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"POLICY" IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS

A lecture delivered by
Dr. Henry M. Wriston
at the Naval War College
May 23, 1950

Occasionally it is desirable to take the mind off the instant problem in order to consider broader and more general questions; the current puzzle is sometimes easier to solve after it is looked at in a longer perspective. When this is done successfully it changes the scale of daily events and makes it possible to view them with more detachment and see them in their relationship to values which are permanent.

In an attempt to do something of that kind I wish to discuss what we really mean by "policy" in foreign affairs. At the outset we are faced with a problem in semantics. The language of diplomacy, at least until the Russians revised international manners, has been formal in style and notable for understatement. It is not infrequently equivocal in expression. The reason is simple: anyone executing diplomatic maneuvers must have in mind the possibility of failure and must prepare in advance a way of retreat in order to save face; if prestige is maintained, it is possible to return to the encounter when arguments have been refurbished, military and other dispositions re-arranged, and when the chances of success are more favorable.

In dealing with *basic* policy, however, "diplomatic" language should never be used. Meaning should be crystal clear; therefore, policy is best expressed in naked terms. An illustration from domestic life will clarify the point. When nullification threatened the

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Union, President Jackson reduced fundamental policy to a brief phrase in his classic toast: "The Federal Union: it must be preserved." That was a definition of the problem in terms so clear, so explicit, and so simple that it was impossible to confuse the issue.

When adjustment, which had been tried earlier in the Missouri Compromise and was tried again in 1850, failed to resolve the conflict and the States were brought to the verge of war, Lincoln restated the Jacksonian policy in language equally clear and perhaps even more explicit. In a letter to Horace Greeley he wrote: "If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that."

He succeeded, in those few words, in separating the central issue—the preservation of the Union—from the confusing emotional tensions arising from the problem of slavery. In the Second Inaugural he again re-stated the issue with such matchless clarity that Charles Francis Adams, Jr., wrote his father, our Minister in London: "That rail-splitting lawyer is one of the wonders of the day . . . This inaugural strikes me in the grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historical keynote of this war."

It is one of the major tragedies of our time that no such lucid summary of the meaning of the recent world war has come from any statesman. It is a measure of our confusion that it is asserted from time to time that no such valid and clear pronouncement could be made because of the incoherence which the Russian alliance brought in its train. This is not true. If one has any grasp of historical fact, it must be clear that the Russian alliance brought no more complications than the slavery issue brought to the War between the States. Lincoln was able to put in words which a child

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could understand the reason for war. In similar fashion the basic policy beneath American participation in both world wars of the 20th century is just as simple; any schoolboy could grasp it. It is, explicitly, that the interests of the United States are so world-wide that it could not permit any aggressor nation to control the whole continent of Europe—or for that matter Asia.

That is the complete and adequate explanation of our participation in both wars. It is also the complete and adequate explanation of our delay in entering both wars. Our basic interest is real and vital, but it is neither so immediate nor so vital as the like interests of Britain and France. As long as there was reasonable basis for the belief that Britain and France could win alone, or with moral and material help from us, or assistance short of force, there was adequate reason to abstain from fighting. When it became clear that the risk of their defeat was too great and, therefore, our own policy was genuinely imperiled, we went in. It is not necessary to assert that the timing was accurate in either case. The point is that delay in participation was not irrational. As fundamental policy explains our entrance into the world wars, it equally explains our part in the "cold war"; the fact that victory in two world wars did not avoid the cold war does not invalidate the reasoning.

When one looks at *foreign* policies, therefore, there are many which can be put in phrases just as clear and just as brief as the Jacksonian policy with reference to the Federal Union. The classical British doctrine, the Balance of Power, illustrates the point. Our twin policies of the Open Door in China and the integrity of China are other illustrations. If one reflects upon those fundamentals with which we are concerned this morning, it will be perfectly obvious that they can be more effectively implemented and more successfully carried out when they are reduced to plain,

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naked, Anglo-Saxon terms. It is a magnificent exercise to list the major policies of American diplomacy, and to define each in a hundred words or less. Such an effort leads to a clarification of mind.

