

**A WORLD SPLIT APART:
COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS DELIVERED AT
HARVARD UNIVERSITY, JUNE 8, 1978
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We in America have long thought highly of ourselves. This feeling crested during the early Cold War, when most Americans believed that our “system,” our way of life, was superior to any other—especially Communism, but more broadly any based on any other values. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Prize winner, was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974 because he was too famous to be killed. We initially praised him; he vigorously attacked Communism, and we assumed that meant he endorsed our American system. But he disabused us of that assumption in this famous speech, given as the Harvard commencement speaker in 1978. The reaction of the American elite was frothing fury, and Solzhenitsyn was cast out from polite society. Examining his speech now, forty years later, we can see what Solzhenitsyn got right, and what he got wrong.

Looking over a list of Harvard commencement speakers, it has been twenty-five years since any speaker was not a person of the Left. (The last was Václav Havel, in 1995.) It is inconceivable, of course, that someone like Solzhenitsyn could be invited to give a commencement speech, or any speech, at Harvard today. He would be deplatformed, probably by violence, if he spoke to five people in a private talk on campus. If Harvard’s mandarins had known the content of his speech, he wouldn’t have been invited even in 1978. He was not known as a man of the Right until this speech, which is why he was allowed to give it.

The split to which Solzhenitsyn’s title refers isn’t the split between the Soviet Union and what was once known as the Free World. Rather, it is to humanity as a whole, which is not, and never will be, a unified group, much less one unified around Western, that is, American and European, premises and values. “Every ancient and deeply rooted self-contained culture . . . constitutes a self-contained world, full of riddles and surprise to Western thinking.” This basic truth was masked until very recently, because “modern Europe . . . seemed an overwhelming success, with no geographic limits.” Solzhenitsyn means colonialism,

global territorial expansion, rather than cultural influence, and notes that the process has gone entirely into reverse, both in terms of success and in terms of the changed Western attitude toward those it formerly conquered, which “often exhibits an excess of obsequiousness.”

Solzhenitsyn saw that the West’s core belief about political systems was “that all the vast regions of our planet should develop and mature to the level of contemporary Western systems, the best in theory and the most attractive in practice.” He rejects this. “But in fact such a conception is a fruit of Western incomprehension of the essence of other worlds. . . .” He further rejects the then-fashionable theory of convergence, the idea that the West and Communism were growing toward each other. And he also rejects that anybody else can, should, or will adopt the American system, because it is defective in many ways, and not appropriate for other countries, now or ever. No wonder in his memoir released last year, *Between Two Millstones*, covering his exile from 1974 to 1978, Solzhenitsyn notes that some in the audience started to hiss him at this point.

As we all know, this belief, that so-called liberal democracy was the “end of history,” a superior model for everyone, became nearly universal after Communism imploded in 1989. For three decades now the ruling classes of the West have tried, by one mechanism or another, to impose it on the rest of the world. In many places, most of all post-Communist countries, the ruling classes of the target countries have eagerly embraced, or at least mouthed embracing, liberal democracy. Where they have not, trillions of dollars and thousands of American lives have been spent to demonstrate why they must, if they know what is good for them. So it seems Solzhenitsyn was wrong, or would have seemed so ten years ago. But as the defects in liberal democracy, a flawed system that is neither democracy nor real freedom, become ever more obvious, and more and more people reject it, it has become evident that Solzhenitsyn was right that the American system is not desirable for others. It’s not even desirable for America.

But in his speech, he is just getting started. He piles on, explaining why America is defective as a model for others, and, in fact, just plain defective. First, he points out the loss of courage in the West (he says West, but as far as I can tell, from this point on he means America, just as when he says “East,” he means the Soviet Union). This is “particularly

noticeable among the ruling and intellectual elites" (that is, his audience), who exhibit "depression, passivity, and perplexity." Driving the spike home, he says "Must one point out that from ancient times a decline in courage has been considered the first symptom of the end?" Solzhenitsyn attributes this lack of courage to a surfeit of "well-being," by which he means that everyone has been guaranteed more than adequate material goods and, more importantly, "an almost unlimited freedom in the choice of pleasures." He believes that the decline in courage comes from an unwillingness to risk "this precious life . . . in defense of the common good." As fatal as it is, loss of courage is merely a manifestation of a deeper malady, an excessive, and legalistic, over-emphasis on individual rights. In America, "destructive and irresponsible freedom has been granted boundless space." The "abyss of human decadence" is supposedly limited by "the right not to look and not to accept." But this is a false defense; "Life organized legalistically has thus shown its inability to defend itself against the corrosion of evil." America pretends "man does not bear any evil within himself." This is untrue.

