The POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IDEAS OF ST. AUGUSTINE

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happy and unfortunate man is he who by successfully evading the punishment that is due him continues unchecked his life of crime and wrongdoing.

In conducting wars and in peacetime relations with other states, rulers and military leaders should fulfill and guard the agreements, treaties, and conventions made with their friends and with their enemies. "For, when faith is pledged, it is to be kept even with the enemy against whom the war is waged, how much more with the friend for whom the battle is fought!" This fidelity to promises and engagements is a sacred obligation. Yet, with his usual realistic insight into human affairs, Augustine realizes that a situation may occur in which a state is compelled to make the agonizing choice between fidelity to its treaties and engagements and its own self-preservation. He discusses at length the bitter fate of the Saguntines in Spain who, during the Second Punic War, were destroyed because of their fidelity to their treaty of alliance with the Romans. After a siege of eight or nine months, "this opulent but ill-fated city, dear as it was to its own state and to Rome, was taken, and subjected to treatment which one cannot read, much less narrate, without horror." To escape falling into the hands of Hannibal, those Saguntines who had survived siege and famine killed their dependents and then threw themselves into the flames of a massive funeral pyre. Thus it was shown that the pagan gods could not or would not interfere to preserve a city closely allied to the Romans and completely faithful to the obligations of that alliance, although these gods were the guarantors and mediators of the treaty.

When Augustine returns to this subject in Book XXII of The City of God, he notes that according to Cicero's argument in Book III of the De Republica, a state will not engage in a war except for honor or for safety. Death for a state is not natural, since a state should be so constituted as to be eternal. "But when a state is destroyed, obliterated, annihilated, it is as if (to compare great things with small) this whole world perished and collapsed." Augustine agrees with Cicero's view that a state must engage in war if it is necessary in order to preserve its existence and to prevent destruction—salus populi suprema lex. However, he then goes on to ask whether the Saguntines acted correctly when they chose to perish as a nation rather than to break faith with the Romans. He does not say that their decision was wrong; indeed, he clearly admires them for the nobility of their choice. He insists, however, that a state may have to face the dilemma of choosing between fidelity to its obligations and safety and preservation, and that one or the other of two terrible evils—breaking faith or self-destruction—may have to be accepted.

But I do not see how they could follow the advice of Cicero, who tells us that no war is to be undertaken save for safety or for honour; neither does he say which of these two is to be preferred, if a case should occur in which the one could not be preserved without the loss of the other. For manifestly, if the Saguntines chose safety, they must break faith; if they kept faith, they must reject safety; as also it fell out.

In this world of sin, imperfection, and suffering, men and states are sometimes confronted with dreadful choices, and they cannot refuse to choose because they do not like either of the alternatives. If a statesman feels—and he may well do so—that his primary duty is to secure the existence and safety of the state whose affairs he is directing, he may have to act in a manner that is morally objectionable, in ways in which he would never think of acting in his personal relations. There is only one city which is never forced to make this terrible choice between safety and keeping faith, and that is the City of God. "But the safety of the city of God is such that it can be retained, or rather ac-
required, by faith and with faith; but if faith be abandoned, no one can attain it.” 44

Although Augustine recognizes the advantages that have been the result of the far-flung Roman Empire and of the *paes Romana* that it has imposed upon the Mediterranean world, he is well aware of the enormous costs of building that Empire and of the ultimately self-defeating character of imperialist expansion. He sees the diversity of men’s languages as a symbol and also as a cause of the conflicts and misunderstandings that divide the human race. The division of mankind into nations with different and mutually unintelligible languages was God’s punishment for the arrogance and presumption of those who sought to build the Tower of Babel. The punishment was altogether appropriate.

As the tongue is the instrument of domination, in it pride was punished; so that man, who would not understand God when He issued His commands, should be misunderstood when he himself gave orders. Thus was that conspiracy disbanded, for each man retired from those he could not understand, and associated with those whose speech was intelligible; and the nations were divided according to their languages, and scattered over the earth as seemed good to God, who accomplished this in ways hidden from and incomprehensible to us.46

Ever since that time, this diversity of language has been a grave impediment to understanding and communication among men.

For if two men, each ignorant of the other’s language, meet, and are not compelled to pass, but, on the contrary, to remain in company, dumb animals, though of different species, would more easily hold intercourse than they, human beings though they be. For their common nature is no help to friendliness when they are prevented by diversity of language from conveying their sentiments to one another; so that a man would more readily hold intercourse with his dog than with a foreigner.46

Rome has endeavored to overcome this diversity of languages and the other grounds for strife among the nations by imposing upon the subject peoples “not only her yoke, but her language, as a bond of peace, so that interpreters, far from being scarce, are numberless.” 47 The order and unity thus provided by the Empire have been real goods, “but how many great wars, how much slaughter and bloodshed, have provided this unity!” 48

In spite of the great extent of the Empire there have always remained beyond its borders hostile nations against whom wars have had—and still have—to be waged. But even if we suppose that there were no peoples left outside the Empire, it would not follow that peace would reign throughout the world. “The very extent of the empire itself has produced wars of a more obnoxious description—social and civil wars—and with these the whole race has been agitated, either by the actual conflict or by the fear of a renewed outbreak.” 49 After the destruction of Rome’s great rival, Carthage, the removal of fear and anxiety led, as Scipio had feared, to a decline in the morals of the Romans and to a weakening of the bonds of internal concord so that seditions and bloody civil wars followed in rapid succession. At the time of Pompey’s conquest of the Jews,

Rome had already subdued Africa and Greece, and ruled extensively in other parts of the world also, and yet, as if unable to bear her own weight, had, in a manner, broken herself by her own size. For indeed she had come to grave domestic seditions, and from that to social wars, and by and by to civil wars, and had enfeebled and worn herself out so much, that the changed state of the republic in which she should be governed by kings, was now imminent.50

The final term of this process of internal conflict and civil war was the collapse of the republic and of the liberty of the Romans, and the rise of dictators, such as Pompey, Marius, and
orders run counter to the clear commandments of God. Also, he completely ignores the problem of classifying and evaluating different forms of government, as well as the question of how a given system of rule can be changed so as to make it more just or more satisfactory. The worst possible government is far better than anarchy, and in any case it must be endured as a divine punishment for men's sins. Revolution and rebellion, which would destroy the framework of peace and order, would serve only to compound the evil and the suffering.

In addition to his fundamental insight into the essential function of the political order—maintaining peace by the application of coercion—Augustine also gives us penetrating analyses of the complexities of political action and of the pitfalls of ignorance, pride, and cruelty inevitably associated with the exercise of political power. No one who has read Augustine carefully can fail to be impressed by the ambiguities and limitations inherent in political action, and by the enormously difficult tasks and the almost insoluble moral dilemmas that confront the ruler at every turn.

As he surveyed the collapse of ancient institutions and the rising tide of destruction in the world around him, which led many of his contemporaries to the conclusion that the end of the world was at hand, Augustine's keen sense of the perpetual power of human pride and sinfulness compelled him to reject any hope that the future would bring enduring peace or progress. Both his theological beliefs and his experience and observation of men's actions in an age of disorder enforced upon him an attitude of pessimistic realism, which would not allow him to sentimentalize or evade the darker aspects of social and political life.

In our own century, when, once more, men have been compelled to recognize the almost incredible brutalities of which human beings are capable, especially when they struggle for political power and military domination, it is no accident that