FELIX MORLEY AND THE COMMONWEALTHMAN TRADITION:
THE COUNTRY-PARTY, CENTRALIZATION AND THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

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Some years ago in *Modern Age* (Winter, 1958–59), in a poem dedicated to Robert A. Taft, Sr., he was referred to as “Old Roundhead”, and compared to the English revolutionary, John Pym (1584–1643). The historical connotations and the loving insights revealed by that designation are highly significant. In the 20th century, Taft, indeed, did represent the anti-Court, anti-Executive Establishment, Country-Party tradition of the Roundheads, the Commonwealthmen, the Independent Whigs. He revealed the courage of that tradition by resisting the blandishments of the modern Court Party, when in 1940 he was offered its support for the nomination to the presidency if he would drop his commitment to the principles of isolationism and if he would support the policy of assistance to England.

When I think of Felix Morley, I am reminded of Robert Taft and his commitment to principle and his courage in standing by his principles. I have no hesitation in referring to Felix Morley as a Roundhead, Commonwealthman or Independent Whig. No doubt influenced by his Quaker forbears, Morley has directed his attention to the 17th century Puritan Revolution in England as the origin of our libertarian heritage. The events which contributed to that revolution were important in the early colonization of the American colonies. In *The Power in the People* (1949), Morley presents the historical background to American liberties drawn from 17th century England. He emphasizes the work of John Milton and the influence of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*; from Bunyan he draws his admiration for the courage and perseverance of Christian. Finally, there is the exposition of a consistent classical liberal philosophy in the writings of John Locke, and those that he influenced.

Given Hobbes’ writing of *Leviathan* in reaction to the Puritan Revolution, Morley finds Locke’s arguments in opposition to Hobbes of central importance. Locke’s distinction between State and Society, Morley views as the philosophical basis of American political thought. Locke emphasizes that even in a state of nature man cannot be called a really vicious animal. Morley sees the same debate restated on the eve of the American Revolution in the answer to Viscount Bolingbroke’s *Letters on the Spirit of Patriotism* by Edmund Burke’s *Vindication of Natural Society.*

It is on the basis of the development of political philosophy during the 17th and 18th centuries that Morley believes that it is possible for Americans to make a rediscovery of their heritage, and that rediscovered principles will guide us to solutions to the crises of today. Even the failures of the 17th century revolutions will provide lessons for the achievement of liberty. But, paradoxically, critics of liberty have viewed those failures as the success of liberty. Morley notes that Oswald Spengler, viewing the developments of 18th Century English history from an Hegelian perspective, believed that the Lockean revolution of 1688–89 had been successful in abolishing the state. From *The Decline of the West,* Morley quotes Spengler: “In England, The Declaration of Rights (1689) in reality put an end to the State . . . On the other hand, the word ‘Society’ established itself as the expression of the fact that the nation was ‘in form’ under the Class- and not under the State-regime”.

Morley comments that Spengler means that the polit-
ical state was replaced by the cultural estate — a social system "in general opposed to artificial privilege or monopoly of any kind, especially those that the State seeks to sanctify". This promise of the primacy of Society over the State received partial fulfillment in the England which we associate with the principle of "Salutary Neglect", during the hegemony of Robert Walpole; Henry Pelham; his brother, Thomas Pelham-Holles, the first duke of Newcastle; and Philip Yorke, first earl of Hardwicke.

However, there were critics of the continued strength of the state in that laissez-faire period; and as the works (more recent than Morley's) of Caroline Robbins (The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman) and Bernard Bailyn (The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution) have shown, it was the heirs of the Puritan Revolution and Locke, the 18th century Commonwealthmen, who had the greatest impact on the Americans of the era of the American Revolution and Constitution. The Roundhead, Commonwealthmen, Country-Party ideas which Morley emphasized as the foundation of American political thought had been concretely and widely presented in the eighteenth century, especially through the Independent Whig and Cato's Letters, published in the 1720s by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. As Bailyn has shown, their work was the most important influence on Americans of the era of the American Revolution and Constitution. The Roundhead, Commonwealthmen, Country-Party ideas which Morley emphasized as the foundation of American political thought had been concretely and widely presented in the eighteenth century, especially through the Independent Whig and Cato's Letters, published in the 1720s by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. As Bailyn has shown, their work was the most important influence on Americans of the era of the American Revolution and Constitution.

