

No Right To Self-Determination

The twentieth century's greatest philosopher of freedom and reason, Sir Karl Popper, regarded the 'alleged right of nations to self-determination' as a catastrophic error. In one of his last speeches, in Prague in 1994, he **said**

I think that all lovers of peace and a civilized life should work to enlighten the world about the impracticability and inhumanity of that famous – or shall I say notorious? – Principle of National Self-Determination, which now has degenerated into that ultimate horror, ethnic terrorism.

We must fight against such horrors.

It does not follow from this that all secessionist (or unionist) movements are immoral. It is just that the issue of how territory should be divided up into states must never be decided on the basis of the 'rights' of nations (or states, or races, or religions...), whether to self-determination or anything else, nor in terms of an alleged right of individuals to be ruled by members of 'their own' group. Claims to sovereignty must be independently justified, and for all the usual conservative reasons, the burden of justification falls on whoever wants to change the status quo. And the only legitimate consideration is:

- What do the claimants intend to do with the sovereignty, once they have it?

Thus, if a faction wants sovereignty because they would repeal bad laws and pass good ones, and the existing political tradition is incapable of doing that, then their claim is, *prima facie*, justified.

But if they want sovereignty because they don't like the colour of the people currently in the government, then they have no case. If they want sovereignty because it would give them a monopoly on the revenue from a certain canal, or certain natural resources, then again, they have no case. If they want to repeal good laws and pass bad ones, then they certainly have no case. It may sometimes be best to let them make their own mistakes – which always means, in practice, tyrannising those among them who are not party to the mistake – but that is not because they have a right to do so.

Furthermore, even an entirely justified secessionist or unionist

movement is not entitled to use violence unless their reason for wanting sovereignty is that it is the only way to protect the lives or other rights of the people they represent. Violence is legitimate only in defence of human rights. *Political independence is not a human right*, and therefore cannot justify violence.

Sun, 09/12/2004 - 02:04 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

Yes, But...

It's not always clear to all participants and observers which side's proposed laws are good, and which side's are bad.

I'm curious. Given these standards, does **The World** think that the American Revolution against England was justified?

Gil

by [Gil](#) on Sun, 09/12/2004 - 03:25 | [reply](#)

Re: Yes, But...

Well, the secessionists seem to have agreed with our basic position:

Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. --Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.

It's plausible that the following account is largely accurate:

The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the

accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us, in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences:

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty and perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

In which case, by our criterion, the answer to your question is yes.

by [Editor](#) on Sun, 09/12/2004 - 04:30 | [reply](#)

So.....

Given the historical and current situation of the Kurds in Iraq **The**

World would be in favor of a Kurdish state? (Kurds were clearly persecuted by the previous regime and the current regime has been unable to provide for their security.)

by a reader on Sun, 09/12/2004 - 16:59 | [reply](#)

no answer

IANTW (I Am Not **The World**), but: By my reading of **The World's** post, one consequence is that it makes little sense to be in favor of a "***ish state" as a blanket position, without knowing more details. --Blix

by a reader on Sun, 09/12/2004 - 19:16 | [reply](#)

kurds

well, is the current regime preventing the kurds from securing themselves? (for example banning them from owning guns). If not, how would the Kurds having their own state make them more secure? What new measures would it allow them that they can't do now?

PS brilliant post.

PPS anyone notice what this means for Palestinians and Chechans(sp)?

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sun, 09/12/2004 - 19:48 | [reply](#)

Re:kurds

The only reference to individual ownership of arms is in Article 17 of the Iraqi constitution:

"It shall not be permitted to possess, bear, buy, or sell arms except on licensure issued in accordance with the law." Not exactly the right to bear arms.

The Kurds having their own state make them more secure by being able to secure their borders.

by a reader on Sun, 09/12/2004 - 20:24 | [reply](#)

Alternative theory

I do agree with the World, that in the current context a "Right To Self-Determination" is a bad thing. On the other hand, if that right were consistently applied, it would be a good thing. That is, if people understood that if any group has a combined right (the added rights of all individuals) to self-determination, that logically implies that each individual has that right as well, and understood this right has nothing to do with a right to be ruled by one's own people, it would

be a good thing. For then we would have libertarian anarchy. For then if Wales were to secede from the UK, any city in Wales could in turn secede from Wales, and any street in that city could secede from the city, and any individual on the street could secede from the street. So if the rule of self-determination is consistently applied to any group or individual, there's no problem, and in fact many problems are solved, because then all governments would be truly voluntary, and therefore no longer would be governments.

Henry Sturman

by [Henry Sturman](#) on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 12:15 | [reply](#)

Re: Alternative Theory

Henry Sturman wrote:

'That is, if people understood that if any group has a combined right (the added rights of all individuals) to self-determination, that logically implies that each individual has that right as well, and understood this right has nothing to do with a right to be ruled by one's own people, it would be a good thing.'

Well, actually it doesn't imply any such thing. One could consistently hold that nations have rights and individuals do not because nations have some mystical property or other that makes them superior to individuals. This theory is balderdash but it is certainly possible to believe it. It is also possible to believe, as the Southern secessionists did before the American Civil War, that certain types of individuals are inferior to other types and that self-determination consists in superior people being allowed to make laws allowing them to enslave, torture and rape inferior people without interference. National self-determination would only work in the way you described if all people thought that individualism was true and they don't. Even then it would be redundant since political institutions would be judged largely on the basis of whether or not they promote individual freedom.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 15:52 | [reply](#)

I'm no expert by any means on

I'm no expert by any means on the current Kurd situation but reader asserts that if a "Kurdish state" were made, they would be better able to defend their borders than currently. I don't know how it's possible for reader to know this, without specifying, among other things, *who* he proposes be put in charge of the proposed Kurdistan. (It *matters*.) If the answer is, "the guys who are basically in charge of semi-independent Kurdistan right now", then what's the point?

