Influence of William Penn on International Relations

In the field of international relations William Penn's fame rests entirely upon his Essay Towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe. This remarkable document was first published in 1693, but Penn's whole life was in a sense a preparation for it. He was moved to write this essay as he says by contemplation of the "bloody tragedies" of the war then raging on the continent of Europe, but another and perhaps even more powerful moving cause was his deep-seated determination to do what he could to secure justice in the world.

He had suffered great injustice when little more than a youth at his famous trial for preaching in Grace Church Street, London. On this occasion the judges refused to accept the verdict of the jury and would not release Penn, although the jury had refused to convict him. He and his fellow members of the Society of Friends had suffered savage persecution for their religious principles and activities for many years. These experiences had built up in Penn's mind a hatred of injustice and a settled determination to devote his life to securing justice for all, especially for the poor and friendless.

When his opportunity came to found a great commonwealth in the New World, he put into effect his "holy experiment" and became, as Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1825, "the greatest lawgiver the world has produced; the first, either in ancient or modern times, who has laid the foundation of government in the pure and unadulterated principles of peace, of reason and of right; and in parallelism with whose institutions, to name the dreams of a Minos, or a Solon, or the military and monkish establishments of a Lycurgus, is truly an abandonment of all regard to the legitimate object of government, the happiness of man."

In later years Penn conceived the plan of extending his ideas of justice and the means of procuring it to nations. He recognized that
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are satisfied they should not do. Which brings me near to the point I have undertaken, and for the better understanding of which I have thus briefly treated of peace, justice, and government, as a necessary introduction, because the ways and methods by which peace is preserved in particular governments will help those readers most concerned in my proposal to conceive with what ease as well as advantage the peace of Europe might be procured and kept; which is the end designed by me, with all submission to those interested in this little treatise."

It is thus clear that William Penn’s mind moved on from a consideration of government as a necessary means of controlling the actions of men to a consideration of some sort of international government which should perform the same service for nations. The plan itself is compressed into 209 words, yet it contains in a few brief sentences the principles upon which the world must be organized if war is to be prevented; principles nowhere recognized so early as by William Penn and which are only now, after the lapse of two and a half centuries, under serious consideration by the principal powers of the world.

Penn’s plan naturally related only to European sovereignties as at the time of the publication of his essay they were the only powers which controlled the known world, with the exception of the Asiatic powers with which there was then little intercourse. He proposed that all European nations, including the Turks and Russians, nations excluded from other plans, should agree to meet together by deputies yearly or at least once in two or three years "in a general diet, estates, or parliament"; that this parliament should "establish rules of justice for sovereign princes to observe one to another," (or in more modern language lay down rules of international law); and that all differences arising between one sovereign and another which could not be settled by negotiation between them should be brought before this diet or parliament for decision.

One criticism which has been made of Penn’s plan is that he proposed that the same parliament should act both as a legislative body to establish rules of international law and also as a judicial body to decide disputes arising between the states. Subsequent proposals have rightly suggested that the two functions should be exercised by separate bodies; in other words, that there should be an international
court, as well as an international parliament. Penn’s failure to realize this is understandable in view of the fact that at that period of the world’s history the importance of separating legislative, executive and judicial powers was not fully recognized. In fact, at the present day, the Parliament of England has and exercises, either directly or through other agencies, all the powers of government, executive, legislative and judicial, and Penn, of course, was more familiar with the government of England than any other.

Postponing a discussion of some of the details which Penn suggested for the composition of the diet or parliament and other matters with which he briefly deals, note should be taken not only of what he proposed but of what he did not propose by this plan. He did not propose a super-state or federation which should have control over the domestic affairs of the nations sending delegates to the parliament. He made this clear in discussing a possible objection to his plan, namely, that the sovereignty of the states would be destroyed. He denied this and says it “is a mistake, for they remain as sovereign at home as ever they were. Neither their power over their people, nor the usual revenue they pay them, is diminished: it may be the war establishment may be reduced, which will indeed of course follow, or be better employed to the advantage of the public. So that the sovereignties are as they were, for none of them have now any sovereignty over one another: And if this be called a lessening of their power, it must be only because the great fish can no longer eat up the little ones, and that each sovereignty is equally defended from injuries, and disabled from committing them.” The legislative power of the parliament would be limited to laying down rules of international law. It is now well recognized that this is a proper function of an international body. Both of the Hague Conferences and the many treaties which have been concluded between various powers show that it is now the common practice of nations to agree upon rules of international law even though they may not always observe them.

Turning from the legislative to the judicial functions of the parliament or imperial diet, Penn proposed that all differences which cannot be decided by negotiation must be brought before this body for decision; “and that if any of the sovereignties that constitute these imperial states shall refuse to submit their claim or pretensions to
them, or to abide and perform the judgment thereof, and seek their remedy by arms, or delay their compliance beyond the time prefixed in their resolutions, all the other sovereignties, united as one strength, shall compel the submission and performance of the sentence, with damages to the suffering party, and charges to the sovereignties that obliged their submission. To be sure, Europe would quietly obtain the so much desired and needed peace to her harassed inhabitants; no sovereignty in Europe having the power and therefore cannot show the will to dispute the conclusion; and, consequently, peace would be procured and continued in Europe."