The second characteristic of fundamental foreign policies is that they are never created; they develop. When the situation has matured to a point where a statement can sum up past thinking and experience and set the course for the long future, they are put in dramatic, crystallized form. Such statements do not require frequent revision. The Balance of Power is as clear—and as valid—today as it ever was. The preservation of the Federal Union is as fundamental now as it was in 1830. Of course, policies are not “timeless,” because there is change as well as continuity.

Let us take the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine is essentially reinsurance for our own independence. One can trace its roots back to George Washington and beyond, but it could not be stated until two great events had happened: first, the consolidation of our nation, which can be associated historically with the War of 1812 (at least in its culminating phase); and second, the breakup of the Spanish colonial empire in Latin America. The Monroe Doctrine found expression when those two historical developments came into conjunction at a moment of crisis.

We have another fundamental doctrine which is seldom given expression in this country, and yet I think it must be recognized. Since our emergence as a world power, and more particularly since we attained the stature of a major world power, our basic policy is not to permit any one aggressive power to be dominant in Europe over a considerable period of time. Again, that was always our interest. We can see it reflected in the fact that during the Napoleonic struggle we fought at various times on both sides—the

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naval war with France and the War of 1812 with Britain. But it could not emerge as a very significant policy until all the world recognized us as a world power, and it could not become a fundamental policy until we were recognized as *the* Western power—the anchor man in that power group.

We have the same sort of fundamental policy with regard to Asia. Of course, we had no basic Asiatic policy for many years because we did not face the Pacific and Asia was not a factor in world affairs. But once we touched the Pacific it is extraordinary how speedily men who have no claims to great statesmanship perceived the reality of our interest in that continent. Thus as Asia came into the focus of international affairs and as we rose to the stature of a world power, the policy of no single dominant power in Europe had to be matched by a policy of no dominant power in Asia. It found expression in two classical phrases—the Open Door in China, that is resistance to economic imperialism, and the Integrity of China, or resistance to political imperialism.

It is essential to recognize the extraordinary stability of basic policy. The ebb and flow of circumstances over those underlying realities must occasion many tactical maneuvers in the effort to make policy effective, but that does not mean a new policy. The Integrity of China, for example, is still valid. It has suffered many vicissitudes. As a policy it was never fully achieved; but, if one understands its fundamental character and appreciates how long it was in maturing, it becomes equally clear that it is not yet completely, or permanently, defeated. Its current eclipse is nothing to be happy about, but neither is it anything to despair over.

Thus when we draw policy into its time perspective it becomes clear that most so-called “new” policies are transient; that is because they violate a third quality which a fundamental policy

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should have. It should be not only clear and stable, but free of passion and emotion; it ought to be a strictly intellectual construct framed from real and permanent interests and utterly devoid of heat. Of course, once it has come to definition and its status is determined it may be, in fact it must be, defended with fervor. But what Jackson showed in his toast and Lincoln demonstrated in the War between the states, Washington had defined in his Farewell Address; he emphasized the objectivity of proper policy when he spoke against "passionate attachments" and "inveterate antipathies."

Thus the so-called "Morgenthau policy" for Germany was, it seems to me, not a policy at all; it was just a reaction under emotional stress; it overlooked geography, experience, the talents of a people, strategical concepts, and the psychology of both Germans and Americans. It was, therefore, transient.

It was also disastrous, because it exemplified a characteristic modern error—the belief that the opposite of something bad must be something good, which is not true. By destroying not only German dominance but German power completely, protection is not achieved; it may lead, as the Morgenthau proposal did, to a power vacuum and thus draw in another nation (in this instance Russia) until it threatens to replace the beaten nation as the dominant force in Europe. The consequence may be a situation no less intolerable than that which was overcome by war.

