



Peace on Earth Among Men of Good Will

by Thomas Fleming

The dilapidation of the Soviet Empire at the end of 1989 became the minor premise of the argument that man's dreams of peace and global unity are finally about to be realized at the end of the second millennium. The peaceful crusade of East Germans across the border has convinced otherwise sober men that democracy's star is in the ascendant. George Will made the point in one of his Sunday morning lectures to David Brinkley and Sam Donaldson: the third President of the United States is the dominant man in Europe.

One wishes the Germans, East and West, nothing but good, but the complaints most frequently heard on the refugees' lips had little to do with the principles of representative government and a great deal to do with the shoddy goods and low standard of living in the East. As they came streaming back from a day in West Berlin, it was not copies of the *Declaration of Independence* or any other forbidden political or religious tract they were carrying, but tape decks, T-shirts, radios, and stuffed animals. They looked less like democratic revolutionaries than like K-Mart shoppers who had just blown their welfare checks on cheap Japanese electronics.

The news commentators all spoke of a new day dawning in history, and only a few were honest enough to point out that the real political drama being played out was a contest of wills between the old hard-line Communists, led by Erik Honecker, and the most powerful Communist czar since Stalin. As if to rub in the message, Soviet spokesmen

declared that the East German government was paying the price for its intransigence and threatened other hard-liners (e.g., in Rumania) with a similar fate. It is a brilliant, if dangerous strategy for Gorbachev, and one that could plunge Europe into spasms of ethnic conflict as each little nation and national fragment begins demanding its rights, but so far the net effects are a qualified positive good for everyone. At the best, it probably means Poland and East Germany will go the way of Sweden—social democracies addicted to consumerism and impersonal sex. At the worst, it means World War III.

However things turn out, there is as much cause for doubt as for rejoicing. After five years of *glasnost*, the Soviets are only beginning to trim their ruinously high military expenditures. Meanwhile, they continue to ship arms into Afghanistan, Africa, and Central America. At the same time the USSR and its allies are negotiating trade credits, loans, and other economic privileges from the West that will help them to escape from the consequences of their vice and folly. A cynic might suppose that this is the real point of Gorbachev's reforms: a chance simultaneously to cut defense costs and attract Western capital, without abating his global strategy of aggression.

Whatever the facts on the case may be, the United States would be ill-advised to rush in blindly. Politics is always a matter of risks and benefits to be calculated according to the rules of prudence, and Secretary Baker—to almost everyone's surprise—has so far done a credible job of

navigating through dangerous waters. But to listen to Mr. Will or read the nation's leading editorialists is like listening to a Pentacostalist preacher raving about the last days in the unknown tongue. The occasion serves to remind us, if we could ever forget, that, whether they choose to call themselves liberals or conservatives, our intellectual and cultural leaders are only the most recent heirs of America's progressive tradition. At one time or another the progressives have marched under the name of Unitarians, Universalists, Oneida free-love colonists, Social Gospellers, New Dealers, New Leftists, and One Worlders. Ever since the New England Puritans mistook the Indians for devils with whom they had to struggle for the soul of the continent, American visionaries have been busily at work building their city on a hill. Unfortunately, the city turns out to resemble Detroit more than Jerusalem.

The manifest decline in all the standards of our civilization, however, has not dimmed the enthusiasm of the progressives, who see the dawning of a new age through the holes punched into the Berlin Wall. Recently, *The New Republic* did a retrospective issue on their 75 years of history, and except for the deterioration in the prose, it was hard to distinguish the current crusaders for democracy from the first generation of draft-evading militarists—including, of course, Walter Lippman—from their current avatars. Only Henry Fairlie, God bless him, was honest enough (or learned enough) to expose the dangerous role played by that magazine in promoting American entry into World War I.

But the years surrounding every turn of century bring the cultists out of the woodwork. It is as if the script for American intellectual history had been written by H.P. Lovecraft on a bad day. Many of Lovecraft's best tales concern the "Old Ones" who, as he informs us in *At the Mountains of Madness*, "filtered down from the stars and concocted earth life as a joke or mistake." If the correct ritual is performed according to the dictates of the *Necronomicon*, the Old Ones can be summoned back into this dimension, and a New Age—of wonder or terror—will begin. Lovecraft seemed almost to believe his fantasies, but in lunacy he was exceeded by any number of political dreamers, each sect with its own version of the *Necronomicon: Le Contrat Social, Das Kapital, On Liberty, Progress and Poverty*. With the secrets contained in any of these books, man will be able to slip free from the shackles of history and enter the Golden Age.

