Control Freaks

Robert Conquest traces the history of power plays

Robert Conquest is one of the century's leading commentators on Soviet communism, in such pathbreaking books as The Great Terror *(a 1968 account of Stalin's purges) and* Harvest of Sorrow *(the definitive 1986 chronicle of the collectivization of agriculture in Ukraine). His most recent book,* Reflections on a Ravaged Century, *looks at the role utopian centralizers have played in contemporary history.*

In addition to his many non-fiction works, Conquest, a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, has brought out six books of poetry and one of literary criticism, as well as a science fiction novel, a verse translation of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Prussian Nights, *and a novel co-authored with Kingsley Amis.*

Conquest served in the British infantry in World War II and thereafter in Britain's Diplomatic Service. Now a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution, he recently spoke with TAE *editor in chief Karl Zinsmeister.*

TAE: Where does the centralizing impulse in politics—the desire to have one small group tell everyone else how to live—come from?

CONQUEST: Well, there's a general tendency to increase your power at the center against the interests of everybody else. History shows that unless there is a check on this and society is somehow balanced, centralization will take place. The tendency of bureaucracy to get larger and larger is with us everywhere.

TAE: What are the factors that cause one society to go farther in that direction than another?

CONQUEST: The only societies that have done well in resisting this have been pluralist societies where different interests have kept each other in check, so no central figure could force himself on others. In a few places like England and Switzerland, freer social orders grew up where several different and not readily compatible forces prevented any of the others from getting an upper hand. It was sometimes a close call but in England monopolization of power was repeatedly defeated, so decentralist traditions survived. During the English Civil War, for example, local judges remained, administering ordinary law, while the armies marched to and fro across the country.

This is the model put forth by America's founding fathers, with their promulgation of competing interests and checks and balances. The reason they didn't want pure democracy was that they wanted to prevent any particular section of society from ruling over others.

TAE: Have Catholic and Protestant nations developed differently in this area?

CONQUEST: The mere fact that Protestantism split the church up into smaller parts did provide a notion of pluralism. If the guy in the next city is under a different regime from me, maybe variations are possible. But at the same time, the Swiss developed democracy in the Catholic cantons as much as in the Protestant ones; so this seems not to be a definitive factor.

TAE: Historically, what have been the effective restraints on a centralization of power?

CONQUEST: Well, here we go back to religions and traditions. Back in Saxon times in England, 1500 years ago, there was a balance of power between the centralized state and the many minor nobles. Even representatives of the serfs were included in meetings where decisions were taken. The so-called kings were mainly in charge of war. That sort of arrangement was much less common or non-existent over most of Europe.

One important reason for this is because in England there was always a good deal of economic pluralism, even in the countryside. Lots of people produced stuffs for the market. Unlike in other parts of Europe, land was not divided amongst all the children into tiny, non-economic sizes—instead, one son took it all—and farmers maintained some economic leverage.

There was economic mobility in England. There wasn't a peasantry in the way there was in, say, France. So economic factors were critical in maintaining English freedoms.

TAE: Does communism represent the apogee of political and economic centralism?

CONQUEST: Yes. Communism controlled society not simply in practice but also in theory and principle. Communists didn't just come together and turn into tyrants, they decided they *had* to be tyrants. That is the contrary tradition to the English and Swiss.

It comes not just from an impulse to dominate but also from the semi-rational ideas of revolutionary France, where the notion arose that "we thinkers know how to run society, and anybody who doesn't agree with us is an enemy of the people"—not an opponent of me, the tyrant, but an enemy of the people.

TAE: With communism dead, some think the threat of utopian centralization is gone. But people also thought that after the French Jacobins were defeated, yet 100 years later the Russian Bolsheviks brought the same ideas back to life. Will we have another recurrence of tyrannical centralism 100 years after Bolshevism?

CONQUEST: I don't think we can make predictions. But I think a slightly dangerous tendency in the West is the notion that "democracy" means anything which you vote for the state to do, the state can then pursue without limits.

Rather than a Bolshevik-type revolution, what endangers us now is an evolution toward centralism by slow degrees. We're getting a bit of that in Europe today, where the European Union bureaucracy in Brussels is absolutely frightful and intervening in all sorts of tiny matters—the size of strawberries, the quality of beer, and so on. Not that it matters particularly if you're told strawberries must be a certain size, but it's a very bad principle to let get established.