Looking back at 1978, it was a grim time. Jimmy Carter was President. Urban crime was rampant. The social pathologies that have eaten away our foundations—abortion, divorce, illegitimacy, pornography, wage stagnation, drugs, promiscuity—had already sunk their teeth into America, courtesy of the ruling class's acquiescence to Left demands. It was only a few years later, with Ronald Reagan, that the grim atmosphere receded. But the pathologies did not. They were merely glossed over, and they got worse, and worse, and worse, while we were told through the 1980s and 1990s that being able to buy more stuff every year made it OK, even if wages were stagnant for most people and the atomized neoliberalism of Gordon Gekko now emblematic of America, rather than the earlier achievements of Thomas Edison or the Apollo Program. It is perhaps no wonder that even under Reagan, in America Solzhenitsyn was a niche taste, since pointing out that America was continuing to rot from within, as he did, wasn't a popular position.

Among the few positive things Solzhenitsyn says of America is that that "The individual's independence from many types of state pressure has been guaranteed." This was true in 1978; it is mostly not true now. It is completely false in Europe, where, as Ryszard Legutko has brilliantly shown, "coercion to freedom" is the order of the day. The same thing is

happening here, and with an additional aspect that Solzhenitsyn could not foresee, that “woke capitalism” would be used to impose conformism to leftist demands, and to cement leftist power, across huge swathes of society. Convergence has happened after all, and then passed beyond the middle point; it is far less dangerous for a businessman or academic to point out today in Moscow than in New York that gender dysphoria is a mental illness or that homosexuals can’t actually marry.

Compounding his sins, Solzhenitsyn next attacks the press. We have to remember that among the aspects of America we were proudest of during the Cold War was our supposedly free press, which, although monolithically leftist already by the 1970s, unlike today still attempted to maintain some veneer of objectivity, and was not controlled by the state as under Communism. He correctly identifies that “the press has become the greatest power within the Western countries, exceeding that of the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary.” This matters because the press, and also academia, moves in lockstep, not much different than “the totalitarian East with its rigorously unified press.” “Fashionable trends of thought and ideas are fastidiously separated from those that are not fashionable. . . . Your scholars are free in the legal sense, but they are hemmed in by the idols of the prevailing fad.” Solzhenitsyn saw the cancer of political correctness long before everyone else. And then he wraps up this set of criticisms by saying, in essence, that they are just the tip of the iceberg, and he could add much, much more in the same vein, but he doesn’t have the time to go further.

Having rejected the West as a model, Solzhenitsyn is at pains to say that he does not believe that socialism is the answer; “socialism of any type and shade leads to a total destruction of the human spirit and to a leveling of mankind into death.” It has, certainly, shattered Russia. But Russia retains one thing that the West does not. The West is in a state of “spiritual exhaustion,” and Russia, despite its chains, has remained spiritually strong. “The complex and deadly crush of life [in Russia] has produced stronger, deeper, and more interesting personalities than those generated by standardized Western well-being.” Solzhenitsyn predicts, “The Western way of life is less and less likely to become the leading model,” because “observers from all the worlds of our planet” can see this Western spiritual exhaustion. As I say, for decades he was wrong in this prediction. The shiny things promised by America, backed

up by its coercion, caused many to adopt the Western model, including, in many aspects, Russia, where there has been little indication of widespread spiritual strength.

The West's spiritual exhaustion leads to fantasies, such as "that the impudent Cuban expeditions to Africa would best be stopped by special U.S. courtesy to Cuba," or that George Kennan's demand for unilateral disarmament by America was anything but hilarious to the masters of the Kremlin. He attacks the American antiwar movement for abandoning the people of Vietnam and Cambodia to suffering and genocide. "Do these convinced pacifists now hear the moans coming from there? Do they understand their responsibility today? Or do they prefer not to hear?" (Oddly from our perspective, Solzhenitsyn's examples of the effects of spiritual exhaustion are all in the foreign policy realm, rather than in the social realm that ultimately proved far more damaging to us.) Adding insult to injury, no doubt realizing his audience's reaction will be "Hey, we're not cowards, we won World War II," Solzhenitsyn says "Western democracy has not won any major war by itself; each time it shielded itself with an ally possessing a powerful land army, whose philosophy it did not question. In World War II against Hitler, instead of winning the conflict with its own forces, which would certainly have been sufficient, Western democracy raised up another enemy, one that would prove worse and more powerful, since Hitler had neither the resources nor the people, nor the ideas with broad appeal, nor such a large number of supporters in the West—a fifth column—as the Soviet Union possessed." I cannot even imagine the audience reaction to this, two sentences that kick out all the supports from some of the most cherished fantasies of America's ruling class, while implying they harbor traitors. Then he warns against allying with China to defeat the Soviet Union, because China would ultimately turn on America, and "America itself would fall victim to a Cambodia-style genocide."

