



Poet and lawyer, publicist and public servant, ARCHIBALD MACLEISH has answered many callings in his distinctive career. He was a successful practicing lawyer; in 1932 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry; and he was a leading contributor to *Fortune* during its years of trial. From 1939 to 1945 he served as Librarian of Congress, Assistant Director of OWI, and finally as Assistant Secretary of State. At the war's end, he was appointed Chairman of the American Delegation to the UN Conference which founded UNESCO. This autumn he comes to Harvard as the Boylston Professor, a chair giving full scope to his love of teaching and writing.

## THE CONQUEST OF AMERICA

by ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

SOMETIME along in the nineteen-eighties, when the world has left us as far behind as we have left the years that followed the First World War, somebody is going to publish a piece called *The Late Forties*. I hope to be dead at the time.

The subject of this piece will be the conquest of the United States by the Russians. It will begin more or less as follows:—

Never in the history of the world was one people as completely dominated, intellectually and morally, by another as the people of the United States by the people of Russia in the four years from 1946 through 1949. American foreign policy was a mirror image of Russian foreign policy: whatever the Russians did, we did in reverse. American domestic politics were conducted under a kind of upside-down Russian veto: no man could be elected to public office unless he was on record as detesting the Russians, and no proposal could be enacted, from a peace plan at one end to a military budget at the other, unless it could be demonstrated that the Russians wouldn't like it. American political controversy was controversy sung to the Russian tune; left-wing movements attacked right-wing movements not on American issues but on Russian issues, and right-wing movements replied with the same arguments turned round about.

American education was Russian education back-

ward: ignorance of Communism was the principal educational objective recognized by politicians and the general press, and the first qualification demanded of a teacher was that he should not be a Communist himself, should not have met persons who might have been Communists, and should never have read books which could tell him what Communism was. American intellectual life revolved around Russian intellectual life: writers stopped writing and convoked enormous meetings in expensive hotels to talk about Russia for days at a time, with the result that the problems of American culture (if that self-conscious and overfingered word is still in use in 1980) became reflections of the problems of Russian culture. Even religious dogma was Russian dogma turned about: the first duty of a good Christian in the United States in those years was not to love his enemies but to hate the Communists — after which he was told to pray for them if he could.

All this, moreover — so the story will go on — all this took place not in a time of national weakness or decay but precisely at the moment when the United States, having engineered a tremendous triumph and fought its way to a brilliant victory in the greatest of all wars, had reached the highest point of world power ever achieved by a single state. The American national income had doubled and doubled again in a generation. The American

standard of living was far in advance of any other, including — including particularly — the Russian. The American industrial potential balanced, and overbalanced, that of the rest of the industrial world. American technological supremacy was so obvious that it was taken for granted, and American products were so far superior that they were used or copied everywhere on earth.

It was not, in other words, a weak and declining people, caught in the expanding shadow of history's new master, which gave up its independent mind, contracted its national will to the dry negation of the will of others, and threw away the historic initiative which, in the lives of nations as in the lives of men, is the key to greatness. It was the most powerful people in the world — a people still young in a continent still new — a people which, only a generation before, had been regarded as brash to the point of arrogance, cocksure to the verge of folly, and so wholly certain of its future and itself that travelers wrote books about the national assurance. It was the nation, in brief, which had been chiefly famous among other nations because it conceived of its present not in terms of its past but of its future — the nation which spoke with a straight face and with entire sincerity of the American dream.

It ought to be possible for a good historian with a lively sense of the ridiculous to amuse himself and his readers for some pages with variations on that theme. But what will be hardest for us to take — those of us who are left around — will not be the ridicule of our successors but their sympathetic understanding. For it is unlikely that any future account of the prodigious paradox of our conduct will fail to reach the conclusion that we lost our way as a people, and wandered into the Russian looking-glass, primarily because we were unable to think.

We were unable, that is, to understand the nature of the crisis in which we were caught or the character of the role we were called upon to play. Instead, we confused one of several consequences of the crisis with the crisis itself, enlarged upon a necessary police operation until it became not only a national policy but *the* national policy, and chained ourselves, as a sort of vast sea anchor, to the purposes and policies of a rival state. Even the Marshall Plan, which, in its beginnings, was a courageous and positive proposal, responsive to the realities of the world situation, became in press and Congress, under the influence of our fears, a negative and defensive operation.

As to the nature of the crisis, it will be noted that the general opinion held among us, however individuals might dissent, was the opinion that the troubles of our age were international in character; that they had been precipitated by the rise of Communism; that Communism was a great new revolutionary force; that the way to resolve the

crisis, therefore, was to resist and contain and presumably strangle the Communist revolution.