The policy of destroying all German power—economic, political, and military—was emotionally oriented. The war checked Fascism and Nazism, but the exhaustion of the West offered to Russia an opportunity to attempt something which was contrary to our interest. Only slowly did realization dawn that an emotional response was likely to defeat our own policy by making us think

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of Germany in negative terms only and misconceive Russia in positive terms, often sentimentally. This attitude can be summed up in the phrase, "Good old Joe," now happily relegated to the realm of myth.

In the fourth place we should remember that the word "policy" should be reserved for the things which are fundamental and continuous and should not be applied to devices and tactics, however important they may be. It is a mistake, for example, to refer to the Marshall Plan as basic policy. It is an extraordinary important operation, but nonetheless essentially a tactical device in support of our basic policy of preventing a single aggressive power from encompassing Europe. It is, therefore, a means to a larger end. It is, as we know, a transient means, for, by its own terms, it is to end in 1952. It has all the elements of ingeniousness that any brilliant tactical maneuver should have; it involves the constructive use of economic power to buy time for the re-creation and re-organization of forces likely to hold Russia in check. Its success or failure must be judged upon those considerations.

It certainly has bought time. I do not think anyone seriously believes that the Italian Government would be constituted as it is today without the Marshall Plan or that the Greek Government would be constituted as it is today but for Marshall aid. There is now before us a novel and bold suggestion—the Schuman proposal for the integration of the coal and steel industries of France and Germany. That proposal would have been incredible if either DeGaulle or the Communists had been in control of France. If the Third Force had not been perpetuated in power by external support, that dramatic program for strengthening the economic defenses of Western Europe would never have been proposed.

Whether progress toward the re-organization of Europe is complete enough or swift enough is a matter of judgment. Current

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opinion, of course, is that it has not proceeded with adequate speed. The official conclusion is reflected in the statements of Mr. John J. McCloy. He testified before the House Appropriation Committee: "The struggle is immediate and intensive. We in Germany feel that we are facing a critical point in history, and I think no persons sensitive to the forces which play over Europe today can feel differently." Speaking in London early in April he said that "no permanent solution of the German problem seems possible without an effective European union." It was as a consequence of feelings thus expressed officially that the Atlantic Pact Conference has been held recently in London with a view to new tactical dispositions in support of the basic policy of a Europe undominated by a single aggressive power.

That brings us to the fifth aspect of policy which is important in this broader consideration: responsibility for the success of a policy is never unilateral because it is a policy of the United States *with regard to other people*. Therefore, the "other people" involved may contribute directly to the success or failure of the policy. There have been times, for example, when the behavior of some Latin American countries has invited European interference in contravention of the Monroe Doctrine. Such occurrences greatly complicated our problem.

In recent somewhat violent discussion of the so-called "failure" of our Far Eastern policy, its multilateral aspect is almost overlooked. In seeking to effectuate its policy, the United States had to use the available instruments. Chiang Kai-shek is obviously no longer the man he once was, physically, mentally, or spiritually. General Marshall, in his mission to China before he became Secretary of State, could find no personnel unconnected with the Kuomintang or the Communists adequate for leadership; the Third Force, which has been so decisive a factor in post-war France, was con-

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spicuous by its absence in China. We, therefore, had no channel through which our policy could flow. General Wedmeyer also came to that conclusion and said, in effect, that if we wanted to be sure to stop the Reds we must supply the personnel and make the full commitments; otherwise we must let nature take its course for a time because he saw no hope of making an effective instrument of Chiang Kai-shek.

Somewhat the same problem has confronted us in Greece; we have had to work with what is there. The letter, which Ambassador Grady wrote to the Premier of Greece on the first of April, makes it clear that what we have had to work with in that country is not very good; he made a bold and tactically dangerous move to improve it. This is what he said: "The effort to make Greece self-sustaining and independent of foreign aid . . . has hardly begun . . . An important reason for the delay has been a less than satisfactory performance by the Greek Government in its conduct of economic affairs. Only twenty-seven months remain in which the Greek Government may take advantage of the American aid made available through the Marshall Plan. This short time permits no further delay . . . The American people, however, are entitled to expect, and do expect, that any Greek Government which hopes to continue to receive the aid which they have generously offered, will utilize this assistance to the fullest degree.

