J. REUBEN CLARK, JR.: POLITICAL ISOLATIONISM REVISITED

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Modern Mormonism takes just pride in having produced many men and women of distinction in politics, education, science and the arts. One of these was J. Reuben Clark, Jr., international lawyer, career diplomat, and from 1933 until his death in 1961 a counselor in the First Presidency of the Church. While President Clark never dogmatically proclaimed that his political philosophy should be equated with Church doctrine, he was deeply committed to the Mormon belief that America was a land of divine destiny, and his international philosophy reflected a fundamental concern for the dignity and survival of this country. Here two scholars of international affairs present a cogent analysis of Clark's views on several topics which are still of fundamental concern to America.

A "prophet is not without honor save in his own house," the scriptures tell us, or, if one may tinker a bit with the scriptures: "a prophet is not without honor save in his own time." That such a fate befell J. Reuben Clark, Jr. as a critic of American foreign policy can be ascribed almost wholly to his tenacious defense of isolationism. In the forties, J. Reuben Clark seemed out of date. Time, it appeared, had passed him by. America had plunged enthusiastically into an era of "internationalism," and most of that generation of Americans thought that the United States had a moral obligation to set the world right. They threw themselves, therefore, headlong into the turmoil and tragedy of world politics, advocating policies which led to American political, economic, and military intervention in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Clark's misgivings about these policies were ignored by most and ridiculed by some. Moreover, he was not unaware that he was out of step with the time: "Many think me," he told one group, "just a doddering old fogy. I admit the age, but deny the rest of the allegation — the doddering and fogyness."[1]

Clark's concern for the course of American foreign policy after 1914 stemmed not only from his reading of American history, but also from his experience as a practicing diplomat. His years of legal experience as solicitor to the Secretary of State, General Counsel of the Mexican-American Claims Commission, legal advisor to the Ambassador to Mexico, and his later experience as Under Secretary of State and as Ambassador to Mexico during the Hoover Administration more than qualified him as a spokesman on international affairs. His Memorandum on the Monroe Doctrine, which repudiated the interventionist twist given that famed Doctrine by Theodore Roosevelt, is a landmark in American diplomatic history. Clark viewed the Monroe Doctrine as a policy

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designed for defense and not domination; his Memorandum carefully limited the basis for American interference in Latin America and thus created the basis for a meaningful "Good Neighbor" policy.

If in the forties J. Reuben Clark and political isolationism seemed out of date, now, after more than two decades of "messianic" intervention by the United States in virtually every corner of the world and after two costly and perhaps unnecessary wars, they appear to be before their time rather than out of date. In any event, many of Clark's arguments, just as he confidently expected, have stood the test of time, for he believed that despite what appeared to be a new set of circumstances "human nature does not change . . ."; hence his faith in isolation remained unshaken.[2] It seems appropriate, therefore, now that Clark's views on our "meddlesome busybodiness" in foreign affairs suddenly have become fashionable, to attempt a reexamination of the reasons why he believed so strongly in isolationism.

A central caveat is necessary at the onset. First, the purpose of this essay is to examine Clark's own rationale for his belief in political isolationism, not to enlist his prestige on one side or the other of the current debate over American foreign policy. Whatever message he has for the present, readers must judge for themselves. But whatever one thinks about Clark's critique of the past sixty-five years of American foreign policy, one cannot ignore the fact that he raised fundamental questions which the nation is only now beginning to examine seriously.

J. Reuben Clark represented, in a particularly articulate way, the Puritan ethic in American foreign policy.[3] That tradition had four basic tenents: (1) the necessity for human freedom; (2) the rejection of power politics; (3) an overwhelming belief in the ultimate triumph of moral truth; and (4) a belief in the special historical mission of the United States. These basic elements in the Puritan ethic are clearly represented in Clark's views on international affairs.

Necessity of Human Freedom

No theme in Clark's writings puts him so squarely into the Puritan tradition in foreign policy as his emphasis on the reality and necessity of human freedom.