This last, about China, now seems a little silly. At the time, with Nixon's opening to China, it probably seemed like a plausible future. But what seems not silly at all is the idea that we could fall victim to a Cambodia-style genocide. It's not imminent, perhaps, but there is no reason in principle why the American Left would not, if it gained full power, behave differently than Mao in the Cultural Revolution, or perhaps even like Pol Pot. Genocide, from the French Revolution onwards,

has characterized the response of all triumphant Left movements to challenge, or perceived challenge, from within. Why should America be any different, since our modern Left is no different in its essence from any of those previous Left movements? When, for example, last week Michelle Goldberg, a *New York Times* columnist and one of the most prominent and powerful liberals in the country, could write without comment from anyone, discussing yet another book that predicts demographic disaster for conservatives, "It sounds almost messianic: the Republican Party, that foul agglomeration of bigotry and avarice that has turned American politics into a dystopian farce, not just defeated but destroyed. The inexorable force of demography bringing us a new, enlightened political dispensation." This is the face of evil, glimpsed at an angle, as she hides her hands from us so we cannot see the knives she is grinding. It will be us or her.

Whatever we do with China, Solzhenitsyn says, America is losing the fight against Communism, and is paralyzed with numerous debilities. What can it do? It must regain its "loss of will power." "To defend oneself, one must also be ready to die; there is little such readiness in a society raised in the cult of material well-being." How did America come to this pass? Was there a wrong turn or a particular mistake? No. And here we get to the core of the matter:

The West kept advancing steadily in accordance with its proclaimed social intentions, hand in hand with a dazzling progress in technology. And all of a sudden it found itself in its present state of weakness. This means that the mistake must be at the root, at the very foundation of thought in modern times. I refer to the prevailing Western view of the world which was born in the Renaissance and has found political expression since the Age of Enlightenment. It became the basis for political and social doctrine and could be called rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy: the proclaimed and practiced autonomy of man from any higher force above him. . . . The [Enlightenment] way of thinking, which had proclaimed itself our guide, did not admit the existence of intrinsic evil in man, nor did it see any task higher than the attainment of happiness on earth. . . . Thus gaps were left open for evil, and its drafts blow freely today. Mere freedom per se does not in

the least solve all the problems of human life and even adds a number of new ones.

That is to say (as I also often say, so he must be right), the atomized freedom of the Enlightenment is the root of our problems. But this truth has only relatively recently become obvious, because at the time of the American Founding, which undeniably had Enlightenment roots, “freedom was given to the individual conditionally, in the assumption of his constant religious responsibility. Such was the heritage of the preceding one thousand years. Two hundred or even fifty years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual would be granted boundless freedom with no purpose, simply for the satisfaction of his whims. Subsequently, however, all such limitations were eroded everywhere in the West; a total emancipation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice.” The result is “moral poverty”—inevitable because of the Enlightenment, but only now appearing as the moral savings of Western society are exhausted.

At this point, I imagine the hissing was getting pretty loud in Solzhenitsyn’s audience. But was he finished? Oh no. Did he pivot to what his listeners expected, a disquisition on the evils of Communism? Oh no. His penultimate point was that, in fact, Communism and this Western, Enlightenment-driven, decayed morality were close to being the same thing. He quotes Karl Marx, “communism is naturalized humanism.” Both share a focus on Man and materialism. “The inter-relationship is such, moreover, that the current of materialism which is farthest to the left, and is hence the most consistent, always proves to be stronger, more attractive, and victorious.” Flogging his audience, Solzhenitsyn says “The Communist regime in the East could endure and grow due to the enthusiastic support from an enormous number of Western intellectuals who (feeling the kinship!) refused to see communism’s crimes, and when they could no longer do so, they tried to justify those crimes.” Given that many of those intellectuals were in the audience of twenty thousand people, grinding their teeth, this took a tremendous amount of courage on Solzhenitsyn’s part. And he did not do it blindly—he had been warned by those close to him what the

reaction to his speech would be, but like any good prophet, pushed forward anyway.

The only solution, he says, is to reject the “ossified formulas of the Enlightenment” and to “reappraise the scale of the usual human virtues.” We must see Man’s task on Earth as not the search for more and better goods, or, in a nod to the times, cheap gasoline, but “the fulfillment of a permanent, earnest duty so that one’s life journey may become above all an experience of moral growth: to leave life a better human being than one started it.” This turn, if accomplished, will be “a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.” Making and guiding this turn is what Solzhenitsyn bids the students of Harvard accomplish. Forty years later, we can agree they failed, utterly and completely. Not that they tried.