This means, of course, "The End of History," the title of Francis Fukuyama's now-celebrated article. Fukuyama probably did not mean us to take his piece seriously—Americans had better pray it is only a joke, that the US Department of State does not really give refuge to academic millenarians. But even if he and the editors of *The National Interest* were only kidding, the response has been disturbing. The best observation on Fukuyama's manufactured celebrity (so reminiscent of the instant success of Allan Bloom) was provided by *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham, who connected it with another fatuous prophecy, *The End of Nature*. These fantasies, suggests Lapham, are the inevitable spray cast up by the rapidly approaching millennium. We're in for a boring decade, if pundits and reviewers will be compelled to devote the next ten years to the end of sex, the end of the

family, the end of time, and—of course—the end of ends.

The serious attention that has been paid to Fukuyama is good evidence that Americana visionaries have a new sacred text to replace their battered and blood-stained copies of Marx: Kant's essay "On Perpetual Peace," a tract on peace and world government that antedates even the founding of *The New Republic*. It is significant, however, that the revival of such aspirations coincides with the turn of the last century. (The 1780's and 90's were also vintage years for imperialism in the guise of global democracy.) It is odd, really, how similar the 1880's are to the 1980's: both periods were plagued by sex and health cults, crafts and hobbies movements, pseudo-Oriental religious crazes involving crystals, pyramids, and eccentric dress, and out-and-out black magicians, like Aleister Crowley (b. 1875), who would find himself very much at home today.

In many ways the archetypal turn of the century figure was H.G. Wells, who at one time or another embraced nearly every heresy of progress that was to disturb the 20th century: socialism, free love, the emancipation of women, and a utopian future in which science served the universal brotherhood of man. In the Nicholas Meyer film, *Time After Time*, Jack the Ripper steals H.G. Wells' time machine and escapes from the London police into 1979. When Wells follows him and explains that they don't belong in the future, the Ripper turns on the television and creates a collage of violence by flipping from the news to the NFL to cartoons. "Not belong here?" he asks.

On the contrary, I belong here completely and utterly. I'm home. It's you who do not belong here, you with your absurd notions of a perfect and harmonious society. . . . The world has caught up with me and surpassed me. Ninety years ago I was a freak. Today, I'm an amateur.

The turn of the century was home to more than serial killers, utopians, and magicians; it was also the period that witnessed the struggle between rival millennialisms among American Protestants. The dominant creed, post-millennialism, was and is the American civil religion. In the American post-millennialist vision, which goes back at least as far as Jonathan Edwards, Christianity and social reform will eventually make this world so pleasant a place in which to live that the Lord will step in and say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." It was the perfect religious doctrine for a people that did not wish to be encumbered by orthodoxy or tradition in their pursuit of earthly perfection, and down almost to the First World War, the post-millennialist social gospel, the legacy of liberalized Puritanism, was the dominant eschatology of the American seminaries and churches. In its secular form, it is the religion of progressive liberalism, and its prophets are Herbert Croly, Walter Lippman, and Woodrow Wilson.

Pre-millennialists, however, are made of sterner stuff. In their vision of the future, mankind must go through a period of tribulation before the Second Coming. The first sect of pre-millennialist dervishes to sweep through the Northeast were the Millerites (now Seventh-Day Adventists) who confidently predicted the Second Coming in 1843. The disappointment and ridicule that attended the Messiah's

No-Show might have been expected to put down all pre-millennialist heresy for good. However, another, more intellectual strain was imported from England in a form (dispensationalism) that appealed powerfully to conservative evangelicals who were offended by the liberal habit of equating God's will with their own peculiar schemes of social reform.

The post-millennialists had—and continue to have—the intellectuals, while the pre-millennialists possess the hearts and minds of the most fervent Protestants in America. To a great extent, the real conflict in American life today is not between liberals and conservatives (much less between Communists and ex-Communists) but between two rival millennialisms: between a secular creed that puts its faith in technology, progress, and democracy; and the hardshell conviction that man, left to his own devices (which include democratic capitalism), will worship the anti-Christ. The middle way pursued by Catholics (i.e. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, and even Calvinists), who do not spend their lives in some impossible future, has little hold on the public imagination.

Although the mainstream of Christian thought has been resolutely “amillennialist,” Christians have always found it hard to resist the temptation to construct the Kingdom of God in the here and now. Every December we are treated to Christmas cards from United Nations agencies that proclaim, in the words of the heavenly host: “Peace on Earth, Good will toward men.”

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It was from scriptural passages like this that such varied writers as the gentle Origen and the Leveller William Walwyn conceived their ideas of universal salvation. (In Origen's heresy even Satan is eventually reconciled to God.) For more vindictive temperaments, however, it has never seemed right to extend the promise of a harmonious world order to all mankind, regardless of character or behavior. There are men and women who, day by day, add bricks and mortar to the walls of Hell, and it seems a shame that they should never be allowed to stoke its fires.