His love of freedom had, of course, deep roots in Mormon theology and his pioneer heritage. It also drew on the parallel American tradition of freedom. In particular Clark viewed the American Constitution as a culmination of a long historical process during which men were gradually freed from the bonds of slavery and oppressive government.

The Constitution, he insisted, grew out of English common law and was shaped and molded by the colonial experience. The framers, Clark argued, were fully aware of the past; they were not political "tyros" but were learned in law and history, and, therefore, sought to escape from the restrictions on human freedom which were the legacy of the past.

An integral part of the common law tradition was, in Clark's view, the notion that government existed by the consent of the governed and had only those powers expressly delegated to it. These views of course are familiar to us all for they restate John Locke's concept of the state which found expression in the Declaration of Independence and ultimately in the Constitution. What set Clark apart in the Mormon community is the felicity with which he expressed them, the intensity with which he held them, and the persistence with which he repeated them. On this point, therefore, there can be no doubt on Clark's position. He believed the Constitution to be the culmination of a long emerging tradition of human freedom which was the expression of the divine will in history, and thus in Mormon rhetoric, "divinely inspired."

This divinely inspired Constitution created the political environment for a society in which human freedom could receive its fullest expression. Consequently, it became the task of foreign policy, Clark believed, to protect that society from outside forces which might seek to change it. Hence, he stressed those passages in Washington's farewell address which insisted upon the necessity to avoid involvement in the ancient quarrels of European powers.

Clark's insistence that the United States not become involved in those ancient quarrels was not an unthinking acceptance of the rhetoric of the past but rested on an analysis of the costs of being a world power. But the argument cannot be understood fully without keeping in mind Clark's moral premise: that men, and nations, are bound by eternal moral principles which must be obeyed. One of those principles was that men, and nations, are bound by the agreements into which they voluntarily enter. *Pacta sunt servanta* is the legal expression of this moral law, and running through Clark's published papers is the assumption that treaties impose moral as well as legal commitments on the signatories. He was scornful of any suggestion that treaties are like "pie crust, to be broken."[4] Given this moral premise, Clark's hesitancy to see the United States become involved in an elaborate alliance system becomes readily understandable, for if treaties and particularly military alliances are not to be treated lightly, they become real restrictions on American independence and freedom. Hence, participation in the world power struggle with its network of alliances raises the danger that the demands of foreign policy and the promises made to allies, rather than Constitutional principles, will shape our national style.

Coupled with this rejection of alliances which would restrict American independence was Clark's belief that as advanced as the United States was it did not possess "all the good of human government, economic concept, and of human welfare. . . ." In human affairs, he wrote, "no nation can say that all its practices and belief is right. . . . No man, no society, no people, no nation is

wholly right in human affairs; and none is wholly wrong."[5] Given man's fallibility, therefore, it ill behooves any nation to seek to impose its ways upon the rest of the world. The desire to do so, Clark believed, was "born of the grossest national egotism," and the result could only be an "unholy tragedy" ("Peace," 74).

The upshot of this analysis was a firm insistence on the right of self-determination for each nation, to be limited only by the freedom of others. If one accepts, as Clark did, the rule that "What we do to others, we must permit others to do to us,"[6] the consequences are manifestly clear: self-determination is imperative for the United States if the national goals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are not to be subordinated to the wishes of other nations. Furthermore, the freedom essential to the realization of our domestic goals is only possible where all nations enjoy the same freedom to control their domestic affairs.

Rejection of "Power Politics"

Clark's isolationism did not mean he believed that the United States had no role to play in international affairs. He did reject, however, the notion that the United States should participate in what became popularly known as "power politics." Clark, of course, was not alone in rejecting "power politics" and the "balance of power" system. Woodrow Wilson had also reached that conclusion and had become convinced that the only viable alternative was a collective security system. It was this inference which led Wilson finally to the concept of the League of Nations with its elaborate peacekeeping machinery.[7]

