

A Diplomat's Philosophy

By MARC GROSSMAN

PHILOSOPHE MVR

National Portrait Gallery, London

Sir Henry Wotton, 17th-century author
and British ambassador to Venice

One damaging consequence of Wiki Leaks has been the resurrection of the statement by Sir Henry Wotton, who served King James I as ambassador to Venice, that “an Ambassador is an honest man, sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.”¹

There are questions to answer about how 250,000 State Department cables found their way to Wiki Leaks, but a lingering public impression that diplomacy is tainted because it is carried out by patriotic people pledged to the advancement of their country and may sometimes be better accomplished in private than in public leads to a larger challenge: trying to define a diplomatic world view. Is there a philosophy that describes diplomacy’s uplifting qualities? In this essay, I draw on my career to consider, in light of Wiki Leaks, how I would describe a diplomat’s philosophy.

Such a personal essay begins with three statements of what such a philosophy is not. First, it is not a consideration of a philosophy of international relations or a commentary on thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and their relevance to and impact on the international system in which diplomats work. Second, it is not a scholarly work. My perspective remains that of a practitioner of diplomacy. Third, this reflection is not designed to be universal. American diplomats may recognize the fundamentals of this philosophy, and perhaps some of our friends and allies will as well. However, as I will argue below, if pluralism is one of the foundations of this diplomat’s philosophy, then we should not be surprised to find other diplomatic constructs operating around the world.

Four Principles of a Diplomatic Philosophy

If Sir Henry Wotton does not accurately portray a philosophy for a diplomat, what might constitute one? Let us consider four principles as a foundation: optimism, a commitment to justice, truth in dealing, and realism tempered by pluralism.

First, optimism. Twenty-nine years in the U.S. Foreign Service taught me that the

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best diplomats are optimists. They believe in the power of ideas. They believe that sustained effort can lead to progress. They believe that diplomacy, backed when needed by the threat of force, can help nations and groups avoid bloodshed.

This belief in optimism and the pursuit of action on behalf of the nation requires making choices, often between two poor alternatives. John W. O’Malley, in his book *Four Cultures of the West*, describes the prophetic, academic/professional, humanistic, and artistic cultures all as being part of larger Western philosophy. He puts statesmen in “culture three” (humanistic) because they are concerned with contingencies. O’Malley says a statesman must ask: “Is war required of us now, under these circumstances?” A statesman argues, therefore, from:

probabilities to attain a solution not certain but more likely of success than its alternatives. Like the poet, then, the statesman deals with ambiguities, very unlike the protagonist from culture two, who traditionally argued from principles to attain truth certain and proved to be such; cultures two and three represent, thus, two different approaches to problem solving. Like the prophet of culture one, the statesman of culture three wants to change society for the better, but to do so he seeks common ground and knows that to attain his end he must be astute in compromise. He does not shun the negotiating table.²

Henry Kissinger, in his book *Diplomacy*, made a similar observation:

Intellectuals analyze the operations of international systems; statesmen build them and there is a vast difference between the perspective of an analyst and that of a statesman. The analyst can choose which problem he wishes

to study, whereas the statesman’s problems are imposed on him. The analyst can allot whatever time is necessary to come to a clear conclusion; the overwhelming challenge for the statesman is the pressure of time. The analyst runs no risk. If his conclusions prove wrong, he can write another treatise. The statesman is permitted only one guess; his mistakes are irretrievable. The analyst has available to him all the facts; he will be judged on his intellectual power. The statesman must act on assessments that cannot be proved at the time that he is making them; he will be judged by history on the basis of how wisely he managed the inevitable change and, above all, by how well he preserves the peace.³

Put another way, the diplomat sees herself or himself as the person Theodore Roosevelt described as “in the arena,” who strives “to do the deeds.”⁴

Second, a commitment to justice. Kissinger, often criticized by those who subscribe to Wotton’s description of diplomacy, is clear that the only successful international orders are those that are just.⁵ He goes on to note that this requirement for justice is intimately connected to the domestic institutions of the nations that make up the international system. That is why, for this diplomat’s philosophy, the American commitment to political and economic justice, not just at home but also abroad, is a crucial connection.⁶ It is this link that emerges in the press reports of Wiki Leaks as American diplomats pursue policies that promote the sanctity of the individual, the rule of law, and fairness in economic life. American diplomats know that the choices their own country makes about issues such as resilience, health care, infrastructure, and the balance between rights and security will form the foundation for their representation around the world.