Trenchard and Gordon's works went through more than a half dozen editions in the succeeding decades, including a Philadelphia edition. Trenchard and Gordon's Independent Whig "scorns all implicit faith in the State . . . As he never saw much Power possessed without some Abuse, he takes upon him to watch those that have it". Cato's Letters (II, no. 43, p. 75) wondered what would happen "if all magistrates, all priests, all officers, were dismissed. Some people at least would feel that the government would be improved". But, Cato feared that people would turn to their private pursuits and relax their vigilance, and power would be restored and abused. Cato insisted that every man must be knowledgeable about public affairs; that there must be independent journals to provide that knowledge about current events.

Morley concludes that the significant lesson learned from the 17th and 18th century political philosophers by Americans was self-reliance or self-government and voluntary cooperation. These constituted the foundations of society in the duality of Society and State. But, for Morley the emphasis on self-government implied "an instinctive hostility to the State". From this, Morley develops the importance of the concept of the social contract.

Noting the universal antagonism of English writers (with the exception of Hilaire Belloc) to Rousseau and his theories, Morley feels that there is a need for revision:

It is no endorsement of the entire body of Rousseau's thinking to point out that those who dismiss his Social Contract as pure fiction are, on this point, themselves subject to correction. Ironically enough, it was Englishmen, on American soil, who have left us actual records of such contracts — many of them. That their existence, let alone their significance, should have been so consistently ignored by English writers is one of the most curious lacunae in the scholarship of that politically minded nation.

On the matter of social contract, Morley finds Tocqueville a better guide than the English writers. In Jacksonian America, Tocqueville found that "Society governs itself for itself". Tocqueville noted: "Nothing is more striking to a European traveler in the United States than the absence of what we term the government, or the administration". Tocqueville encountered in Jacksonian America the fullest expression of self-reliance:

When a private individual meditates an undertaking, however directly connected it may be with the welfare of Society, he never thinks of soliciting the cooperation of the government; but he publishes his plan, offers to execute it, courts the assistance of other individuals, and struggles manfully against all obstacles. Undoubtedly he is often less successful than the State might have been in his position; but in the end the sum of these private undertakings far exceeds all that the government could have done.

However, Tocqueville warned that the very vitality of self-reliance is a threat to liberty because "Private life in democratic times is so busy, so excited, so full of wishes and of work, that hardly any energy or leisure remains to
each individual for public life”. It is in such circumstances that individuals seek to gain an expansion of government power. Morley quotes Tocqueville:

There is always a multitude of men engaged in difficult or novel undertakings, which they follow by themselves without shackling themselves to their fellows. Such persons will admit, as a general principle, that the public authority ought not to interfere in private concerns; but, by an exception to that rule, each of them craves its assistance in the particular concern on which he is engaged and seeks to draw upon the influence of the government for his own benefit, although he would restrict it on all other occasions. If a large number of men applies this particular exception to a great variety of different purposes, the sphere of the central power extends itself imperceptibly in all directions although everyone wishes it to be circumscribed.

Morley’s most significant philosophical contribution is his chapter 5, in The Power in the People, “State and Society”. The bibliography of that chapter is impressive and instructive: Aristotle’s Politics; Hilaire Belloc’s The Servile State; Randolph Bourne’s The State; Ernst Cassirer’s The Myth of the State; Edward Corwin’s Liberty Against Government; Bertrand De Jouvenel’s Power; Thomas Eliot’s The Idea of a Christian Society; Sir George Frazier’s The Golden Bough; William E. Hocking’s Man and the State; Peter Kropotkin’s The State; Niccolo Machiavelli’s The Prince and The Discourses; Albert J. Nock’s Our Enemy, the State; Franz Oppenheimer’s The State; Vilfredo Pareto’s The Mind and Society; and Herbert Spencer’s The Man Versus The State.

