

WALTER LIPPMANN  
ON  
ONCE MORE THE TANKS



The Russian tanks in Prague are especially unbearable because most of us had allowed ourselves to believe that this sort of bullying would not happen again. Hitler is dead and Stalin is dead and the men in the Kremlin now would presumably know better than to try again to rule a country with tanks. So we are asking ourselves whether nothing changes and that as always might makes right and the mighty are always the same.

I think this is almost, but not quite, the whole truth about the relations between a small country and a very big one. Since Woodrow Wilson it has not been the fashion to say, though it seems to me to be a fundamental truth, that any country lying within the orbit of a much stronger country does not have and cannot have unlimited independence. It cannot do whatever it chooses, and it cannot count upon the military support of any other big power. The Czechs have been taking gallant measures to establish a liberal society. But they have known from the beginning that neither the United States nor NATO nor any other power would help them in a military way. Nobody outside the orbit would come in to stop the tanks.

The official dictum in the State Department is that we do not admit the existence of spheres of influence. But in Prague as in Budapest a decade ago, we have in fact been unable to give the victim anything more than verbal support.

**Two Boxers.** The other side of the matter is that a big country is in military terms unchallengeable inside its sphere of influence. It is, however, far from omnipotent outside of and beyond its sphere of influence. Vietnam, for example, is outside both the American and Russian orbit of power. The Russians have been able to help the Vietnamese, but not decisively, and we have not been able to defeat them. Russia and America have been like two boxers fighting at arms' length. As a result, the war is protracted and indecisive.

One of the cardinal themes of the twentieth century has been how the relations between big powers and the smaller ones within their orbit could be made tolerable, decent and humane. There is no answer to the question if we begin by denying that the big power has vital interests within its sphere of

influence. Thus it matters very much to us what happens in the Caribbean, to Russia what happens in Central Europe, to the Chinese what happens in Eastern Asia. The central problem is how much independence the great power will tolerate, at what level a Good Neighbor Policy will take the place of an imperial policy. The drama of Czechoslovakia is that it disclosed a dominant faction in the Russian state which cannot believe that any liberalization is tolerable in Eastern Europe, which is so vital to the security of the Soviet Union.

**Two Neighbors.** There is a twilight zone between the tolerable and the intolerable in the orbit of a great power. That is why we tolerate Castro's Cuba. We have taken no such chances in Guatemala or the Dominican Republic. The Russians have learned to tolerate Tito and perhaps the Rumanians, but Dubcek, when liberalization was obviously contagious, was too much for them.

We know that it takes two good neighbors to work a Good Neighbor Policy. Cuba, for example, was intolerable when it threatened to become a military base against the United States. The hard-liners in the Kremlin almost certainly thought that Czechoslovakia was on the way to some kind of tacit alliance with West Germany and NATO and the United States. In the very wicked world in which unhappily we live, the lambs have to be very good before the lions will lie down with them.

This rather pessimistic view of the nature of things is, I think, tempered by the fact that if the smaller power resists, it becomes virtually impossible for the great power to impose its will. It is not true that the small and the poorly armed are helpless and defenseless. If they are willing to face the tanks and the bombers, the great power cannot win.

The Russians have not finally learned this truth in Eastern Europe. But they are beginning to learn it, I think, I believe, I hope. We have not learned the full lesson in Eastern Asia, but the unanimity with which even the fiercest hawks refused to step into the Czech trouble is proof that we are beginning to learn it.