Here Penn's proposals probably go beyond what is reasonably possible even at this date, if they be construed to mean that compliance with a decree of the parliament should be enforced by the united strength of all the nations other than the one refusing obedience. It may be in another two and a half centuries that the world will be ready to agree to this. But at the present time, with the great diversity of interests which there are among the nations of the world, multiplied in number many times since Penn's day, it is highly improbable that any powerful nation would agree to perform every decree which should be made by an international body composed mainly of representatives of other states. This will become possible only after an international court or council has thoroughly established a reputation for making impartial decisions of a judicial nature unaffected by national considerations. However, it may be that Penn did not intend the use of force to compel compliance with a decree, for he inserts as a condition of the use of force by the other powers that the recalcitrant nation shall have sought a remedy by arms. He does say that to delay compliance beyond the time fixed in the resolutions should be an occasion for the exercise of force, but the sequence of sentences suggests that when he referred to a delay in compliance he had reference to such delay as indicated that a resort to arms was intended.

Whatever may have been his intentions in this respect, as to which his language is not altogether clear, Penn was on solid ground when he proposed that any state which should seek a "remedy by arms" should be restrained by the other sovereignties. If this and only this is what he intended, his proposal is much more in accord with his introductory remarks to the effect that he is seeking to extend to
sovereignties the same restraints which are exercised against individuals by government. The government of a state does not compel citizens to submit their disputes to courts. If a citizen prefers to allow his wrong or his supposed wrong to remain unredressed, he is not compelled to seek a remedy in court. If, however, he undertakes to use force on his own behalf, criminal law prevents him from doing so. Extending this principle to nations would restrain them from a resort to war for the purpose of redressing a real or fancied wrong or for aggressive or other criminal purpose. This much at least Penn did clearly propose: that no nation should be permitted to go to war to enforce its "claim or pretension," but should be prevented from doing so by the combined strength of all the others, and at the same time he offered a means whereby such "claim or pretension" could be passed upon by the parliament which he proposed should be assembled. So interpreted this scheme is very close to the plans which are now under consideration by responsible statesmen to prevent the recurrence of the destruction of human life and devastation of property which the world is now experiencing. The great end will be accomplished if the principal nations of the world will now agree that no state shall be permitted to take up arms in support of its "claim or pretension," but if it seeks a decision, that it must do so by peaceful means.

Penn also anticipated to a remarkable degree, the necessity for the limitation of armaments in the world he envisioned. In answer to a possible objection to his plan he says:

Nor is it to be thought that any one will keep up such an army after such an empire is on foot, which may hazard the safety of the rest. However, if it be seen requisite, the question may be asked, by order of the sovereign states, why such a one either raises or keeps up a formidable body of troops, and be obliged forthwith to reform or reduce them; lest any one, by keeping up a great body of troops, should surprise a neighbour. But a small force in every other sovereignty, as it is capable or accustomed to maintain, will certainly prevent that danger, and vanquish any such fear.

What could be more directly in point, in the consideration of plans for world security today? It is now realized as never before that the limitation and control of the manufacture of armaments, particularly such as would enable one nation to make a sudden murderous attack upon another, must be a part of any plan to preserve the peace. The relief which the overburdened taxpayers would experience, from the reduction of armaments, requires no comment.
The remainder of Penn's essay relates to what may be called details of his plan and objections which might be urged against it. Most of these need not detain us, but it is interesting to note that he suggested, as he modestly says "solely for example's sake," the weight or number of votes which the various states of Europe should have in the parliament. He based his judgment in this respect upon what he called the "value of the territory" of each nation. He thus apparently visualized that the states should have unequal votes in the parliament. There is no question that while all states should be recognized and were recognized by Penn as being equal before the law, they cannot have the same weight in an international parliament or conference, differing as they do so widely in size and power. Penn's suggestions would not be acceptable today, there having been such great changes in the strength of the various nations to which he refers, but the principle is sound and will no doubt be adopted in some form in whatever plans may be made for the prevention of war in the future.

The question has been raised whether Penn's plan for keeping the peace in Europe was consistent with his principles as a member of the Society of Friends in view of the fact that he clearly proposed the use of the combined strength of all other powers against the one seeking a remedy by arms. It is, of course, apparent without discussion that the only way the strength of the other powers could be combined against the one seeking to support a claim or pretension by force of arms would be to use arms in opposition. However, it is clear that Penn's conception of the function of the nations in this respect is purely that of restraining evil doers. He makes this clear by drawing the analogy between national and international governments. The Society of Friends has never questioned the propriety of the restraint of criminals, recognizing that this is necessary for the maintenance of order and internal peace, although it has criticized the methods used as, for example, capital punishment. However, even if capital punishment be abolished, the restraint of evil doers sometimes, and, in fact, not infrequently, causes life to be taken.

