but for all nations of the world. Schlesinger asserts that fascism and communism, what were seen as the ultra-right and ultra-left wings of the political spectrum, had failed the people in the countries where governments had been based on these totalitarian systems. Liberal capitalism and democratic socialism (i.e., economic/political philosophies on the moderate right and left, were the centrist schools of thought that he felt could best protect individual freedom and democratic institutions).

Using eighteenth and twentieth century France as an example, Schlesinger depicts the original and transformed versions of the left/right political divide. The right wanted to keep things as they were, or go back in time, while the left desired change, sometimes dramatic change. The goals of each were clear in 1789, whether it was keeping the monarchy or moving toward a democracy. However, in post-World War II France, he points out the conservative Gaullist Party and the left-wing Communist Party (Maurice Thorez was its leader) started working together against the socialist government. Although the goals of the two parties were very different, this could not be seen from the actions they were taking in 1948. Thus, the center, in this case democratic socialists, needed to remain strong, in Schlesinger's view, in order to keep democratic ideals alive.

For the United States, which at this time Schlesinger identified as a liberal capitalist society (moderately right on the political spectrum) there was a major problem in developing cooperative programs with the Third Force in Europe (as Schlesinger termed it), the socialist or non-Communist left political parties or governments. Here, he adamantly argues that it is necessary for the moderate right and left to work together to create free democratic societies, not only in all the Western nations but throughout the world. Toward the end of his article, using the words

of W. B. Yeats, he argues that without such cooperation—without a strong center—there would be a “blood-dimmed tide” through which “anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

Pointing to individuals and groups within the United States, Schlesinger states that those who one might expect to understand the value of the socialist (Third Force) movement within Europe had failed to do so. He hopes that more will understand the value of the non-Communist left, as President Truman's State Department and Averell Harriman did. The key truth that too many in the United States overlooked in 1948, he notes, is that there are profound differences between democratic socialists and totalitarian communists. He hopes that a “passionate intensity” will develop within the United States, so that the center could gain the strength it needs to combat extremism, especially the ongoing communist threat, without dismissing the enduring value of democratic left.

Essential Themes

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. sought to inspire those in the middle of the political spectrum to strengthen their resolve against extremists in order to become the “Vital Center: which he desired as the guiding force in American and Western political systems. Having just seen the appeal and power of fascism, on the right, and the postwar expansion of communism, on the left, Schlesinger believed a strong center was the only way to keep individual freedoms intact within a democratic framework. While acknowledging that the left-right dichotomy was not as simple as had been the case in France at the end of the eighteenth century, he used the traditional terms nonetheless. He believed that both extremes led to totalitarian governments. Thus, for one who believed in liberal democratic ideals, the center was the only viable choice. While it was evident from the article that he preferred slightly left-of-center, he did recognize that there was a small range, either side of any perfect center, which held the same essential democratic ideals.

While Schlesinger cannot be solely credited with the move toward a strong competitive center in

American politics in the upcoming decades, his voice did contribute to that development. Through the remaining decades of the twentieth century, and into the opening of the twenty-first, while some political candidates were conservative and others liberal, they were mostly drawn from the center—at least the successful ones were. He spoke of the “horror” that some American politicians felt with regard to European socialist governments. In the years following the publication of this essay and his book, that “horror” was soon overcome and the United States worked together well with centrist governments, whether leaning left or right. It was only as the twenty-first century progressed that the vital center seemed to falter, in the United States and elsewhere.

—Donald A. Watt, PhD

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