Morley based his distinction between Society and State on the origins of the words. Society is derived from the Latin socius, a companion. Society and association are rooted in the voluntarism of companionship. “It would be forcing the language to refer to a company of conscripts, or to the prisoners in a tier of cells, as a society. Companionship in both cases is externally enforced (by the State, as it happens).” Morley continues on to the word State which is rooted in involuntary or forced association. He sees the absence of free choice and free contract as the basis of the word status, from which state is derived.

Morley holds that society antedates that state. He says: “For the purposes of this study it is unnecessary to debate whether the origins of State and Society are coeval, or where the State in primitive form was originally imposed on pre-existent social groups in order to systematize exploitation of the weak by the strong. Certain observations on the issue will be made for what they are worth.” In his observations he locates the origins of the State in the prehistoric launching of an attack by one group on another. Morley finds an analysis of this fundamental aspect of the State in Plato’s Republic (Eighth Book): “... then he is always stirring up some war or other, in order that the people may require a leader. ... Has he not also another object, which is that they may be impoverished by payment of taxes, and thus compelled to devote themselves to their daily wants and therefore less likely to conspire against him?”

Morley sees the origin of the State in the State. He says: “For the purposes of this study the monopoly of power of the victors over the conquered in a permanent institution over time. However, this tendency toward permanence over time creates its own challenges. The impositions of the State on society eventually will not be accepted. “It may be a law that prohibits men from taking advantage of the natural process of fermentation. It may be a law demanding that on his eighteenth birthday a boy shall be conscripted for military service. It may be a law that fixes an arbitrary price for a pound of butter. The occasion is less important than the result, which is at first individual, and finally collective, rebellion.”

From one point of view The Power in the People represents a dialogue between Morley and Tocqueville, with Morley applying Tocqueville to contemporary America. As with Tocqueville, Morley was led to a comparison between America and Russia. In this case, a comparison between an America almost the reverse of the Jacksonian laissez-faire society of Tocqueville’s time, and a Soviet Russia which Morley concluded was much more the continuation of Tsarist Russia. Although Morley draws from Alexander Baykov’s The Development of the Soviet Economic System, and the political analysis of E. H. Carr, William Henry Chamberlin, David Dallin, Bernard Pares, David...
Shub and Pitirim Sorokin, he makes the greatest use of Leon Trotsky’s *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Based on Trotsky, Morley emphasizes that the cities of Russia were centers of consumption of wealth without production as they were political, administrative and military aggregates rather than cities in the Western European sense. Morley was especially interested to note that the enslavement of the peasants in Russia occurred during the Romanov dynasty’s rise in the seventeenth century, which was at the same time as the revolutionary vindication of rights in England and the establishment of local institutions of self-government in colonial America. The Russian peasant was transformed into a serf and in law was considered as property and only as property. Laws gave fugitive serfs no opportunity to gain freedom; they were recoverable throughout their lives and harboring them was punished with the forfeiture of four serf families. Morley underlines Trotsky’s analysis of the gulf between the Russian Orthodox Church and Western Catholic Church. Trotsky stated: “The church never rose in Russia to that commanding height which it attained in the Catholic West. . . . The bishops and metropolitans enjoyed authority merely as deputies of the temporal power. The patriarchs were changed along with the Czars.”

A point which Morley neglects to underline is that the bishops in Western Europe made possible the development of cities as they had immunities from the royal governments, and shared an interest in the economic development of the cities. (It is worthwhile to recall Augustin Thierry’s magisterial works on this subject.) In addition, the bishops established the universities which are one of the most distinctive contributions of medieval Europe, and which found the economic revolution of medieval cities the perfect conditions for their growth. Trotsky also notes that Russia did not experience a Reformation. Morley adds John Maynard’s insight that without a Reformation, Russia did not experience the effects of the Counter-Reformation: “so that Russia missed an educative influence such as the later and reformed Roman clergy exercised in the West, while her own clergy neither studied nor taught.” Through the Counter-Reformation the Italian Renaissance was spread throughout Europe, including Poland, Bohemia and Hungary. The absence of the Jesuit universities which dominated European education for two hundred years with their classical and Renaissance *ratio studiorum* was a major gulf between scientific and intellectual development in Europe and Russia.