Third, truth in dealing. Sir Henry Wotton and his contemporary Wiki Leaks-inspired celebrants are wrong. Untruthful diplomacy is unsuccessful diplomacy. As Harold Nicolson wrote in his classic book *Diplomacy*, first published in 1939, “My own practical experience, and the years of study which I have devoted to this subject, have left me with the profound

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Ambassador Grossman (center) speaks with U.S. and Tajik officials at bilateral consultation with Tajikistan government in Dushanbe

State Department

conviction that 'moral' diplomacy is ultimately the most effective, and that 'immoral' diplomacy defeats its own purposes." In his chapter on the "Ideal Diplomatist," Nicolson says that the first virtue of the ideal diplomat is truthfulness. "By this is meant, not merely abstention from conscious mis-statements, but a scrupulous care to avoid the suggestion of the false or the suppression of the truth. A good diplomatist should be at pains not to leave any incorrect impressions whatsoever upon the minds of those with whom he negotiates."⁷ Garrett Mattingly expands on this conviction when, after describing the fundamentals of diplomacy, he notes that:

*If all this says more about the value of patience, truthfulness, loyalty and mutual confidence, and less about bluff, bedazzlement, intrigue and deception than might be considered appropriate for the century in which Machiavelli was born, perhaps it is not the less realistic on that account. Scholars and literary men often seem more given to the inverted idealism of real politik than working diplomats. In the long run, virtue is more successful than the most romantic rascality.*⁸

Fourth, realism tempered by a commitment to pluralism. It is not a coincidence that the search for useful foreign policy paradigms

after the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq has led some observers back to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr. Andrew J. Bacevich has written an introduction to a reissued edition of Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History*. Brian Urquhart highlighted Bacevich's introduction and Niebuhr's words and warnings in a review in the *New York Review of Books*. Robert Kagan called on Niebuhr's insights to help him define the debate between what he described as "old and new realism."⁹ The return of interest in Niebuhr (including from President Barack Obama) is based both on Niebuhr's pessimistic view of the international system and on his belief in the limits of what America can do to change the world in which we find ourselves.

Bacevich maintains that the truths Niebuhr spoke are uncomfortable for us to hear: "Four such truths are especially underlined in *The Irony of American History*: the persistent sin of American exceptionalism; the indecipherability of history; the false allure of simple solutions; and, finally, the imperative of appreciating the limits of power."¹⁰ As Niebuhr himself wrote: "Our dreams of bringing the whole of human history under the control of the human will are ironically refuted by the fact that no group of idealists can easily move the pattern of history toward the desired goal of peace

and justice. The recalcitrant forces in the historical drama have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning."¹¹ Or, in words particularly relevant to a post-Afghanistan and Iraq United States, Niebuhr says, "For our sense of responsibility to a world community beyond our own borders is a virtue, even though it is partly derived from the prudent understanding of our own interests. But this virtue does not guarantee our ease, comfort, or prosperity. We are the poorer for the global responsibilities which we bear and the fulfillments of our desires are mixed with frustrations and vexations."¹²

Niebuhr challenges (or at least complicates) the diplomat's philosophy of optimistic, realistic actions in the pursuit of justice:

*The ironic elements in American history can be overcome, in short, only if American idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue. America's moral and spiritual success in relating itself creatively to a world community requires not so much a guard against the gross vices, about which the idealists warn us, as a reorientation of the whole structure of our idealism. That idealism is too oblivious of the ironic perils to which human virtue, wisdom and power are subject. It is too certain that there is a straight path toward the goal of human happiness; too confident of the wisdom and idealism which prompt men and nations toward that goal; and too blind to the curious compounds of good and evil in which the actions of the best men and nations abound.*¹³

President Obama's speech in Oslo at the acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 started with an optimistic view of the future. But Obama then reminded the audience that "we must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations—acting individually or in concert—will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified." President Obama recognized that this conflicts with the vision of Martin Luther King, Jr., to whom the President acknowledges he owes so much, and with the philosophy of Gandhi. However:

As a head of state sworn to protect and defend my nation, I cannot be guided by their



Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Secretary Clinton talk at State Department