Clark was no less vigorous in his rejection of "power politics" than Wilson. Although that rejection was not specifically spelled out, it was inherent in his frequent citations from Washington's farewell address. The international politics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe were characterized by "power politics" and faith in the balance of power system. The course of this balance-of-power system has been traced by historians, analyzed by political scientists, and has served as the basis for many sophisticated theories of international relations now current in the literature. It was marked by a series of power struggles between the five major European powers (France, Russia, Prussia, Austria, and Great Britain) over trade, territory, and dynastic succession. The powers tended to shift from alliance to alliance as their national interests dictated; values played a minor role, for the goal was not to assure the triumph of moral force but the getting of power. It was this world of power politics against which Washington warned his fellow countrymen, and it was from this same world that Clark sought to isolate the United States.[8]

While Clark, therefore, shared Wilson's premise that the balance-of-power system was a failure, he drew a different set of conclusions from the premise. Given this kind of a world, Clark saw the United States' role as twofold: (1) to foster international communication, including trade and commerce, while shunning political involvement; (2) to support the cause of peace by working for the settlement of international disputes by mediation and arbitration. This policy did not include an international organization with decision-making powers, but it was compatible with an international organization whose purpose would be to encourage discussion of international differences. "We must," Clark wrote, "have a world organization for the purpose of deliberation,

but not for the purpose of waging wars and imposing sanctions."[9] He feared an international organization with sanction powers precisely because it represented the application of force to international affairs, and Clark believed that the use of force on so wide a scale could result only in tyranny or civil war.

Clark did not place his principal reliance on a world deliberative body but on each nation's adhering to the peaceful settlements of international disputes. He believed that the United States, free from the restrictive bonds of the European alliance system, had been a forceful example in the development of peaceful settlement of disputes.[10] This attachment to peace had been the basis of American influence in the world, and it was an effective influence precisely because it was rooted in peace. This moral force, Clark believed, had been eroded by American participation in both World Wars, and therefore the United States now spoke "only as our brute force may sustain us" (*Some Factors*, 28).

Here we must make explicit what has been implicit in much of the foregoing. Clark believed that war was the scourge of mankind and perhaps the greatest of evils. He considered the effort which began in the nineteenth century to "lessen the evils of war, and especially to relieve noncombatants . . . from the ravages of war" to have been one of the most significant developments of the previous centuries (*Some Factors*, 19-21). It was therefore with a dismay akin to horror that he viewed developments in warfare since 1914. He found no justification whatsoever for the bombing of cities which involved the wholesale destruction of property and the indiscriminate killing of women and children. To those who alleged that it was mere retaliation for the aggression of others, he answered that because "one nation violates a law is no proper justification for another nation to do so" (*Some Factors*, 21). Nor would he take refuge behind the veil of national necessity. He exempted no nation from the condemnation of having been a party to the introduction of "barbarous" methods of warfare. The world, he wrote, had "gone back a half a millenium in its conduct of international relations in time of war. . . ." And then, lest his countrymen smugly blame this relapse on others, he added that "no nation has to bear a greater blame for this than our own" (*Some Factors*, 19).

Clark also faced squarely the greatest moral issue in all of warfare — the use of atomic weapons in the war with Japan. That act, he said, was thought by some to have been unnecessary since the war was won before it took place, and he suggested that if this were so, "it may well be a disaster to civilization. . . ." His own stand was unequivocal: "Some of us think it was shameful" ("Peace," 71).

That ultimate use of force along with all the other modern horrors of warfare led Clark to the conclusion that there was little moral force left in the world "to whose voice the warring nations are as yet willing to harken." The result, he thought, was that "we are now living under the law of the jungle where in cataclysms every beast fights to the death of his own life."

"Are we Christians? We act like pagans" (*Some Factors*, 28).

Accompanying this hatred of war was Clark's deep mistrust of the military. Although he was fully aware of the need for a military force sufficient to the task of self-defense, Clark repeatedly expressed his fears that the ambitions of the military encompassed far more than national defense. He believed, for example, that in the interwar period the full effort of "the general staff of every

first class power in the world, including our own . . . was spent in trying to develop . . . weapons that would wipe out peoples, not merely destroy armies and navies" (*Some Factors*, 21). He expressed his concern over the influence which the military gained in the period immediately after World War II. To him it seemed that the military branches were in almost complete control of the American government and hence were in a position to control our foreign policy. The consequences of this military domination, he said, were frightening. "Indeed, we must regretfully admit," he wrote, "that our own military establishment seems to be deliberately planning and preparing for another great war. . . ." This war, he believed, could only be with Russia, since only the Soviet Union had the resources to challenge the United States. Furthermore, he noted, the military was urging upon the American people larger and larger expenditures for arms on the grounds that "to ensure peace we must maintain a great army and gigantic armaments." Clark insisted this argument ignored the fact "that big armies have always brought, not peace, but war which has ended in a hate that in due course brings another war" ("Peace," 70, 71).