Basic to the long-run success of the Soviet Revolution, Morley found, was the absence of a tradition of private property in pre-revolutionary Russia. Even with the Emancipation of the serfs in 1861, the land was transferred from the lords to the communes. Without private property and its concomitant, equality before the law, egalitarianism remained dominant in Russia and liberty was not a major issue. Morley notes that the first private property system in land in Russia was instituted by Lenin through the New Economic Policy, 1921–28, and reversed under Stalin. Of more immediate significance for the early success of the Bolsheviks, Morley finds, was the centralization of economic resources under the Tsarist regime. Drawing on Tocqueville’s insights regarding centralization, Morley is struck by Trotsky’s recognition that Russia’s industrialization in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was based on very high concentration of industry, mainly due to the role of the government in Tsarist “forced industrialization”. Through government intervention, Tsarist Russian industry was characterized by very large factories employing very large work forces. Trotsky noted that in 1914 American enterprises of more than a thousand employees employed only 17.8% of the total work force, while in Tsarist Russia they represented 41.4% of the total work force. Morley noted “there was more than sufficient ‘Big Business’ in Czarist Russia to make the transition to Big Government an easy one.” Morley emphasizes the fact that it was precisely in these giant factories, artificially created by government intervention, where the Bolsheviks gained their political strength which gave them control over the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets.

Morley felt that the post-World War II
rivalry was aptly called a cold war because both the doctrines of Communism and of Capitalism were chill in their materialism. However, he feels that in both cases there is more to these societies than their basic philosophies. For Morley, the ideals of America are not economic, it is the means which are economic. "What makes the Republic distinctive is the confidence that it places in Man's ability to plan for himself; its deep-rooted mistrust of governmental planning". This confidence was based on classical and Christian thought. The fear that Morley had was that this confidence sometimes was expressed in restlessness which he felt was a weakness.

The attractiveness of socialism for the young Morley found especially in the absence of spiritual values in capitalist countries. This defect had diverted "the attention of honest idealists from the far greater danger to the individual that lurks behind the architectural drawing of a benevolent Welfare State". Morley feels that the development of socialism was inevitable in Europe due to its feudal background. But, it is not inevitable in America; and he credits the conscientious leaders of business channeling their fortunes into philanthropic, educational and cultural activities. (However, in line with Ralph Raico's analyses of the role of the intellectual, one wonders if the effect has been mainly to benefit intellectuals and make them less active as political reformers.) In the long-run, America might not be immune from the impulse to socialism. Morley has noted that it is the tendency toward political reformism that contributes to socialism. "Thus, the political reformer is more likely to be a Socialist, placing great confidence in the coercive power of the State, than a Radical who really seeks the root of social ailments. To the reformer, cure is generally more important than diagnosis, and reflection does not seem to be a prerequisite for action." Morley concluded with reflections on the role of foreign policy. He felt that a major defect among Americans was that they were reactive to headlines rather than reflective through a knowledge of history. "Forgetful of their past, and showing little insight as to their future, the American people have twice let themselves be maneuvered into military alliances and essentially suicidal European conflicts of a nature more likely to destroy than to preserve the States with which we were allied." For Morley, American intervention in the Second World War was an even worse disaster than entry into the First World War.

What William Graham Sumner had called "Blessed Isolation" was indeed abandoned. In its place, unwittingly and unwillingly, the American people had accepted imperial burdens that strongly imply the passing of their Republic. This unhappy outcome explains why so many patriotic and far-sighted Americans viewed President Roosevelt's casual adventure into the last war with such grave misgivings.

. . . Soon, on a frontier stretching from Korea to Bavaria, an interventionist America was maintaining conscript troops, and pouring forth its substance, in a Herculean effort to "contain" the very forces that our own "diplomacy" has so light-heartedly released.

Morley emphasizes that the isolationist tradition, rooted in Washington's Farewell Address, is not opposed to intellectual, economic or charitable relations with other peoples.

There has never been a people whose natural instincts are less "isolationist". Mixed blood and mingled origins dispose Americans to think well of men as men. They are happily not disposed to think well of governments as governments. The fundamental American faith responds to associations of men — everywhere. It has no confidence in associations of governments — anywhere.

For essentially the same reason, Americans mistrust empire. Common sense tells us that the Republic was never designed to run an empire. Imperialism requires centralization of power, and all the political institutions of our federal union were carefully planned to make that centralization difficult.