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*examples alone. I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.*¹⁴

The Diplomat's Dilemma

So what has become of the diplomat's philosophy? Part is rooted in Niebuhr's realism. Most diplomats have seen too much in too many places to remain unvarnished optimists. But while diplomats are children of Niebuhr, he is not their only intellectual parent. For me, the debt to Niebuhr is tempered by two other points: first, a commitment to political and economic pluralism and, second—recognizing the importance of Niebuhr's cautions—a belief, based on America's founding principles, that the United States has an important and potentially unique role to play in the modern world. This is Niebuhr leavened by Sir Isaiah

Berlin's ideas about pluralism, Kwame Anthony Appiah's description of cosmopolitanism, and my belief in the continuing importance of American values and power.

Just as those seeking a framework for U.S. foreign policy after Iraq and Afghanistan have returned to the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, some have also sought the wisdom of Isaiah Berlin. The Oxford University Press has reissued many of Berlin's greatest works, including "Two Concepts of Liberty." In his review of a new book of Berlin's letters in the *New York Review of Books* in February 2010, Nicholas Kristof asks: "What exactly is Berlin's legacy and philosophy? To me, it is his emphasis on the 'pluralism of values,' a concept that suggests a non-ideological, pragmatic way of navigating an untidy world."¹⁵ In his biography of Berlin, Michael Ignatieff writes that Berlin:

never claimed to have been the first to think about pluralism. But Berlin had reason to believe that he was the first to argue that pluralism entailed liberalism—that is, if human beings disagreed about ultimate ends, the political system that best enabled them

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*to adjudicate these conflicts was one which privileged their liberty, for only conditions of liberty could enable them to make the compromises between values necessary to maintain a free social life.*¹⁶

Berlin himself writes in "Two Concepts of Liberty" that:

pluralism . . . seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of "positive" self mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind. It is truer, because it does, at least, recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another. To assume that all values can be graded on one scale, so that it is a mere matter of inspection to determine the

President Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev meet at 1985 summit in Geneva



highest, seems to me to falsify our knowledge that men are free agents, to represent moral decision as an operation which a slide rule could, in principle, perform.¹⁷

Kristof highlights the final paragraphs of “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in which Berlin speaks to a seeker of diplomatic philosophy:

It may be that the ideal of freedom to choose ends without claiming eternal validity for them, and that the pluralism of values connected with this, is only the late fruit of our declining capitalist civilizations: an ideal which remote ages and primitive societies have not recognized, and one which posterity will regard with curiosity, even sympathy, but little comprehension. This may be so; but no skeptical conclusions seem to me to follow. Principles are not less sacred because their duration cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, the very desire for guarantees that our values are eternal and secure in some objective heaven is perhaps only a craving for the certainties of childhood or the absolute values of our primitive past.¹⁸

Appiah’s book *Cosmopolitanism* takes a commitment to pluralism and embeds it in a philosophy which many diplomats will recognize as part of their world view. Appiah writes:

So there are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or

even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life. Whatever our obligations are to others (or theirs to us) they often have the right to go their own way . . . there will be times when these two ideals—universal concern and respect for legitimate difference—clash. There is a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge.¹⁹

Appiah’s ideas connect to Berlin’s credo: “One distinctively cosmopolitan commitment is to pluralism. Cosmopolitans think that there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by all of them so we hope and expect that different people and different societies will embody different values (but they have to be values worth living by).²⁰

To be fair, Niebuhr is part of this pluralistic vision as well. Keeping in mind that he was writing in 1952, Niebuhr notes that:

Today the success of America in world politics depends upon its ability to establish community with many nations, despite the hazards created by pride of power on the one hand and the envy

of the weak on the other. This success requires a modest awareness of the contingent elements in the values and ideals of our devotion, even when they appear to us to be universally valid; and a generous appreciation of the valid elements in the practices and institutions of other nations though they deviate from our own.²¹

And what of American values and power? It is with trepidation that I disagree with Niebuhr when it comes to the importance of maintaining America’s commitment to acting on behalf of freedom and justice in the world, but Niebuhr also says that we must never come to terms with tyranny.²² America was founded, as Robert Kagan has written, with the Declaration of Independence as its first foreign policy document.²³ The United States still has a special role to play in supporting political and economic pluralism around the world. It will cause us the discomfort that Niebuhr describes, but it is both part of our destiny and among the most important reasons that American diplomats go out each day to do our nation’s bidding.

