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Ethnic Conflict

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In my mind, no problem is more threatening to Europe's stability -- and perhaps to the whole world's -- than the rising tide of ethnic separatism. By this, I mean the tendency of people to identify themselves principally as members of an ethnic, tribal or religious group rather than as citizens of a state. We live in a time when the Wilsonian principle of self-determination has been perverted. Ever smaller groups are invoking the principle on behalf of autonomy or independence, both as an expression of ethnic or tribal identity and for fear of repression or assimilation by another group. In its more benign manifestations, ethnic nationalism leads to instability and tension; at worst it leads to unending internecine savagery.

In Europe, it is rather ironic that the end of communism has, in too many instances alas, unleashed waves of extreme nationalism. As the journalist Jonathan Kifner wrote recently, "Nationalism under communist rule was like the pre-historic monster, frozen in an iceberg in a science fiction movie, that runs amok when the scientists thaw it out. The fall of Communism was not the end of history, but the beginning of the instant replay." Outside of Europe's borders, ethnic conflict tears nations apart in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. "The virus of tribalism," The Economist has written, "risks becoming the AIDS of international politics -- lying dormant for years, then flaring up to destroy countries."
Now, as one who studied and who admires Woodrow Wilson, I should make clear that it would be wrong to blame him for this state of affairs. As Arthur Schlesinger has written, one of Secretary of State Christopher's illustrious predecessors, Robert Lansing, warned Wilson in 1918 that the doctrine of self-determination when propounded without definitions and without criteria could be "utterly destructive of the political fabric of society and could result in constant turmoil and change." How, Lansing asked, to define the "people" who have a right to choose their own sovereignty? How to establish due process by which the "people" make this choice? Wilson, notes Schlesinger, took the point. He was well aware that, "pushed to its extreme, the principle would mean the disruption of existing governments to an indefinable degree." If Wilson were alive today, I suspect he would agree that ethnic separatism has indeed been "pushed to its extreme."

I don't know how many of you have had a chance to read the provocative essay in the Atlantic Monthly called "The Coming Anarchy" by Robert Kaplan, the author of "Balkan Ghosts." Kaplan writes of the interrelationship among issues such as ethnic nationalism, destabilizing refugee flows, conflicts over resources and environmental problems. The state, he reminds us, is a Western notion that, until the 20th Century, applied to countries covering only three percent of the world's land
area. According to Kaplan, national boundaries today are often less important to people than ethnic, tribal or cultural ones. Whereas forty years ago we feared an Orwellian future of omnipotent and omniscient central governments, we may be heading back instead to Hobbesian anarchy or a world of weak micro-states.

Kaplan's thesis, while perhaps somewhat overstated, struck a responsive chord with me. Those of you who live in Central and Eastern Europe or the NIS are very familiar with the rise of ethnic nationalism. The fighting in former Yugoslavia, the Kurdish issue in Turkey, conflicts in the Caucasus and Moldova, and ethnic tensions in the Baltics and throughout central Europe remind us of the potential for anarchy that ethnic nationalism represents. Further abroad, the recent butchery in Rwanda and Burundi is an example of the same problem.

But those of you working in the more stable democracies where the citizenry may view themselves as beyond such problems, know that they are not in fact immune to the disease of ethnic nationalism.

- First, of course, ethnic or religious violence still afflicts countries such as Spain and the U.K.

- Moreover, refugees fleeing ethnic conflicts often land in the more stable and prosperous countries of the West. Refugee assistance has become ever more expensive, and even
Prosperous countries can absorb only so many newcomers before an intolerable strain is placed on overextended social services -- and on the political system. As a result, in places such as France, Germany and Italy, extremist parties feed off anti-foreign sentiment. Even in the United States, anti-immigrant parties are arising in states such as California, and a variety of minority groups are attacking what is called cultural "Euro-centrism."

Finally, ethnic conflicts, wherever they occur, have the potential to draw outside countries in. And in a world that still contains weapons of mass destruction -- weapons that are increasingly in the hands of pariah leaders -- ethnic strife holds the sobering potential to provoke an all-engulfing catastrophe.

In short, I think a case can be made that ethnic conflict is the problem of the day, for all of us in Europe.