In this passage (Luke II.14), at least, the vision of universal peace rests upon a probably faulty text, since the best manuscript authorities read: “Peace on earth among men of *eudokia*”—a word which might mean either good will or good repute. On either interpretation of the word, peace on earth is restricted to those whose faith and conduct reveal the operation of grace within their hearts.

It is a small thing, perhaps, a difference between a genitive and a nominative case in a Greek text, but the interpretation raises ethical and political questions that continue to plague the human race. The different readings lead to two quite distinct visions of human life, and not just in relation to salvation. For if the harsher interpretation seems to restrict salvation to men of good will or to men who have found favor in the eyes of God, it also implies a view of

human social life in which the good are forever compelled to struggle with evil, and the sheep are forever being butted by the goats.

The more prevalent philosophical view of the past few centuries has been the charitable conviction that men and nations are essentially good, and that once they are liberated from the fetters of superstition, tradition, and oppressive political order, men will unite into one happy family governed by the popular will. In one form or another, it was the dream of Robespierre and Napoleon, of Marx and Lenin, and of Adolph Hitler, who once confided to Hermann Rauschning that national states had outlived their usefulness. The time had come, he said, for world government.

Today, the specific form this delusion takes, at least in public, is democratic globalism. But no one above the age of 25 can seriously believe that the world will ever be governed, in whole or in part, on democratic principles. Democracy can work in a church congregation, certainly, and in a small town, yes, and in a rural state, perhaps, but not in the city of New York or the state of California, much less the United States. Most of these political entities, I think we all understand, are governed by the machinery of cabals and interest groups. Their family feuds may sometimes give the impression of democracy, but then even the most rigid oligarchies sometimes succumb to partisan struggles. Hitler had to eliminate Ernst Röhm and the SA; Stalin purged the Trotskyists, Bukharinists, and—incidentally—the Jews from the Communist Party.

In America, however, our own party state—the tool of government contractors, unionized government employees, and minority interest groups—can deal more successfully with each competing claim by buying them all off with tax dollars. As for the limited government that depended upon a responsible citizenry of farmers and tradesmen who knew how to mind their own business—what we used to call democracy in the days of Jefferson, Jackson, and Bryan—there is hardly a trace to be found, except in remote areas that have kept themselves relatively free from the infection of federal funds.

If the current dream of world unity and the end of history has little or nothing to do with democracy, then what precisely is the meaning of all this talk of global democracy? Conservatives do not know what to make of it, because ideology—especially a global ideology—is foreign to their nature, but leftists, who have been putting up with this New Republican silliness for some time, know a scam when they see one. John Judis, writing recently in *In These Times*, came close to endorsing the old conservative isolationism that is enjoying a modest revival these days, but the best comment was made by Erwin Knoll, the genial editor of the far-left *Progressive*, who frequently hears complaints that his magazine does not appear to support world government. Knoll's answer, he told me, was always the same: if they think the government of the United States is a repressive tyranny, what do they think these people will do when they run the whole world, without any fear of competition? And if you can answer that question, you are ready to face the millennium.

Scene From Childhood

by Robert B. Shaw

There was a farmer pushing a plow
over and over, around four walls.
Between each sight of him and the next
were tufts of flowers, a curious crop.
For the first seven years of her life
she found him working when she woke up.

He was in profile, hat pulled down,
face hardly showing, bent to his job.
His horse looked happier, stepping high
as if the field were no great chore.
His shirt was red, his pants were blue.
(The prancing horse and the flowers were too.)

When they ordered her up on hot afternoons
to (ugh) take a nap she would try to count
just how many times the man and his horse
were going over the same old ground.
She always fell asleep, of course,
before she got even halfway around.

They held to the same deliberate pace
except for once, when measles kept her
up in her bed, with her fever up,
and then the figures seemed to race;
not even the flowers stayed in place.
They fluttered and sighed in a parching wind.

When she got better the walls stood still.
It would have been when she was six or so.
They moved next year to another state,
leaving the farmer still in full stride,
horse high-stepping, flowers in bloom,
doing their best in an empty room.

For some new child moved in to stay
would all their labor exert such charm?
Would they go limp without her watching,
loaf in the shade and leave the farm
to weeds and weasels? She wondered, watching
farms whipping by on the white highway,
finding no answer for how many years
till now, when a harness jingle, a heavy
share ripping dirt have startled her ears.
Still in mid-furrow as she wakes up . . .
But nothing is there. Her walls are white.
They call it a day at the end of the night.