TAE: Do people become numb to the threat of a slow, creeping centralization?

CONQUEST: Yes. We are not really conscious of it, partly because a large section of the intelligentsia insists "these ideas are right, all we need now is to have government enforce them." This is a very primitive notion, a precritical notion.

This is a serious problem in academe, more so than in the population as a whole. The population as a whole may not have very clear ideas, but they have much better instincts. Although they want the state to do things, they don't want to be interfered with.

But the state is doing more than it should everywhere. Until quite recently economists said the state should handle perhaps 25 or 30 percent of the economy at the most. It's well above that these days in many countries.

TAE: What is your answer to someone who stands up today and says, "Communism was done in by its brutality, the foolishness with which it was implemented by the Russians and others, but there is nothing wrong with communist theory"?

CONQUEST: It doesn't mean anything, because you can't put communism into effect *except* by terror. How can people accept a monopolistic idea, a monopolistic method, total centralization, except by terror? Which is why every single time it's been tried, everywhere, it has been oppressive. From Cambodia to Ethiopia, from industrialized countries like Czechoslovakia to agricultural nations like Vietnam, it can only be put into effect that way.

Molotov was once asked whether, if Lenin had lived, the collectivizations in Russia would have been accomplished with the same brutality Stalin employed. And he said yes, it couldn't have been done otherwise, without the same casualties, the same losses.

TAE: How thoroughgoing was Soviet centralization?

CONQUEST: They were very centralized on anything to do with thought or action which affected political leadership in any way. People went to jail or were shot simply for expressing an opinion that the government wasn't good.

The Soviets also had total control of the educational system. They enforced what amounts to a frightful mental terror. Even people like the dissident intellectual Andrei Sakharov said they had great difficulty breaking free from communist thought, because there was no alternative.

And everything in the economy was under state rule, though that control wasn't quite so well worked out—because if you were a director of a factory you couldn't fulfill your assigned plan *without* cheating.

In the long run, it turned out not to work, partly because the old ideas of independent thought were still there in a suspended way. (Although they got rid of large numbers of independent thinkers, they couldn't completely crush the independent mind.) And partly because the system just didn't function; it wasn't competent.

The irony is that in decentralized America, things like pure food laws were much better enforced than in Russia. Though the Soviet government was much more omnipotent, it couldn't manage those sorts of interventions. One reason is that the more bureaucratic and centralized the state becomes, the more inefficient and corrupt it is. This absolutely hobbled the Soviets. Similar problems are now arising in Europe, where massive corruption in the European Union bureaucracy has just been exposed. That's another accompaniment to modern centralization.

One reason England and Norway, for example, don't like continental Europe is the habit of, say, the French of tolerating a big intrusive government by simply failing to obey its rulings.

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There's a research paper just out that documents the scope of the underground economy in various countries. In America, where government is minimal and people basically obey it, underground activity runs at only about 10 percent of the economy. But in the countries of southern Europe, 30 to 40 percent of activity is illegal, because they're used to ignoring governments who try to enforce all sorts of things they shouldn't be involved in.

TAE: One of the great horrors of twentieth-century centralizations was Stalin's attempt to collectivize Ukrainian agricultural production in the 1930s. What is your latest estimate of the total resulting deaths?

CONQUEST: Something like 7 million people starved to death. Adding in people who were shot and so forth, around 10 million died.

TAE: How much of this was an intentional act of genocide on Stalin's part against small landholders who might have been politically dangerous to him, and how much was an unexpected byproduct of the collapse of agricultural incentives because the Communists didn't understand economics?

CONQUEST: Well, they didn't understand economics. The Marxists thought that they could rule everything, set prices, and order production. When they decided to bring in socialism, a planned economy, and collective agriculture, they were determined to enforce these theories no matter what.

So the government actually *produced* the famine—they took grain away from people who had it, and who then starved. Their method was to say that the crop must be as big as it used to be because we're now better organized under state planning; so we'll take away our share—which turned out to be all of it.

But the Communists were also acting to enforce their own power. The idea was that so long as the peasant was able to produce and sell, he wasn't really under control. Their insistence on the total centralization of power required the destruction of the independent farmer.

If they *hadn't* brutally collectivized agriculture, I think the Russians would have quickly drifted into something like Gorbachevite Communism that would have collapsed and faded away. The Soviet government was in grave danger of collapsing in 1930, '31, '32.