As to the role we were called upon to play, we had persuaded ourselves that this labor of resistance and containment must take precedence over everything else, and that purely American objectives and purposes, including the great traditional objectives of American life, must not only be subordinated to the accomplishment of the task of containment but even, in certain cases, sacrificed to it.

All this, our historians will observe, was uninformed and unintelligent. The crisis in which we were caught was not new but had been produced by the cumulative changes of many centuries. It was not a crisis in international relations but a crisis in civilization, a crisis in culture, a crisis in the condition of man. That crisis had not been precipitated by the rise of Communism, which was, indeed, one of its consequences, or by a conspiracy in the Kremlin, which was one of its incidents, but by a tragic lag between the disintegration of one order of society — the petering out of one historical era — and the flowering of another.

Communism, finally, was not a new revolutionary force but one of several forms of authoritarian reaction, political, philosophical, and clerical, headed back toward the disintegrating order of society and competing with one another for the domination of that disappearing world. The true revolutionary force in our epoch — the force moving not backward, toward the disintegrating age, but forward, toward the age which had not yet begun — was the force which had been released at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth by the words and actions of a few men, most of them Americans.

The belief that the world crisis could be resolved merely by resisting and containing Communism was, therefore, a delusive belief; and the conclusion that the realization of the historic American purpose must be deferred and subordinated to the defeat of the Russian purpose was not only a false conclusion but a betrayal of the life of the Republic.

## 2

WE SHALL hardly be in a position — those of us who live that long — to refute this damaging indictment. No one but the ignorant man or the fanatic really believes even now that Communism is the origin of our ills or that the world suffers solely from the attentions of personal devils — Stalin from our point of view; Truman from the Russian. We know perfectly well, whatever we may read in the general run of our newspapers or hear from the noisier commentators on the air, that the real difficulty of our time goes deeper than Russian imperialism or Communist fraud. The real difficulty touches life itself, not merely the manipulation of life. It involves a conflict not between nations but

between worlds: a dying world not altogether dead; a new world conceived but not yet born.

The dying world is the world which reached its highest European integration in the Middle Ages: the world in which men were able to realize themselves and fulfill their lives as members of the closely knit body of a city, or a church, or a state, or a feudal or institutional structure of some kind. This world began to decay with the Renaissance and has disintegrated with a rapidly accelerated momentum over the years which included the two great world wars. The new world is the world in which men, exiled from an institutional security and an institutional fulfillment, will learn to realize themselves as whole and individual human beings answerable to their consciences and God. The new world, though it was foreseen and its possibility declared a hundred and seventy years ago, has yet to be established. The limbo in which we live is the interval between the two.

But if this is true the theory propounded by the Communists and their authoritarian rivals, that Communism is a revolutionary force, collapses. A revolutionary force, as distinguished from a reactionary force, is one which moves not backward against the flow of change but forward with it. It is a force which dares to take the revolutionary risk of trusting the flowering of the tree, the meandering of the current. The whole movement of human life, violently accelerated over the last few centuries, has been a movement toward the separation of the individual consciousness from the common consciousness, the common sleep, the animal sleep — a movement toward the differentiation of the individual from the community of the tribe, and, before that, from the community of the "natural" life of universal instinct.

Communism is not a force which moves with that current. On the contrary, Communism, like its authoritarian rivals, seeks to cure the sickness of the condition of man by turning back against the current of human evolution to that decaying city of hierarchical and disciplined order in which mankind, at certain sacrifices of manhood, may find seclusion and retreat.

The one force which can claim the revolutionary title in the world we live in, the one force which can claim to move in the direction of life, is the force that Jefferson put into words. Later Americans have, it is true, betrayed that force, both in terms and actions. Its vocabulary has been appropriated again and again for private advantage. Its victories have been corrupted by hypocrisy and cynicism and selfishness. Its articles of faith have been made the catechism of a faithless materialism. Its central concept of the dignity of the individual, grown cancerous on occasion, has swollen to the morbid and malignant figure of irresponsible and grasping power — the "rugged individual" whom some still think of as American. But though the hope has been

betrayed and forgotten in one generation and another, the living seed remains: the seed remains and grows. It is this seed, this influence, this force, this force of revolution, which is the living thing in the Republic. Without it, the United States is so much land, so many people, such an accumulation of wealth. With it the United States is a stage upon the journey of mankind.