"In my opinion, only a stable and efficient Government supported by the people and by Parliament will be able to act with courage and the firmness of long-term policy which are essential to the wise use of the aid offered by the American people. Irresponsible talk of adjourning Parliament or of new elections before the new Parliament has had an opportunity to rise to its responsibility, can only create a climate of political and economic uncertainty which may do grave damage to the country's future . . .

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Only a Government which can secure and maintain public confidence by its boldness and by its devotion to the public interest can be expected to execute the reconstruction stage of Greek recovery. We earnestly hope the Greek Government will meet this challenge It is in the hands of the Greek Government and the Greek Parliament to decide whether or not they wish to continue to receive American aid and hence to accept the responsibilities which will attain its purpose. It is the obligation and intention of the American Government with regard to all Marshall aid countries to decide whether or not the performance of the recipient Government, whether Greek or any other, justifies a continuance of the aid on the scale heretofore contemplated.”

When one has read the letter and realizes that it is usually bad tactics to interfere so openly in the domestic politics of a foreign nation, both the boldness and the dangerousness of the move become clear. It suggests the situation was so serious that only a drastic remedy was worth trying. It also highlights how a sound and necessary policy may fail temporarily (and the word “temporarily” must sometimes be given a very flexible interpretation) for want of adequate, cooperating partners.

The sixth aspect of basic policy in this review is that success or failure at any given moment is affected by the quality of our own management. Americans in times past were proud of our “shirt-sleeves diplomacy,” which in some circumstances was well adapted and worked satisfactorily and in other circumstances was hopelessly bad. There have been at times amazing deftness and finesse, great perception and skill, and at other times, stupidity and lack of stamina.

As a sound strategic concept can fail for want of energy and for many other reasons, so a policy which is entirely valid

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can be under-played, as the Monroe Doctrine was from time to time when we were not alert enough in the defense of its principles; it can be over-played, also, as Olney did in the Venezuela case. Neither the under-playing nor the over-playing affects the validity of the basic concept. The Monroe Doctrine does not represent a geographic reality, for the Western Hemisphere, except physically, is pretty much a myth. Certainly it is not culturally valid. Nonetheless politically it is sound, and even the failure of Latin America to develop along the democratic lines that the Anglo-Saxons believe are correct, while it causes difficulties, does not make the fundamental concept less valid. It must be said that so far as the Monroe Doctrine is concerned our successive Secretaries of State, since we became a world power, have adapted themselves to the changing scene.

In the seventh place, success of a basic policy does not hang upon dramatic or critical events. We have practically worn out the word "crisis" in our time. Modern means of communication and other factors have led us to over-dramatize the daily event and to hide the fact that indirect results are often more important than the immediate result. As George F. Kennan suggested recently in his notable speech in Milwaukee, sometimes five or ten years elapse between cause and effect in major foreign policy developments. The true meaning emerges only after the sense of crisis has subsided.

Hitler offers a dramatic example: he told his men that on their arms rested "the fate of the German nation for the next thousand years." That was nonsense, because it made transient circumstances appear too decisive over too long a period. Already we can see that the German nation, though defeated, is now so essential to both competing power blocs that we may again see a repetition of what has happened so often before in history: over

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a considerable period of time the defeated nation may profit more in defeat than it would have profited if it had won the victory.

Hitler's error suggests a common failing. Right now over-dramatization of current events leads us to expect too much of diplomatic conferences. It is complained, for example, that the Big Three communique issued week before last sounded very much like the one issued nearly a year before. That ought not to be regarded as necessarily bad. It may well reflect steadiness of purpose, not a mere rushing from one hunch to another.