The curse of large armies, he thought, was that where they existed their use seemed inevitable. "Our militarists will no more be able to let a great army lie unused than they were able to withhold the use of the atom bomb once they had it. . . ." This threat led him to inveigh against the use of arms to gain peace: "Guns and bayonets will, in the future as in the past, bring truces, long or short, but never the peace that endures." The right course for the United States, he wrote, was to "honestly strive for peace and quit sparring for military advantage." The United States and the world must "learn and practice . . . the divine principles of the Sermon on the Mount. There is no other way." To Clark this was not a pious exhortation but a categorical imperative. Peace, he insisted, would be achieved only through the "strength and power of the moral force in the world." This moral force not only produces peace but also "fructifies industry, and thrift, good will, neighborliness," and brings about "the friendly intercourse of nations. . . ." All of these come from peace, "whereas force is barren" ("Peace," 71, 76, 78).

Importance of Moral Strength in International Affairs

J. Reuben Clark is perhaps best characterized as an idealist with few illusions. His idealism was clearly evident in his oft-repeated assertion that "moral force is far more important than physical force in international relations." Some experts on international affairs draw the cynical conclusion that morality has no place in international politics, that all states alike are compelled by the "system" to play the evil game of power politics.[11] Not so with Clark; he was willing to impose on all nations, including his own, the highest possible standards. He argued, for instance, that the Atlantic Charter contained "principles of self-restraint and of altruistic aspiration" which were as "applicable to and against us as to and against any other nation." We could not, he warned, expect others to be bound by those principles while we remained free "to follow our own bent. What we do to others, we must permit others to do to us" (*Some Factors*, 8).

Not even the spectre of Russian power caused Clark to lose faith in the ultimate victory of morality. "No group can permanently maintain itself by

murder . . ." was Clark's assessment of the lesson of history. "So it will be with communism . . ." ("Peace," 80). The proper course for the United States was to seek peace and await the inevitable victory of liberty, a victory, however, which must come from within as the spirit of liberty breaks forth among men and sweeps "away everything that lies in its path."

If, as Herbert Butterfield suggests, the only valid moral judgments are those we make about ourselves,[12] President Clark was more than willing to measure the behavior of his own nation against the moral norms which he believed had universal value. "If we are to be the Savior of the world," he wrote, "we must come to our task with the spirit and the virtues of a savior" (*Some Factors*, 18). Hence he worried about rhetoric and programs which suggested that the United States was willing to undertake the reform of the world. He reacted to our plans at the end of World War II to occupy and reconstruct our defeated enemies on the basis of the Atlantic Charter by asking the hard question, "Who is going to occupy us to see that we keep the standards?" (*Some Factors*, 8)

There is in all of this a deep respect for the importance of moral norms and a recognition that no man or nation can escape from the responsibility to meet their challenge. Indeed there is only one sure path to national security: awareness of and adherence to those moral virtues which derive from the Christian ethic. This belief that "force is barren" had led Clark to view with dismay the emergence of the United States as a participant in the world "power struggle." He believed that as a participant in that power struggle the United States became only another "world power" and thereby forfeited its moral leadership. "I believe," he wrote, "America's role in the world is not one of force, but is of the same peaceful intent and act that characterized the history of the country from its birth till the last third of a century" ("Peace," 77). He felt the United States had abandoned its role as the advocate for peace in international affairs. America's task, he believed, was not to plan how to wage war more effectively but to use its resources and the abilities of its people to bring the world to good living and high thinking. But this required that the nation return to its reliance on moral force, and this, Clark thought, would reestablish the principles which had once guided the nation.