### 3

IT IS not, however, only because we have been wrong and fainthearted in our thinking that we shall be blamed by those who come after us. It is not only because we had no reason to subordinate our own purposes to the defeat of Russian purposes and thus to surrender to Russia the initiative we had always held before. We shall be blamed also because the negative and defensive attitude of mind to which we have committed the Republic is mistaken and mischievous and evil in itself. It is mistaken because it is incapable of achieving even its own negative purpose. It is mischievous because it has choked up the deep springs of the moral life of the nation. It is evil because it has deprived the world of the thing the world most needed — a positive and believable alternative to the grim choice the authoritarians hold before mankind.

The inadequacy of the position we have taken, even within its own narrow and negative purpose, is only too obvious. Neither Communism nor any other body of positive belief can be overcome in a period of world-wide dissatisfaction and unrest merely by denying it, or by offering, as a substitute, the world of things as they are. It can be fought only by facing it with a true alternative. And the true alternative to Communism is not the world of things as they are; nor, even more certainly, is it some other kind of authoritarianism.

The real choice is the choice between all forms of authoritarianism on the one side and, on the other, the dream of a whole and responsible human freedom. The real conflict, in other words, the underlying conflict, is not the struggle between the Kremlin and the West which the press associations report from day to day. The real conflict is the conflict between world reaction, which preaches submission to authority, whether of a state or a man or a party or a church, and world revolution which is still, however the various reactionaries may attempt to confuse the issue, the revolution of the individual, the revolution of the whole man.

Stated in terms of structure, the real alternatives are, at the one pole, a cellular, authoritarian society in which individual human beings may live their lives through the life of the society as a whole, and at the other, a world of individual men, whose relation to each other, in the freedom of their individuality, will create a society in which each can live as himself.

For the United States in such a situation to adopt a wholly negative policy aimed at the containment of Communism is not only to fail in the effort to defeat Communism but to miss the real American objective as well; and, worse still, to obstruct one form of authoritarian reaction to the advantage of others. Having unwisely elected to forgo our own purposes as a people, and to resist the purposes of the Russians, we have found ourselves, not once but many times in the past four years, befriending those who hate the revolution of the individual as violently as the Communists hate it. And not only abroad but here at home. For, by putting the hatred and fear of Russia first we have opened the sacred center of our lives, our most essential freedoms — the freedoms of mind and thought — to those among us who have always hated those freedoms and who know well how to use our fear of Russia as a mask to cover their disguised attacks. The spread of legalized thought control from points of infection in the Congress to state legislature after state legislature across the country is not the work of chance. It is the work of freedom-hating men. And we have laid the nation open to them by our fears.

## 4

THE second vice of the morbid and negative national opinion we have accepted in these years — its mischievous influence on our spiritual life — may be judged by other evidence, no less obvious to those who wish to see it. The soul of a people is the image it cherishes of itself; the aspect in which it sees itself against the past; the attributes to which its future conduct must respond. To destroy that image is to destroy, in a very real sense, the identity of the nation, for to destroy the image is to destroy the means by which the nation recognizes what it is and what it has to do. But the image a people holds of itself is created not by words alone or myths but by its actions. Unless the actions are appropriate to the image, the image is blurred. If the actions deny the image, the image is destroyed.

What is happening in the United States under the impact of the negative and defensive and often frightened opinion of these years is the falsification of the image the American people have long cherished of themselves as beginners and begetters, changers and challengers, creators and accomplishers. A people who have thought of themselves for a hundred and fifty years as having purposes of their own for the changing of the world cannot learn overnight to think of themselves as the resisters of another's purposes without beginning to wonder who they are. A people who have been real to themselves because they were *for* something cannot continue to be real to themselves when they find they are merely *against* something.

They begin to ask questions. Who are they then?

Are they still the journeying restless nation to which the future was a direction on a map and the duty of the son was to turn his back on his father's gateposts, or have they turned around and headed the other way? Are they still the new nation of discoverers and inventors who were never satisfied to leave things as they were but remade the world in every generation, or are they an old nation now of protectors and preservers whose passion is to keep things as they used to be? Are they still the young champions of freedom in the west who warned the Holy Alliance to leave the fires of revolutionary freedom alone to burn as they might on this continent, or have they joined with those who put the fires out?

The old words of freedom and revolution are still around, louder than ever, but somehow they are not the same. Revolution, which was once a word spoken with pride by every American who had the right to claim it, has become a word spoken with timidity and doubt and even loathing. And freedom which, in the old days, was something you *used* has now become something you *save* — something you put away and protect like your other possessions — like a deed or a bond in a bank. The true test of freedom is in its *use*. It has no other test. But freedom in this sick and melancholy time of ours has become, not a thing to use, but a thing to defend.