In 1880 one of our basic policies was crystallized by President Hayes, when he said that, "The policy of this country is a canal under American control An inter-oceanic canal across the American Isthmus will essentially change the geographical relations between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the United States It would be the great ocean thoroughfare between our shores, and *virtually a part of the coast line of the United States.*"

The last phrase sums it up—the canal as "part of the coast line of the United States." That was as explicit as a policy could be made. Few people could now tell with any precision why that statement came just when it did; the crisis which precipitated the pronouncement has faded. The policy, so plainly and forcefully stated, remains. It ran counter to the terms of the Clayton-Bulwer treaty and Hayes' comment was in a sense an announcement of the fact and a prediction that the treaty would not survive the pursuit of American policy.

Over the years that policy could have been implemented by any number of actions. At one extreme would have been the annexation of everything within that "coast line." There was a

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strong drift in that direction for some time. The statement of Olney that our "fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition" was in harmony with such an idea. The Platt Amendment for Cuba and the putting of armed forces into Haiti, Santo Domingo, Nicaragua, and other countries might have eventuated in military, political, and economic control. At the other extreme, while the basic policy of regarding the canal as part of our coast line remains unchanged, all our relations with Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean have been put upon the bases of mutuality, with some accent upon United States leadership, to a degree which Olney's tactics would never have led one to expect as within the realm of possibility. In short, a shift in tactics from time to time seen in too short a perspective looks like a shift in policy, when in reality it does not involve such a development.

This consideration leads to the eighth point. One of the central issues of recent discussion is bipartisanism. Basic policies are non-political. That is more accurate than saying bi-partisan. I think Senator Vandenberg recently called them "un-partisan," which correctly expresses the point. The Monroe Doctrine, the Panama Canal as our coast line, Canada as within our defense system resistance to control of Europe or Asia by a single power—all these policies would be the same whether the administration were Republican or Democratic.

On the other hand, the tactical dispositions adopted to achieve the policies are subject to politics, and properly so. It is the essence of the democratic system that action by the party in power is carried on under the scrutiny and criticism of the minority. In England this is epitomized by the phrase, "His Majesty's loyal opposition." It is revealed in our government by the fraternalization across the aisle at one moment and the tension between the

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two sides at the next. The opposition almost always has to take a somewhat negative attitude because it does not have access to all the current dispatches and information necessary for constructive judgment. But even when criticism is negative, it may well force those in power to act carefully. It can be vigorous and occasionally may be violent, but should be at all costs responsible. When we see political opposition in this light, we realize that it is not to be deprecated, but encouraged; that is the only way in a democratic society by which the public can hear both sides of every question and reach a considered consensus.

In times of crisis when there is imminent and serious danger, opposition is mitigated. That has been true of the so-called "Truman Doctrine" with regard to Greece and Turkey, true in connection with the Berlin air lift and the Marshall Plan. Nonetheless, if the mitigation of opposition is long continued and not limited to matters under dangerous tension, it leads to a tendency to regard all opposition as improper. That feeling is far more dangerous in many respects than even violent opposition because it cuts at the root of the responsibility of the majority party and destroys the foundations for an informed public opinion.

Consideration of policy in these broader terms indicates in the ninth place that it must be judged dynamically, rather than by any static method of estimation. One recent proposal is that we draw up a balance sheet to show our assets and liabilities and learn whether or not we are over-extended. It is not an apt analogy, because policy is never fully reflected in a balance sheet—even industrial policy. By its nature the momentum, which is inherent in the activity of any organization, is not shown. In some of our greatest corporations, the balance sheet has an item: patents, one dollar. If the patents were really worth one dollar, the organization would be bankrupt. If the company did not have the patents, it

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would not be in business. That dollar is merely a symbolic figure; it is an indication that the value of the patents cannot be estimated.

Anyone who has been on an investment committee knows that the balance sheet does not adequately reflect the kind of management the company has. The enterprise may be solvent, but stagnant; management may be vital, but unwise. Those considerations could well be concealed, rather than revealed, on a balance sheet. Moreover, the balance sheet, by its very nature, isolates the company. It does not show it in relationship to its competitors or to those cooperating with it. But an industrial company does not live in isolation any more than a nation does. Therefore, while a balance sheet has certain obvious merits, as a basis for estimation of policy it may be quite misleading.