Penn, who was an intensely practical man and fully familiar with the operations of government, recognized this and he applied the same principle to international relations. Hating war, recognizing its
essential wrongness, and desiring above all things its abolition, he yet fully recognized that the preservation of order in the world and the prevention of war required the use of force. Whether his views in all respects met the approval of the members of his Society is not altogether clear. Some writers have thought that he was criticized for proposing the use of force to resist force, and others have even argued that this was not his intention as disclosed in his essay. On the latter point, however, there can be no real doubt for he not only speaks of preventing by force any nation from seeking a remedy by arms, but in many places he draws the comparison between the government of a state and an international government in such a way as to show beyond question that he believed the use of force which he proposed was similar to that coercion which a government would use in the restraint or punishment of criminals.

William Penn was no internationalist in the sense that he desired to abolish independent nations. This is clear from the statement made in his conclusion: “I confess I have the passion to wish heartily that the honour of proposing and effecting so great and good a design might be owing to England, of all the countries in Europe.” In spite of the great injustice he and the members of the Society of which he was a member had suffered in England, he had a great love for his native country and clearly had no wish to see it submerged in an international association.

What effect did Penn’s essay have upon a developing world opinion for the avoidance of war? It is difficult to say. It often happens when a pioneer in a field of thought advances a proposal that his ideas are adopted and used by later writers or statesmen without acknowledgment. This may have been the case with William Penn. There is no doubt that his proposals were widely read at the time they were issued; they were criticized as impracticable, but the thoughts which he expressed have appeared in many writings since then and the principles he advocated are and must be the basis of the plans which are now being made in the effort to prevent the recurrence of war in the future.

William Penn was truly a pioneer. Philosophers and statesmen had written about the desirability of some method of preventing warfare before Penn’s time, but hitherto no plan had been published which, without interfering with the political organization
of existing states, proposed a representative assembly to lay down rules of international law and to decide disputes, and a method for preventing any state from going to war to gain its own purposes.

The most famous plan before Penn’s time, to which he refers modestly as having been a source of inspiration to him, was the so-called “Grand Design” of Henry IV of France. Whether this was really proposed by Henry or by his minister Sully after Henry’s death is uncertain. The “Grand Design” was, however, political in character. It provided for redrawing the frontiers of Europe with the specific intent of reducing the power of Austria. Its apparent purpose was to redistribute the territories of Europe to suit Henry (or Sully) and then to preserve the status quo. This was to be done by forming a federation of the states which were to be members of the great design. The government of the federation was to be vested in a senate and means were to be provided for furnishing the expenses of the international government and for the maintenance of a large army through contributions by the different states. Russia and Turkey were not included and the use of force to conquer states or territories not members of the federation was apparently contemplated.

This plan, while it may have aroused Penn’s interest in the subject, was very different from his. Essentially political in character the “Grand Design,” while containing provisions for preserving the peace, aimed at a peace which would be solely in the interest of the federation. Its members would be subordinated to the federation which had executive and legislative power. Disputes between the members of the federation could be settled by it but no court was provided for. The scheme was never put into effect and clearly could not have been without a great war. It would be impracticable even at the present time as such a federation of the world or even of the states of Europe is not now reasonably possible. No powerful nation, not even our own, would consent to become subject to the directions of such a super-state.

On the other hand, William Penn’s plan, not interfering with the territories or possessions of individual states, was directed to the one object of providing a means of settling disputes between them and of preventing any state from commencing a war. It was therefore much more flexible than Henry’s scheme, would not require a war to put it into effect and, through the broad powers which
Penn proposed for his parliament or diet of nations, disputes of all kinds could be settled as reason and justice seemed to require. Penn's plan carried special weight because it was proposed by a man who was a prominent member of a Society which condemned war altogether and who was famous as the founder of Pennsylvania, in which the principles of peace, justice, liberty and democracy were given full play. It was also clearly apparent that it was written by one who had no political purpose to serve and who desired nothing else than to bring to an end the "bloody tragedies" of war.

William Penn's interest in the adjustment of relations between states or colonies is further indicated by his scheme for a general union of the American colonies which he presented in February, 1696, to the Board of Trade in England. He proposed that the American colonies should appoint deputies who should meet once a year or oftener if necessary, that their business should be "to hear and adjust all matters of complaint or difference between province and province," that they should provide ways and means for protecting themselves against public enemies and "that in times of war the King's High Commissioner" should "be general or chief commander of the several quotas upon service against the common enemy as he shall be advised for the good and benefit of the whole." This is the first proposal, so far as is known, of a federation of all the American colonies, and it is further interesting as showing beyond any question that at that time Penn realized the necessity for the use of force for self-defense and in the preservation of the peace.

That Penn's essay had much influence upon subsequent thinking on this great and controversial subject may be inferred from the fact that every plan since suggested for avoidance of war contains some of the proposals he made. Most of these plans have now been discarded as impractical, but Penn's stands out, not only as the first of its kind but as exactly fitting the needs of today.

Philadelphia

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