Even the word American has changed. The American once was a man bound to his country and his fellows by a common belief in something, not yet realized, that he loved. Now he is a man — or there are those who tell him he is a man — bound to his country and the rest by a common hatred of something looming that he fears.

What has been happening to the people of the United States in the last few years is something that can destroy the inward vitality of the nation if we let it go on. It is possible for writers of a certain journalistic mentality to look at the change and rejoice in it as proof that we have grown up as a country, that we have faced the harsh realities of life at last and that we have now become a great power. But a people which recognizes its unity only in its opposition to another people, which understands its purpose only in its resistance to another purpose, is not a people which has a unity or a purpose of its own. And it is not a great people whatever its power or its wealth. The great nations in the history of the world have been the nations which proposed, the nations which asserted, the nations which conceived. The United States was such a nation when it knew its mind and declared its belief and acted to create the world it wanted.

From the American point of view, then, the severest indictment of this generation of men and women will be the charge that we falsified the American image and thus undermined the spiritual integrity of the nation. But there will be other accusations

from other quarters and some of them will be even harsher than our own. There will be the judgment of the men of conscience and concern and honest mind in every country who, when all the arguments are in, write down the verdicts. And what they will say of us will certainly be this: that we had it in our power at a critical moment in history, when the whole future of humanity hung in balance, to present a true and hopeful alternative to the iron choice with which the world was faced and that we did not do it; that we did not do it even though the true alternative was the course to which our whole past and our entire tradition had committed us; that instead of doing it we built a wall against one half the evil but not against the other, and made the wall still higher by tearing down for its construction some of the dearest of our own beliefs.

## 5

IT WILL be difficult for us to answer that charge in whatever tribunal of the future such verdicts are debated. We can argue with great conviction that we had no choice, in the face of Russian threats of force and Russian conspiracies of fraud, but to arm ourselves and to resist. And it is true that we had no choice. But it is true also — and no one who remembers what has been said in the American press and the American Senate, in these days, can deny that it is true — that our policy in this situation was not merely to put ourselves in a position to resist and then go on about our American purpose: on the contrary our purpose and our policy became resistance.

Resistance to the Russians became an end and object in itself. And the result was a declaration of political bankruptcy such as few great nations in the course of history have ever confessed to. When Senators, urging recognition and aid for Franco, argued that that enemy of everything this republic is or has ever stood for deserved our friendship because he had fought the Communists and Russia, they said in effect that what we believe in is nothing, but what we hate is the gateway to our minds.

No one in his senses denies that Russian fraud, Russian lies, Russian militarism, Russian imperialism, Russian stupidity and fanaticism and greed left us no choice but to rearm. But no one in his senses can deny either that we made of this necessity the excuse for a failure to achieve a policy of our own. That failure may well turn out to have been the costliest blunder in our history.

What needed to be done in the years immediately following the second war is obvious even now. What needed to be done both for the purposes of peace and for the hope of human life was to break the impotent and issueless deadlock, the total spiritual impasse, between the two authoritarianisms of right and left by declaring, as alternative to them both, a free man's solution of the problems

of this time. To the shrill bat voices of those who cry out on this foreshore of history from the direction of Franco's Spain on the one side and Stalin's Moscow on the other that the world has no choice but to choose between them, and that peace between them is impossible — to these shrill and cynical and brutal voices there should have been a man's voice answering, like Ulysses' above Hell's offering of blood, to tell them both they lied.

The answer to the "inevitable choice" between the authoritarianisms with their heartless promise of a bigoted and bloody war is the answer implicit in the American proposition. The answer is that there is also another choice: a man's choice: one man's choice. What was needed was to *make* this answer. What was needed was to declare, with the full and reasoned conviction of a great people behind the declaration, that there was still a man's way out of the wreck of our disasters; that the revolution of the individual, far from being finished, had not yet begun; that the words of that revolution were not merely words but meanings also; that the meanings could be given and could be understood. *What was needed was a redeclaration of the revolution of the individual in terms which would have realistic meaning in this time.* Only one nation in the world was capable of that act and the nation was our own. And we did nothing. We built walls.

It will not be possible for us to argue, when the finger of time is leveled against us, that we did not see what needed to be done. The wisest and soberest and most realistic statesman of our generation warned us three years ago that the job we had to do — the job we had to do whether there were Communists around or not — was to make freedom a reality in the post-war world; and Henry L. Stimson did not speak alone.