This is just one of the reasons why being in favor of a "***ish state" qua ***ish state is untenable. What bothers me about the "right to self-determination" is that it masks the reality in a way that sounds uniformly, deceptively nice. What most listeners (to whom this all sounds very Nice) will fail to grasp is: Saying "There

should be a ***ish state" is functionally equivalent to saying "such and such group of people should be given monopoly on the use of force over all of the (much larger group of) people in such-and-such geographic region". I don't know how one can possibly endorse or reject such a claim without actually specifying who that group of people is, what sorts of checks would be placed on their behavior, etc. It literally makes no sense.

(This is why I was so pleased to see this, excellent, World post.)

Back to the Kurds, from where does the biggest threat to Kurdistan come? From Turkey? (Honestly curious.) What would be the likely response of Turkey to the creation of an independent Kurdistan - more belligerence or less? What would you predict? Has this prediction been factored into the assertion that Kurds would be better able to secure their borders if they had "their own state"?

Would Kurdistan require US military assistance in securing their borders? If so, what exactly would be so different from the current situation? What's the point here? I think one of the lessons of the World's post is that, at the very least, you ought to be sure that you're not favoring a ***ish state just for the sake of there being a ***ish state i.e. because that would be nice and swell.

For the record, I've got no particular gripe with there being a separate Kurdish state and I'm certainly open to being convinced that it is a necessity.

--blix

by a reader on Mon, 09/13/2004 - 18:21 | [reply](#)

intentions vs results

"And the only legitimate consideration is:

What do the claimants intend to do with the sovereignty, once they have it?"

So the probability of them actually achieving their intentions don't matter?

by a reader on Tue, 09/14/2004 - 00:40 | [reply](#)

Re: intentions vs results

Yes, it does matter, but that's implicit. Our judgement of whether what they intend to do is right or wrong will usually depend in part on what we think the outcome would be.

by [Editor](#) on Tue, 09/14/2004 - 00:55 | [reply](#)

curious

I'm curious to read what Elliot Temple, or anyone else, thinks this

means for Palestinians and Chechyan(I don't know how to spell it either). I know what it means if certain factions of the Palestinians, like Hamas, were to gain control of such a state. But some factions have claimed that they want a secular, democratic government. Not that that alone puts it in the "good" category.

by a reader on Thu, 09/16/2004 - 23:28 | [reply](#)

my 2 cents

IMHO,

Essentially it means that arguments of the form "we must ____ because the [Palestians/Chechnians] have the Right To Their Own State" are, on the face of it, nonsensical and false.

You mention that there are factions in each place who talk about wanting a secular, democratic government. That's very nice to hear. What will it take to put such a faction in power? Keep them in power? Will they be able to stay in power? Can they be believed about what they say they want? Can they be trusted (rather, to what extent can they be trusted)? Will they become corrupt (rather, to what extent will they become corrupt)? What are the realistic outlooks for the country if all this is attempted? Will it become a failed state? terrorist haven? will factions inside launch attacks on neighbors [Israel/Russia resp.]? will the newly-made government be able to stop this effectively? Will third-party nations such as Iran Syria Jordan Pakistan whoever attempt to influence matters? in what way? with what results, broadly speaking?

Answer those questions and if the answers sound good to me (like if I come to believe that your plan can actually create a Chechnya which doesn't contain gangs which regularly kidnap and ransom Russians, or a Palestine from which guerrillas won't be regularly firing mortars into Israel), you might start to build a case which I could support that e.g. yes we ought to support the creation of a [Palestinian/Chechenian] state with the properties you just described. The devil is in the details, **all** in the details. This is why "Right to their own state!" is such a dangerous principle; it ignores details (all of them) as if they are unimportant, when they are **everything**.

-Blixia

by a reader on Fri, 09/17/2004 - 00:22 | [reply](#)

Creamface

didn't Bill Bryson uncover facts behind the US statement of grievances ?

namely the calling "together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable" - only 3 states had had their legislative bodies moved - at most to a distance of 4 miles or so.

and most of the tax raised (the colonists were taxed at a very low level compared to the Brits) was used to defend the colonies.

by a reader on Tue, 09/21/2004 - 12:11 | [reply](#)

Who determined that "Libertar

Who determined that "Libertarian Anarchy" was a "good" thing?? I don't want to live in an anarchic society, and most people don't. I read your personal webpage, so I know what your opinions are, and I strongly disagree with them. Who are you to tell me that I must accept your ideas? I don't think total personal freedom is necessary. I see nothing wrong with the government doing things for the benefit of society, as long as it doesn't become totally oppressive in their means. Democracy is NOT a failure and in most democracies the minorities are protected, not oppressed. Democracy works very well, that's why it is the most popular system ever created. It isn't perfect by any means, and nothing is perfect and never will be. Also, I disagree with the idea that people have no right to self-determination. If a group of white people want to live with only a group of white people, that should be their right as long as they don't harm others or take away their rights. I completely agree that people should be able to live the way they want if the majority approve. Those not wanting to participate should be able to freely choose something else, and if they want to be part of a conglomerate society, they should be able to. I see no legitimate argument to convince me otherwise.

Incidentally, I thought the purpose of this was to demolish all these pro-left wing, self-righteous intellectually pretentious arguments and conspiracy theories, not support nonsense such as this? I just lost my respect for this website.

by Christopher on Sun, 04/02/2006 - 20:27 | [reply](#)