Clark frequently contrasted moral force with physical force; the first he believed was the basis of peace, the second the cause of war. The addition, therefore, of American physical force to the already consisting constellation of physical force in the world only increased the probability that war would be the result. He thus worried about a foreign policy which was concerned more with preparing for war than for peace. "We have lost, at least for the moment," he wrote, "the temper to live at peace with our brethren of the world, our fellow children of God" (*Some Factors*, 29).

America's Special Mission

Underlying and reinforcing all of Clark's rational justification for isolationism was his belief in the special historical mission of the United States. As was the case with much of Clark's political creed, this faith had twin roots: one reaching back into the wellsprings of American history, the other tapping the reservoir of Mormon tradition. Clark's own faith in the American mission would have responded wholeheartedly to John Winthrop's confident prediction in 1630 that

> Wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deal falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdraw his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.[13]

America's mission, Clark thought, was multifaceted, and in his speeches and writings he stressed the three principal themes of the Puritan tradition over and over again: America must defend human freedom, America must be the foremost proponent of peace, and America must be a source of moral strength for the rest of the world.

The first facet of this mission is reflected in Clark's faith that the American Constitution creates the political environment in which human freedom can flourish. He stressed those aspects of the Constitution which assured the maximum freedom: the separation of powers because the lessons of history had taught the founding fathers to be wary of political systems which concentrated power in one branch of government (one cannot help but believe that Clark would have been amused at the yelps of horror of many political liberals who have suddenly discovered since Vietnam how much power they have willingly let the Executive branch amass), and the Bill of Rights because it protected those indispensible handmaidens of freedom — freedom of speech, the press, and religion. These he called the "great fundamentals" and warned against any attempts to change them.[14]

The second facet of the mission is the logical extension of the first. There is no greater enemy of human freedom than war, Clark believed; no greater friend than peace. America's task, then, was to foster peace wherever possible. Clark constantly praised the American record before 1914 in the peaceful settlements of disputes. He knew that this record was not perfect — he described the Mexican War as one in which the United States was the aggressor — but to him it represented a long tradition which deserved to be strengthened. Among his earliest published papers is a plan to further the pacific settlement of international disputes which would "provide a system of world association which shall in no way sacrifice our own interest, our free institutions or our sovereignty."[15]

The third aspect of the American mission was to provide a source of moral strength for the rest of the world. But America could only provide the needed moral force when its internal house was in order. Clark worried not only over what he thought was a decline in the moral fiber of the nation, but also over a foreign policy which was concerned more with preparing for war than for peace. " [W]e have entered into new fields to impose our will and concepts on others. This means we must use force, and force means war, not peace" ("Peace," 19).

Clark believed that the mission of the United States required it to maintain intact its freedom to act so that it could serve in international affairs as the agent of those moral principles which would ultimately bring peace on earth. America's allegiance, he thought, should not be to earthly allies but to the cause of peace and justice; its destiny required that it avoid entangling alliances with secular powers so it could remain free to serve the cause of human freedom.

Clark's insistence on the necessity of American independence or sovereignty was firmly grounded in his belief that it was crucial to the achievement of

America's historical mission. But in no way did Clark's respect for the principle of sovereignty rest on a naive belief that sovereignty would automatically result in a solution to the world's problems. It rested rather on a clear understanding that a salient dimension of rationality is an understanding of the limits of one's effectiveness. He believed that the genius of American foreign policy from the Founding Fathers until the beginning of the twentieth century had been characterized by a clear understanding of where the United States' effectiveness began and ended in foreign affairs.

Isolationism was for Clark simply the recognition of those limits. By implication he posed a rhetorical question: how can a nation hope to solve problems which are outside its sovereignty and hence outside its jurisdiction, when it has so much difficulty with the solution of problems which are within its sovereign jurisdiction? The American mission, he believed, was not to impose its solutions upon the world but to set an example of justice, freedom, and peace which would be a compelling attraction to other nations. For the United States to seek to impose its will on the rest of the world was to resort to force and abandon moral principles, a course which would be a denial of the mission itself. Clark, therefore, accepted the oft-repeated maxim that no matter how good the end, it does not justify the means. He seemed to sense clearly that if the United States insisted on being Rome it would require its citizens to be Romans. He saw a higher goal for Americans: not to be Romans but Christians.