Morley concluded that the strongest bulwark against imperialism was the American home. He thinks that it is more than an accident that America's leading aesthetic contribution has been domestic architecture. The desire and effort toward home ownership was matched by the role of the home in educating for liberty. If the home protected its role of educating for liberty, Morley considered the threat of empire resistible.

In his The Foreign Policy of the United States (1951) Morley found the origins of America's foreign policy tradition in the Puritan Revolution's struggle against Charles I. The struggle for the people's control over
foreign policy was the cause of the English Revolution. Morley saw the struggle over "Ship Money"—taxes for the navy—as involving Anglo-Saxon freedoms; the militia was central to traditional English defense. John Hampden's refusal to pay "Ship Money" led to his trial and imprisonment, and he became the model of tax refusal leading to the English Revolution.

In 1641 Parliament declared that the judgments "against the said John Hampden were and are contrary to and against the laws and statutes of this realm, the right of property, the liberty of the subjects, former resolutions in Parliament, and the Petition of Right". Morley sees this early connection between the resistance to foreign intervention and military taxation and the broader struggle for liberty as very significant. John Hampden he recommends as a great witness in the struggle for freedom.

Thereafter, the struggle for liberty was tied directly to the struggle against interventionism in foreign policy. John Trenchard's *A Short History of Standing Armies* (1698) was reprinted almost a dozen times in half a century. Felix Gilbert has presented the development of that tradition in *To The Farewell Address*. Morley notes the Congress during Confederation holding that for an independent America the "true interest of the states requires that they should be as little as possible entangled in the politics and controversies of European nations".

In *Freedom and Federalism* (1959), Morley described the growth of centralization of power due to wars and preparation for war. In "Democracy and Empire", he expresses his suspicion that it is more than a coincidence that each war in which the U.S. has been engaged has produced centralization. The War of 1812 caused a national debt, a national bank, protective tariff, and "a great impetus for the strongly centralizing Supreme Court decisions of Chief Justice Marshall". The Mexican War caused extension of slavery, military government and central administration of conquered territories. The Civil War greatly expanded civilian and military bureaucracy.

The Spanish American War caused Americans to suppress Filipino independence after liberating Cuba. Morley sees a connection between the ending of private enslavement of Negroes and the public control over alien populations. For Morley, that imperialism prepared the way for U.S. intervention in the first World War. The Income Tax Amendment provided the resources "whereby the central government could finance colonial operations".

In "Nationalization through Foreign Policy" Morley notes George Washington's warning that,

> overgrown military establishments... under any form of government are inauspicious to liberty, and... are to be regarded as particularly hostile to Republican Liberty.

Morley insists that any role of world leadership must include "overgrown military establishments". The military budget in peacetime is a centralizing force of the first magnitude.

In "The Need for an Enemy" Morley notes that military security has become a base for economic security—protection against the consequences of bad economic policy, i.e. depressions. Morley shows that logically the government could try to gain legislation for industry similar to that for agriculture. But, this might encounter public or congressional resistance. Industry does not seek that program because it has an alternative—defense production. Morley emphasizes that as long as Congress can be convinced of a military threat, it will vote unlimited funds for hardware. He believes that the growth of the idea that government must provide employment is due to the artificial stimulus of defense spending. Morley concluded:

> For the Federal Republic there is a very serious threat in the combination of undisputed power and calculated secrecy now exercised by the executive branch of the central government. Indeed it may and should be questioned whether the Russian military threat, which of course encourages the centralizing threat here, is the more serious danger.