The issue is joined by Kagan in his *Wall Street Journal* article “Power Play.” Kagan calls for a “bit of realism” to challenge “the widespread belief that a liberal international order rests on the triumph of ideas alone or the natural unfolding of human progress.” He notes that:

The focus on the dazzling pageant of progress at the end of the Cold War ignored the wires and the beams and the scaffolding that had made such progress possible. The global shift toward liberal democracy coincided with the historical shift in the balance of power toward those nations and peoples who favored the liberal democratic idea, a shift that began with the triumph of the democratic powers over fascism in World War II and that was followed by a second triumph of the democracies over communism in the Cold War.²⁴

President Obama made the same point in Oslo: “But the world must remember that it was not simply international institutions—not

the United States still has a special role to play in supporting political and economic pluralism around the world

just treaties and declarations—that brought stability to a post-World War II world. Whatever the mistakes we have made, the plain fact is this: The United States of America has helped underwrite global security for more than six decades with the blood of our citizens and the strength of our arms.”²⁵

While trying to graft pluralism to realism, it is vital to avoid thinking that all values are equal. Appiah writes, “Universalism without toleration, it’s clear, turns easily to murder,” and so there are limits to cosmopolitan tolerance. “We will sometimes want to intervene in other places, because what is going on there violates our fundamental principles so deeply. We, too, can see moral error and when it is serious enough—genocide is the uncontroversial case—we will not stop with conversation. Toleration requires a concept of the intolerable.”²⁶ And Kristof quotes Berlin as saying, “I am not a relativist. I do not say, ‘I like my coffee with milk and you like it without; I am in favor of kindness and you prefer concentration camps.’” As Kristof concludes, “Finding the boundary between what can be tolerated with gritted teeth and what is morally intolerable may not be easy, but it does not mean that such a boundary does not exist.”²⁷ This is at the root of the diplomat’s dilemma and why a combination of philosophies speaks to those charged with pursuing America’s interests around the world.

No Room for Wotton

An American diplomat starts her or his career by taking an oath of office to the Constitution of the United States. These officers come to their profession having formed their own values, instincts, and philosophies. But the professional pursuit of diplomacy requires a philosophy of diplomacy and a commitment to an America founded on optimism, a commitment to justice and truth in dealing, and the sobriety described by Niebuhr, complemented by a belief in the pluralism of Berlin and Appiah. In the search for a name for one’s professional credo, perhaps this can be termed “optimistic realism,” the belief that strategic, determined effort can produce results, tempered by a recognition of the limits on where, when, and how fast these results can be achieved.²⁸ Looking back over almost 30 years of service to America as one of its diplomats, this is my attempt to define my motivations and beliefs. Sir Henry Wotton is not my guiding philosopher. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Sir Ivor Roberts, *Satow’s Diplomatic Practice*, 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 82.

² John W. O’Malley, *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 16.

³ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 27–28.

⁴ Theodore Roosevelt, “The Man in the Arena,” speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, France, April 23, 1910.

⁵ Kissinger, 79.

⁶ Marc Grossman, “Supporting Political and Economic Pluralism: A 21st Century Diplomatic Approach,” American Diplomacy.org, 2010, available at <www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2010/0912/comm/grossman_pluralism.html>.

⁷ Harold Nicolson, *Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 49, 110.

⁸ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 35.

⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Brian Urquhart, “What You Can Learn from Reinhold Niebuhr,” *New York Review of Books*, March 26, 2009; Robert Kagan, “Power Play,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2008, W-1.

¹⁰ Andrew J. Bacevich in Niebuhr, x.

¹¹ Niebuhr, 2–3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴ Barack Obama, remarks by the President at the acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo, Norway, December 10, 2009.

¹⁵ Nicholas Kristof, “On Isaiah Berlin,” *New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2010, 26.

¹⁶ Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 286.

¹⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 216.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 217; Kristof, 26.

¹⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), xv.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

²¹ Niebuhr, 79.

²² *Ibid.*, 143–144.

²³ Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 41.

²⁴ Kagan, “Power Play,” W-1.

²⁵ Obama.

²⁶ Appiah, 140–144.

²⁷ Kristof, 26.

²⁸ Grossman.



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