Against this background of the American mission a clear justification for Clark's political isolationism becomes apparent. Rather than being the expression of a narrow American parochialism, it became a policy the goal of which was to provide the benefits of freedom and peace to all men. To Clark it seemed crystal clear that if the United States did not remain free from the "sins of the world" there would be no advocate for freedom, no protector of the peace, no champion of morality.

The goal of his isolationism was not to cordon the United States off from the rest of the world but to assure that there would remain at least one nation whose allegiance was to eternal principles rather than expediency. If the United States were true to its mission, if it did not lose faith and become a participant in the international power struggle, then ultimately the virtues it sought to foster would triumph.

In the end one must let Clark speak for himself, and he has done that in one of his finest rhetorical passages: a passage in which his hopes and vision for America and the world receive their most forceful expression.

> For America has a destiny — a destiny to conquer the world, — not by force of arms, not by purchase and favor, for these conquests wash away, but by high purpose, by unselfish effort, by uplifting achievement, by a course of Christian living; a conquest that shall leave every nation free to move out to its own destiny; a conquest that shall bring, through the workings of our own example, the blessings of freedom and liberty to every people, without restraint or imposition or compulsion from us; a conquest that shall weld the whole earth together in one great brotherhood in a reign of mutual patience, forbearance, and charity, in a reign of peace to which we shall lead all others by the persuasion of our own righteous example. (*Some Factors*, 30-31).

[1] "Our Dwindling Sovereignty," in *Stand Fast by Our Constitution* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1962), p. 97.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]For an excellent discussion of this tradition, see David L. Larson, "Objectivity, Propaganda, and the Puritan Ethic," in *The Puritan Ethic in United States Foreign Policy*, ed. David L. Larson (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1966), pp. 3-24.

[4]This is a paraphrase of Joseph Stalin's reputed attitude toward treaties.

[5]"Let Us Have Peace," in *Stand Fast by Our Constitution*, p. 74. Hereafter cited in the text as "Peace."

[6]*Some Factors in the Proposed Postwar International Pattern*, address delivered before Los Angeles Bar Association. Biltmore Hotel, Los Angeles, California, February 24, 1944, p. 8. Hereafter cited in the text as *Some Factors*.

[7]See Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Swords into Plowshares*, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 37-49.

[8]There are any number of works on the European balance of power system. Richard Rosecrance, *Action and Reaction in International Affairs* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), is the best. Also good is Herbert Butterfield, "The Balance of Power" in *Diplomatic Investigation*, ed. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wright (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966).

[9]J. Reuben Clark, "The Pacific Settlement of International Disputes," *Unity*, 92 (4 October, 1923), 35-42.

[10]"Let Us Have Peace," pp. 63-65. Apparently Ramsay Macdonald, leader of the British Labor Party, understood Clark's point. He wrote to Colonel House in August 1917 that a large minority in England believed that "America, out of the war, would have done more for peace and good feeling than in the war, and would also have had a better influence on the peace settlement." Quoted in J.E.C. Fuller, *The Decisive Battles of the Western World: And Their Influence Upon History* (3 vols.; London: Eyret Spottiswoode, 1956), III, p. 271.

[11]See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949). "International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aim of international politics, power is always the immediate aim" (p. 13).

[12]Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, (London: G. Belt & Sons, Ltd., 1960), p. 85.

[13]Quoted in Arthur A. Erirck, Jr., *Ideas, Ideals and American Diplomacy* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966), p. 22.

[14]See *Prophets, Principals and National Survival*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1964), p. 87.

[15]"The Pacific Settlement of International Disputes," *Unity*, 92 (4 October 1923), 42.

I have found that the greatest help in meeting any problem with decency and self-respect and whatever courage is demanded, is to know where you yourself stand. That is, to have in words what you believe and are acting from.

— William Faulkner