Thus, *A World Split Apart* presciently outlines a modern dividing line. It is not that between Left and Right. None of what Solzhenitsyn said has any relevance or resonance on the Left today, who think of such things, if they do, either roughly as they think of Zoroastrianism, or merely as a manifestation of whatever dog whistle they are currently using to coordinate their baying mobs organized around the ancient Left principle that their enemies must be erased. Rather, Solzhenitsyn deftly summarized, long ago, the dividing line emerging only now on the Right, exemplified by the battle recently joined between Sohrab Ahmari and David French. If, like cut-rate pseudo-conservatives such as Jonah Goldberg, you think the West in its current incarnation, and what led to it emerging from the Enlightenment, is awesome, vibrant rather than spiritually exhausted, you are fundamentally not just on a different page from Solzhenitsyn, and from reality, but in a different book, a book of fantasies. At crunch time, as French is fed to the dogs by the Left, shrieking “let’s have government viewpoint neutrality!”, and Ahmari, having just in time discovered that gun control is stupid, is pounding rounds downrange, it will be obvious to all that this is the only political divide that matters, the resolution of which will define the future of Man. Solzhenitsyn just saw it earlier than the rest of us.

Predictions, predictions. There is a fundamental problem that admirers of Solzhenitsyn have to address, the same problem that faces those devoted to any apocalyptic prophet. If the apocalypse doesn’t arrive, why, and what does that say about the prophet? To most, my

bizarre-sounding calls to gird for war no doubt sound unhinged. After all, the iPhone 11 was announced last week, and my new Peloton arrived today. (It's great, by the way.) What's not to like, and why should it end? My default response is that the apocalypse has merely been delayed; that the pathologies identified, and many not identified, are far worse than in 1978, and the pressure towards apocalypse correspondingly greater. It is like magma in a volcano. It's going to blow sometime. The problem is that this line of reasoning is indistinguishable from the Millerites of the 1830s, who, when the End Times did not arrive as foretold by their prophet, spun ever more tenuous excuses for his failure. To a non-believer, such claims are simply not convincing. They seem grasping exercises in self-aggrandizement.

There are a variety of answers to this, none completely satisfactory. I intend to write an entire piece on what is wrong with the modern world; showing that is, after all, a necessary precursor to being able to claim our entire system should be torn down and replaced wholesale with Foundationalism. In brief, life is not actually all that pleasant. For some, a narrow slice, the ruling class, who also control much of the public narrative, it is pleasant on the material plane. They have the latest gadgets, big houses, secure jobs. But even for this group, the pathologies of spiritual exhaustion are rampant, from psychological problems leading millions to chew Xanax like candy to destruction of the social fabric, all ultimately traceable to lack of meaning resulting from modernity. "Who am I?" is a question not even most of the ruling class can answer. And for most of the rest of society, the other eighty percent or so, life is a struggle, as shown by many things. The opioid epidemic, mass shootings, rising suicides, falling life expectancy, mental illness, rampant loneliness and atomization, and more, again all traceable to lack of meaning. For the bottom forty or fifty percent, there are cheap material goods, but there is also wage stagnation and constant fear, on top of the pathologies of meaning.

Nor is there any transcendent goal to bind us. What substitutes is consumerism, the ability to buy cheap Chinese crap, and Solzhenitsyn could not foresee the ability of consumerism to keep the magma in the volcano. Neither could he foresee other new tools used to keep the proles in line, such as video games. Young men seeking meaning, especially, who when at loose ends are the most dangerous to a society, find a

substitute, a poor substitute, in such games, combined with marijuana and other transitory pleasures that distract them from the aimlessness of their lives. For now, this suffices. But all this is to say that a person of the 1950s, seeing the world of today and fully informed, if given the choice to live in 2019, would probably choose to stay exactly where he was. We have advanced in time, and regressed in flourishing, yet we have never been forced to pay the piper as a whole society.

But we will, I think. Money, or things bought with money, cannot substitute for virtue. I suspect, as I have written elsewhere, a wealthy society will always find it very hard to be a virtuous society. Certainly, any society not organized around some form of collective meaning is going to fragment, sooner or later, and in our case, spectacularly so—probably just as soon as the ability of the ruling classes to pour the oil of consumerism and flashy distractions on the waters fails. My guess this will be when there is an economic crash, even if, perhaps, technology may allow the wheel to be spun forward (as depicted, quite well, in the book *Ready Player One*, though I suspect such immersive virtual reality will never arrive). I can't prove my dark predictions, but then, nobody can prove the future. There is always an element of faith, informed by reason, in any belief about what will happen. Place your bets, because someday soon, the croupier will call, "No more bets."