

On Standing Alone

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A considerable number of workers and laid off workers in the United States believe, some of them fervently so, that Donald Trump will make things better for them. Neo-liberalism has hit them badly. They believe that Trump is 'a real man' courageously telling it like it is and not collapsing to the clap-trap that they are usually exposed to, i.e., the establishment twaddle. Trump will, or so he chants, make American great again if he becomes President. However, even if such people are a majority, even a vast majority, they may be mistaken. Trump, and Hillary Clinton as well, may be taking them down the garden path. Majorities can be wrong. Germans made a great mistake about Hitler in the only time they got to vote during his ascendancy. So the Americans who are enthusiastic about Trump will make a bad mistake if they get him placed in the White House. I am not saying Trump and Hitler are the same but there are some family resemblances. Many people have said, and not without reason, that Trump is a neo-fascist.

Majorities, even vast majorities, may be mistaken and sometimes tragically so. However, we should, of course, think twice before we stand alone. Think, brother and sister, that you might be mistaken. And we should, of course, apply this to ourselves as well. That probably at least seemingly never occurred to Donald Trump. We should indeed think twice before we stand alone or with a tiny minority that we take to be the enlightened ones or people we take to be the chosen people or with what Hillary Clinton takes the United States to be, namely 'the indispensable nation'.

I am not a fan of Elisabeth Anscombe or Peter Geach but I am fully on their side in their opposition to Oxford University giving an honorary degree to Harry Truman. He, we must not forget,

ordered the atomic bombing of Japan. This was something that should have been treated as a war crime with Truman as a war criminal. I am also disquieted by Obama's (2016) showing up at the site of the brutal mass destruction in Japan of both masses of people and of two cities without a whisper on his part of the horror that it created and without negation of claims of its alleged necessity. With Obama there was no acknowledgement that something not only unnecessary but also criminal had taken place caused by the country that Truman was the president of. It was not, to put it mildly, one of the U.S.A.'s finest moments. In doing what they did, war crimes on a monstrous scale were committed. An apology, which Obama did not give, wouldn't have been nearly sufficient. What was morally required was a public recognition that a monstrous crime had been committed by the United States with those bombings. Japan was plainly on its knees and the United States knew it. So it was plainly a war crime.

Sometimes both in science and in political and social affairs standing alone has advanced things. And sometimes at great cost to the stand-aloners. But that has not always been so. Sometimes stand-aloners have also been very mistaken. Sometimes plainly so and sometimes tragically so. Sometimes their mistakenness has been a matter of dogmatism or stupidity or both. But also sometimes of remarkable importance. However, the mistakes of going it alone are just publicly ignored, unless they are tragically mistaken. Otherwise the going-along-mistakenly are soon forgotten. They then are usually just not even remembered that there were mistaken. Franklin Roosevelt is remembered. Calvin Coolidge only barely. Only monstrously bad guys like Hitler or George Wallace are remembered. Not MacArthur or Ford.

What are our criteria for the sometimes goodness of going alone? We do not usually ask why of those who push things forward in these matters. We are only likely to note that things are going forward when what was done was striking. For example, Daniel Berrigan's actions were striking, Jeb Bush's were not. The defeated go-it-aloners are forgotten unless their situations are very contested

such as Woodrow Wilson's once were or as Henry Kissinger's were. But while there can be unsung poets, unnoticed cosmopolitans are hard to find.

Are all major politicians cosmopolitans? Certainly not. George W. Bush, John Diefenbaker, Stephen Harper, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan and now Donald Trump were or are not. Pierre Trudeau, Tommy Douglas, Adlai Stevenson, Woodrow Wilson, Henry Kissinger and Michael Ignatieff are or were. Though these cosmopolitans were or are of many different camps, they all are regarded as uncontroversially cosmopolitans. Even those who detested Pierre Trudeau or Henry Kissinger acknowledge that they were cosmopolitans. Among the Nazis, Speer and Schmidt were cosmopolitans, Hitler and Goering were not. Some cosmopolitans are to be approved of and some not. But the same thing obtains for non-cosmopolitan politicians. Eisenhower was one thing, Nixon another. But it does not obtain for anti-cosmopolitans, for example, Trump, Nixon, Chretien, Diefenbaker, Goering, Eisenhower or Reagan. They all were or are anti-cosmopolitans. Yet some might view Reagan or Eisenhower favorably while recognizing they were anything but cosmopolitan. Well people, even politicians, can be decent and still not be cosmopolitans. And some can be cosmopolitan and indecent. Kissinger, for example. Cosmopolitans come in many colors and shades of colors. They are all over the map. Sometimes to be welcomed, sometimes to be abhorred and sometimes in fact to be indifferent about. Henry Wallace (not George) and Kissinger to be abhorred, Ignatieff and Ford to be indifferent about.

History reveals that sometimes standing alone or nearly alone is the thing to be done. We should not just hunker down. Think of what it must have been to be in Germany under Hitler's reign or to be in East Germany with the Stasi vigorously in business. Can or even should we avoid some hunkering? Well, there one should be crafty.

On another note, standing-aloneness sometimes but not always has indeed marked progress. But certainly not invariably so. Sometimes it is foolish as some were by refusing to use seatbelts when

they were first required or indeed even now. Sometimes standing-aloneness is just ideological blindness, as when one refuses certain kinds of vaccinations.

But not infrequently standing-aloneness has been of great value to humankind both scientifically (Galileo) or politically (Chomsky). What we should be clear about is that sometimes standing-aloneness is justified and sometimes it is not. What is badly needed here is to have an understanding of when. Sometimes it is obvious but more often it is not. We need, if we can gain it, carefully and non-evasively thought out criteria here. Is there a special job for philosophers here? There are reasons to be skeptical of philosophy here but no reason to be skeptical about the urgency of getting some reasonable ascertainment as to when to and when not to stand alone. Can we perceptively or usefully generalize here? Well, it needs to be contextual.