Let us take, for example, the Monroe Doctrine; on any balance-sheet theory it would never have been drafted by so stern a realist as John Quincy Adams nor uttered by so seasoned a political leader as James Monroe. There were timorous people who felt at the time that we were over-extending our commitments. They wanted us at least to concert our action with Britain; but John Quincy Adams, one of our really great Secretaries of State, said that he was unwilling the United States should come in as "a cockboat in the wake of the British man-of-war." He could read with amusement, not untinged with irritation, the bombastic words of George Canning, "I called the New World into existence to redress the balance of the Old," because he knew that statement was not true.

The policy involved in the Monroe Doctrine has been challenged many times and by many powers—Britain, France, and Germany among others—but we were seldom alone in its defense. It is not historically accurate to say that it rested upon the power

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of the British navy. From time to time it did so depend to some extent, but at other times it challenged the power of the British navy.

What the balance-sheet technique would conceal is that, when at various times the issue was drawn, there was almost always some nation with an interest which was parallel to our own over a short or middle-length period, and that we could count upon assistance, direct or indirect. It was not even necessary that our interests should coincide with those of the cooperating power in Latin America; support might mean no more than a common desire to oppose the threatening power for wholly different reasons; the effect was to lend help to our policy at the moment of crisis. But even beyond such assistance there is a fact of first importance, namely that we always had a greater interest in the preservation of the Monroe Doctrine than anyone else could have in challenging it.

This leads to the final characteristic of basic policy: not all policies, not even all basic policies, have the same order of magnitude or equal priority. We would defend the policy of the Panama Canal as part of our coast line before we would make war to avoid dominance of Asia by a single power. Similarly, we mitigated our support of the Monroe Doctrine in the course of the Civil War because the indissolubility of the Union took priority over the maintenance of the Monroe Doctrine. The balance-sheet technique conceals the fact that our commitments are not uniform over the whole area of policy and, more particularly, that they are not uniform at any given moment. Moreover, not all the policies of a nation are challenged at the same moment. For this reason it is never necessary to exert all the nation's power behind every policy at one time; they tend to be successively challenged—not all at once.

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Other nations, some of whose policies parallel our own, may have, indeed must have, different priorities. That no one power should dominate Europe is American policy; it is also British policy and French policy. Inevitably it has a higher priority in the British and French hierarchy of policy than in ours. The same reasoning applies to aid to Greece and Turkey. Because they were on her life-line, Britain's interest was more immediate and direct than ours. Our interest in them was a subsidiary of our determination to let no nation dominate Europe. Only when Britain notified us that she could not bear the weight, and when the Russian threat was immediate and serious, did we take over the leadership.

Today there is no direct threat to the Canal as part of our coast line, no challenge to Canada as within our defense system, no infringement of the Monroe Doctrine; today it is our policy of no one dominant nation over all Europe or Asia that is being challenged. That fact accounts for the notable shift in our tactical dispositions, in new political emphases, and in dramatic economic maneuvers; but it does not in any way mean the abandonment of other policies, nor does it mean that we are over-committed, because while there is a very heavy threat in one area, there is virtual absence of challenge in others.

The purpose of this review of the underlying considerations in foreign policy is to lift our sights from the daily and immediate, the complex and the confusing. It is designed to help us look at the broader significance which time and analysis can reveal. The seriousness of the current situation is abundantly clear. We do not want even a factual reverse. Nevertheless no one ever achieves all his objectives; whether we like it or not we must expect some reverses because our opponent is strong, resourceful, and determined. The recent temper of Americans has been one of reaction from the stimulation of victory; it may well have moved from the over-optim-

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ism that followed triumph to an unwarranted pessimism. Judgment will be sounder if is founded upon a long-range view.