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A Return to the Classics: Harold Nicolson and a pattern for diplomatists

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The best, and best written, book in English on the practice of diplomacy, first published in 1939, is by the late British diplomat (or as he would have said, diplomatist) Sir Harold Nicolson. It is also mercifully brief - by contrast, for example, with Henry Kissinger's book of the same name that once served me as a pillow during an overnight train journey in Ukraine.

The State Department and European foreign ministries should follow the example of the Soviet government, which translated this book into Russian and distributed it to all Soviet missions. The effect would be harsh but salutary. I don't know how Soviet diplomats responded to its lessons; but I am pretty sure that few Western diplomats today would be pleased by the mirror it holds up to their services.

Sir Harold Nicholson was the son of a British ambassador, and served as a British diplomat from 1909 to 1929. He was later an MP and a leading opponent of the appeasement of Nazi Germany. Married (in a relaxed kind of way) to the novelist Vita Sackville-West, he was an honorary member of the Bloomsbury set, and became a noted biographer, historian and diarist.

A formative role in his views on diplomacy was played by the Versailles Peace Conference, which he attended and which is described vividly in his book "Peacemaking 1919." This experience left him with an abiding hatred of petty and narrow nationalisms; of policies of national revenge; and of the pursuit of ideology in international affairs. His portrait of President Woodrow Wilson ("a theocrat") is not wholly unsympathetic, but it is still damning:

"His spiritual arrogance, the hard but narrow texture of his mind, is well illustrated by his apparent unawareness of [foreign] political reality…He informed the members of his delegation in a solemn address delivered on board the USS George Washington that not only would America be the only disinterested nation at the Conference, but that he himself was the only plenipotentiary possessed of a full mandate from the people."

While suspicious of professed idealism in diplomacy, much of his book is concerned with the personal principles and qualities that form the foundation of good diplomacy and good diplomats. This is a distinction that inhabitants of Washington would do well to keep in mind. Many parts of

the world have swamps. Few have ones in which the alligators and snakes are quite so given to proclaiming their own collective goodness.

In Nicolson's words,

"The worst kind of diplomatists are missionaries, fanatics and lawyers; the best kind are the reasonable and humane sceptics. Thus it is not religion or ideology which has been the main formative influence in diplomatic theory; it is common sense…[Ideal diplomacy] can be described as common sense and charity applied to international relations."

It will probably come as a surprise to most readers that Nicolson lays such emphasis on truthfulness:

"By this is meant, not merely abstention from conscious misstatements, but a scrupulous care to avoid the suggestion of the false or the suppression of the true. A good diplomatist should be at pains not to leave any incorrect impressions whatsoever upon the minds of those with whom he negotiates."

Nicolson quotes the famous play on words by the 17th Century English diplomat Sir Henry Wotton, that "an ambassador is a man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country", but points out that Sir Henry did indeed mean it as a joke; and when King James I heard about it, he never employed him again. By contrast, he quotes the French 18th century diplomat Francois de Callieres,

"[A] lie always leaves in its wake a drop of poison…Even the most dazzling diplomatic triumphs which have been gained by deception are based upon insecure foundations. They leave the defeated party with a sense of indignation, a desire to be revenged and a resentment which will always be a danger."

Nicolson's concern with truthfulness helps to explain his acute dislike of propaganda, or what is euphemistically described in the U.S. as "public diplomacy." He describes radio as "this terrible invention." As he points out, it is very difficult to cultivate reasonably good relations with another country if your own state-backed media are pumping out a constant stream of hostility backed by half-truths or outright inventions.

Connected to truthfulness on the part of the diplomat is reliability on the part of the state. Nicolson looks back to Congress's repudiation of Wilson's signature of the Treaty of the League of Nations. If he were writing today, he would doubtless condemn a whole series of treaties and agreements either rejected by Congress or canceled by subsequent administrations, from the Kyoto Protocol and the ABM Treaty to the JCPOA with Iran.

Another key quality stressed by Nicolson is what Hans Morgenthau called the duty of empathy, grounded in a combination of study, curiosity and modesty. Nicolson quotes de Callieres,

"It is essential that a negotiator should be able to divest himself of his own opinion in order to place himself in the position of the Prince with whom he is negotiating. He should be able, that is, to adopt the other's personality, and to enter into his views and inclinations. And he should thus say to himself - "If I were in the place of that Prince, endowed with equal power, governed by identical prejudices and passions, what effect would my own representations make upon myself?"

In my experience, only a very small number of Western diplomats are now capable of this - and of that number, most are prevented by fear for their careers from expressing their understanding, at least when the countries they are dealing with are perceived as adversaries of the West.

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