In perhaps his most important essay "American Republic or American Empire" (*Modern Age*, 1, 1 (summer, 1957), Morley began:

We seem to have reached a stage, in our national evolution, where we have a vested interest in preparation for war. It has become necessary for us to have a powerful enemy... Russia could revert to free enterprise; or restore an hereditary Czardom, tomor-
row; and still our Secretary of State would be compelled to question her bona fides... because our economy apparently needs the constant stimulus of a threat of large-scale war.¹³

Since Americans are not a belligerent people, he notes the need for constant propaganda to build up the threat of an external threat. The management of public opinion becomes a central concern of the government. Morley feared that the differences as to democratic decision making between Russia and the United States were not very great. "It means that in grasping for the shadow of democracy we are losing the substance of self-government."¹³

It was for these reasons that Morley admired Charles A. Beard and his American Foreign Policy in the Making, 1932–1940 (1946). He placed Beard with Thucydides as an objective examiner of governments' claims.¹³

In his "Preface" to the Watershed of Empire (1976) Morley welcomed the movement toward "correction of what has been too hastily set down as Gospel by the 'Court Historians' or official propagandists"; the correction coming as a result of the Vietnam war and its consequences — Watergate, CIA, FBI, IRS revelations. Morley was impressed by the historical research which revealed the extent that the imperial presidency had been initiated in the New Deal and continued since then.¹³

Morley concludes with a call for greater popular vigilance in foreign policy:

But, when the Republic became imperial, domestic politics had to concern itself actively with foreign policy or else admit that the power of self-government had been surrendered to Washington. And that admission would be to forget the warning of James Madison, in words not of one era but for all time, "We rest all our political experiments on mankind's capacity for self-government."¹³

In the chapter "Filter Them From Yourself" in his forthcoming Memoirs, Morley recalls Charles Pinckney of South Carolina in his address to the Philadelphia Convention: "We mistake the object of our Government if we hope or wish that it is to make us respectable abroad. Conquest or superiority among other Powers is not, or ought not ever to be, the object of republican systems." Morley continues:

Recent Presidents, however, happily less arrogantly with Mr. Carter, have laid great stress on the alleged necessity of American military superiority, using the "adversary" strength of Soviet Russia as argument. Whatever the reality of this threat it clearly demands continuous centralization of power, as is also the case with para-military organizations like the C.I.A. and F.B.I. This often surreptitious attrition of popular control runs counter to the carefully planned decentralization of our political institutions and in such basic opposition either post-war policies or traditional institutions must give way. So far the latter have surrendered ground, but not without producing a popular schizophrenia that deeply disturbs the harmony of national thinking. Are we, or are we not, obligated to military intervention in Israel, Korea, Vietnam, Angola, Rhodesia, Cuba, Panama or what-have-you?¹³

Morley, in his criticism of the feudal traditions of Europe against which the Roundheads led their attack, notes that the strength of the concept of self-government in America was connected with the concepts of free contract, in strong contrast to Europe's emphasis on status. In his discussion of the importance of "productive enterprise" without which "the most human theories of distribution are meaningless", Morley refers to Old Jolyon Forsyte, in John Galsworthy's The Forsyte Saga as a man "in whom a desperate honesty welled up at times".¹⁴ Perhaps, it is that "desperate honesty" which is characteristic of the Roundhead tradition, and of Felix Morley.¹⁴

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 12.
4. Ibid., pp. 122–123.
5. Ibid., p. 123.
7. Ibid., p. 89.
8. Ibid., p. 90.
9. Ibid., p. 97.
10. Ibid., p. 94.
11. Ibid., p. 93.
12. Ibid., pp. 273–274.
13. Ibid., p. 106.
15. Ibid., p. 152.
16. Ibid., pp. 118–119.
17. Ibid., p. 135.
20. Ibid., p. 218.
21. Ibid., pp. 219–221.
22. Ibid., p. 243.
23. Ibid., p. 246.
24. Ibid., p. 251.
25. Ibid., p. 223.
26. Ibid., pp. 231–232.
27. Ibid., pp. 265–266.
29. Ibid., p. 74.
31. Ibid., p. 92.
32. Ibid., p. 109.
33. Ibid., p. 154.
35. Ibid., p. 30.
41. Felix Morley in a letter to the author (November 21, 1977) observed: “There is no doubt that both inheritance and association influenced me toward the Puritan tradition and this was deepened when, at Oxford, I made a deep study of the documentation in the Commonwealth era. I was electrified there by discovering the connections between Cromwell’s ‘Instrument of Government’ and our own Constitution and I have always seen the American Revolution as a natural successor to the failure of the first, in England”. The author wishes to thank Professors Robert Nisbet and Milton Mayer for their comments on this paper at the 1977 Libertarian Scholars’ Conference at Princeton University.