Neither will it be possible for us to plead that there was nothing we *could* do — nothing we could do as a people: that a people cannot think itself through problems such as these: that the labor of redefining, of implementing, the revolution of the individual in a modern industrial society is a labor of such difficulty that only the technicians of industry and politics can accomplish it: that to ask an entire nation, by an act of choice, an act of will, to make freedom a reality under the conditions of contemporary life is to talk in rhetoric, not reason. It is true of course that the labor is difficult; nothing more so. It is true that it will require much technical skill, political, industrial, mechanical, and economic. But it is not true that it is the technical difficulty that stands in the way. What really stands in the way is the moral difficulty, the difficulty of choice, the difficulty which only the people, acting as a people, can remove.

No intelligent man believes that technical difficulties are insurmountable — and least of all in a country of great natural wealth, a high level of administrative and technological intelligence, and

large reserves of skilled labor. If the people of such a country were determined to hammer out a political and industrial and economic order in which individual men — all men as individuals — should be capable of living and working in dignity and freedom and self-respect with an adequate opportunity for the realization of their full potentialities as human beings the thing could be done. It makes a great deal of difference, as Bishop Berkeley observed, whether you put truth in the first place or in the second. It makes a great deal of difference whether you say that your objective is a free society but that you wish first to be prosperous, or first to be comfortable or first to be something else, or whether you say that *your objective is a free society*.

Certainly the political problems, difficult and delicate though they may be, are not insoluble. Some, like the control or the liquidation of monopolies which stand in the way of individual initiative, have a long history in this country. Others, like the struggle to liberate individuals from the degrading fear of unemployment or old age or sickness, are less familiar — at least in the United States. Still others, like the overriding question of the relation between individual freedom and the intervention of the state, have a meaning for our generation which they did not have for generations before. But only a man who did not wish to find an answer to questions such as these would argue that no answer can be found.

And what is true of the political difficulties is true also of the industrial. Even the greatest of the industrial obstacles to individual freedom — the mechanization of the machine-worker — could be removed if the freedom of the individual became the first business of society. There is no lack of mechanical inventiveness, as the proliferation of new machines and new machine methods demonstrates. Unwanted gadgets are produced with the most astonishing originality and brilliance. Machines and methods which would restore to the men who work them a measure of their former manhood, their former mastery, could be developed with equal skill if industry were determined to discover and produce them.

No, it is not the technical problem requiring special knowledge and unusual skill which stands in the way of the great alternative of freedom. It is not the failure of the engineers or the economists or the political philosophers to devise the new form of a free society which has robbed us of our initiative as a people. We cannot excuse or justify ourselves by complaining that no one has told us what to do. The real obstacle is the obstacle of ends, not means. The real obstacle is the obstacle of will, not method. Those who follow us and observe our failures will say we did not wish sufficiently for freedom. And they will say the truth.

Freedom — individual freedom — is always a hard choice. With us, in a world in which the old established order, weakened by the earthquakes of four centuries, has all but collapsed, it has become a choice which many men find it impossible to make. For to choose individual freedom now is to choose, not a common struggle against the masters of an ordered world, but a lonely journey, each man for himself, across the ruin and the rubble which that world has left. To choose the revolution of the individual now is to choose not revolutionary armies and open battles but singleness and duty in a broken world.

It is not remarkable, therefore, that many of those of our generation who should have been champions of the revolution of the individual — poets, writers, men whose first necessity is freedom — have been unable to accept the burden: have turned back instead to one or the other of the authoritarianisms where they can stretch the painted canvas tent of dogma between them and the empty sky where once the roofs were. But though it is possible to understand why many of the best have left us, and why great numbers of the American people have given up the lonely pursuit of liberty for the safer assurance of discipline and peace, it is not possible for that reason to forgive their desertion, or to justify it, or to forget that it is through them and their default that the world has lost the great and positive affirmation it so desperately needed.

We are at that point in our moral history as a people at which we have failed, for the first time in a moment of decision, to assert our moral purpose. We have not yet denied that purpose — the cock has not crowed for the second time — but we have failed to assert it. We have not yet changed the direction of our national life but we have lost our momentum, we have lost our initiative. We have not yet rejected our role as a revolutionary people moving with the great revolutionary current of history but we have ceased to move, we have begun to resist, to oppose. It does not require a prophet to see that we have come to a moment of critical decision — a decision which is none the less critical because it may be taken unaware.

If we do nothing, if we continue to stand where the forties have left us, we will have taken one decision, we will have ceased to be what we were and we will inevitably become something else, something very different, something the founders of the republic would not recognize and surely would not love. Only by action, only by moral action, only by moral action at the highest level — only by affirmative recommitment to the revolution of the individual which was the vital and creative impulse of our national life at the beginning of our history — only by these means can we regain ourselves.