What implications does this have for the way we conduct our foreign policy? I don't purport to have all the answers, but let me throw out a few ideas:

First, I think that we should consider carefully how we deal with ethnic issues. We must do all that we can to prevent repression of people based on their ethnicity, and to help them preserve their heritage and traditions. But this does not mean we should endorse the dissolution of coherent multi-ethnic states.
We should be circumspect, I think, in supporting concepts such as ethnic "autonomy" or in advocating rights for particular ethnic groups. Demands for such rights too often reflect what Freud called "the narcissism of minor difference" in which basically similar peoples exaggerate what separates them in an extreme search for identity. It might be better to focus on guaranteeing the equal rights of all persons within a nation than on seeking special treatment or protections for certain groups. As Arthur Schlesinger has put it: "Self-determination turns too quickly into self-destruction. ...Small is not necessarily beautiful. The objective should not be to give every people the right to choose the sovereignty under which it shall live. It should be rather to seek ways by which people of diverse ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds can be brought to live together in harmony under the same sovereignty."

We are all defined by a multiplicity of attributes or characteristics -- not just ethnicity, but profession, sex, neighborhood, class and so on. Defining a nation, or even a population, in purely ethnic terms is dangerously limiting. At the same time, looking at the matter practically, yielding to separatist ethnic or minority demands does not always achieve a lasting political solution. On the contrary, too readily recognizing the special status of a particular ethnic group tends to lead to a proliferation of mini-states, many of which are unstable and economically unviable.
Of course, there may be instances when a history of egregious discrimination requires short-term equalizing remedies. One need not leave the shores of the United States to find one such example. And it is true that, once a conflict breaks out, our immediate concern must be to contain and defuse it. In Bosnia, for example, our first obligation has to be to help stop the bloodshed. While I wish we could preserve a multi-ethnic Bosnia, with a harmonious Sarajevo as its capital, the humanitarian imperative may compel the international community, in this instance, to accept some form of ethnic division. But in general, I think we must discourage the idea of ethnic nationalism at an early stage, and encourage pluralism.

Second, I think we should be holding up our own country -- for all its faults -- as a model of multi-ethnicity. On the whole, the American experience has been one of successful assimilation: E Pluribus Unum. In your role as representatives of our country, you can emphasize America as a model, not only of free enterprise and a consumer culture, but of a philosophy of individual rights that can help ease ethnic tensions.

No analogy is perfect. The U.S. "melting pot" is unique, resting in part on our history as an immigrant nation and on the wide-open frontier that diffused our population. Still, recent ethnic migrations make our experience more relevant to other countries. Indeed, the French press has engaged in
lively debates over whether France should look to the U.S. for inspiration in dealing with its increasingly eclectic society. Further east, there are a host of potential "melting pots" that could benefit by taking a spoon from our bowl. At the very least, we should give voice to the lessons we learned from our Founding Fathers. As Benjamin Franklin put it, albeit in a different context: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

On a more practical level, I would like to see us show visible and concrete support in the newly emerging democracies for political parties, organizations, and media that are openly and assertively multi-ethnic, and more generally to encourage pluralism and assimilation. In Estonia, for example, our embassy supports Estonian language training for the ethnic Russians and round tables that bring together the Estonian and Russian populations. More generally, we will be looking at ways to target some of the initiatives that President Clinton announced earlier this year in Prague, such as the Democracy Network, at building or consolidating multi-ethnic societies.

Finally, I think that we must emphasize preventive diplomacy as much as possible, to foster cooperation and co-existence among different groups, and thereby preserve and promote pluralism. Where tension already is present, we need to be aggressive in keeping the peace, lest we later be forced into the position of making it. The CSCE, deriving as it does from the principles of the Helsinki Accords, is well-suited
to deal with these issues; for example, its mission to Latvia is trying to defuse the tensions between ethnic Russians and Latvians before they reach the level of conflict. In NATO, the United States has actively -- and successfully -- promoted the development of a new strategy and new missions that focus on peacekeeping and crisis management.

These are a few specific suggestions which flow from the idea of supporting individual rights rather than ethnic ones. Of course, much of what we do in Europe will indirectly affect the problem of ethnic strife. Our overall goal is to build a Europe of free, prosperous and stable nations that so coordinate and regulate affairs among themselves that no one of them is dominant and disputes among them are resolved peacefully. We can be sure that ethnic tensions would diminish in such a Europe. But by the same token our ability to achieve this goal will depend, in large part, on our ability to deal with the problem of ethnic nationalism.

I hope that you view my remarks not as policy gospel, for they are not, but rather as a stimulus to thought and action in dealing with this troubling and explosive issue. And, in closing, let me thank all of you for the work you are doing to build a more harmonious world. I know from experience in the private sector and in government that commerce brings people together, instead of tearing them apart. In nurturing ties between the United States and the countries of Europe, you are weaving a strong web of interdependence among people. In an ever-fracturing world, that is essential work.