So in one sense, the collectivizers were right. While their methods didn't work, their regime would have rapidly disappeared without those methods. But it was a dreadful miscalculation, ultimately.

TAE: If all of this hadn't taken place in Russia, where would the great communist experiment have been launched?

CONQUEST: Well, it might not have been launched at all. It was bad luck that this group of fanatics took control of a big country. For they then used their organizational powers, their financial means, to establish groups all over the world to spread their movement.

And that made an enormous difference. Before the Bolshevik influence, there were countries which were evolving from what we call a backward state, but they weren't evolving in the communist direction. Places like Tunisia and Turkey weren't developing by centralizing power. But then Leninism came along and, partly through great financial aid from Moscow, became popular with local intellectuals. And soon, centralizing, dictating, Leninist parties were multiplying all around the world.

Without the existence of the Soviet regime it would have all gone differently. The Soviets were a very bad influence on Africa, Asia, and South America, not to mention Europe.

TAE: Writers and painters and artists—who tend to be extreme individualists in their own lives—have often in this century been very friendly to centralizing schemes. Why?

CONQUEST: Yes, Picasso, George Bernard Shaw, hundreds of others. It's quite astonishing, really. And you might have added scientists. There were plenty of scientists who supported Stalinism.

Many of these people were not educated in reality, in knowledge, in practical sense. And they were safe. If you're a communist apologist living in America or Britain, it's not going to do you any harm; so you can show off to your heart's content about how alienated you are from capitalism. The later thing was for academics to blast capitalism like hell, while living high off of it. Not directly, of course—professors don't do the direct "greed" stuff, but they are all the more sponges for living off it indirectly.

TAE: Of course, on the flip side, Russians and others suffering under oppressive governments often produced great literature. Can experiencing repression produce powerful art?

CONQUEST: Well, Solzhenitsyn, for example, was a product of the pressure on him. But he was also a product of the pressure within him—of what he had absorbed of the great previous Russian writings.

TAE: One of the most energetic opponents of government centralization in recent decades was British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. As someone familiar with British politics, tell us where you believe she was most and least successful in breaking up state power.

CONQUEST: Well, she broke up the state monopolies like the airlines and phone companies and so forth, though not entirely successfully. She also broke the very bad effects of the union movement, which was wrecking the economy. And she made it clear by winning all those elections that there wasn't any future for socialism. Socialism is now dead in England. Even the Labour Party doesn't profess it.

But the new danger is corporationism, as it were, where the state joins in cozy alliances with big businesses. This is part of the slower drift toward bureaucratic centralism, which is harder to warn against than outright socialism, though also dangerous. It's happening in China today, where they've moved away from the worst aspects of communism, but not toward what one would call a very wonderful society.

TAE: What causes the public to react sometimes, but not others, when central governments usurp private rights and prerogatives?

CONQUEST: Well, in England when the Conservatives and

Labour were fighting over nationalizations and denationalizations of the steel industry, a poll was taken that showed only 10 percent of the public on either side had the slightest interest in the subject. There was no popular feeling for nationalization or against it. Many of these battles will have to be fought out by the small number of people who care enough and are informed enough to take note. The public will often be oblivious.

Or sometimes worse than oblivious. When Britain set up its National Health Service, that was extremely popular, and to some extent still is. America has this same problem. There is an appeal to big central programs that promise to give you something. Everybody wants more money spent on his health, and then the bureaucrats come in to plan, and organize, and reorganize.

TAE: Though Russia is no longer burdened with communism, it is burdened with a populace used to having not only their health care but also their jobs, their houses, and everything else handed to them. When people have been patronized in this way for their whole lives, how do they learn to be independent and self-supporting again?

CONQUEST: Well, despite official claims, the Soviet health service was terrible. It was riddled with corruption and "personal arrangements"—"I'll get your boy into school if you treat us," that sort of thing. So it took a certain amount of entrepreneurial panache to navigate even that system.

In fact, that's what keeps Russia going today, the underground economy, the informal economy, in health care and all other areas. But, of course, getting used to not going to the state for things when you've been a serf of the state for 70 years is hard going. It's going to be a hell of an adjustment.

TAE: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has proposed a radical solution for having Russians take responsibility for their own affairs. He would devolve power to a very local level, to villages and so forth. Is this type of decentralization quixotic, or is it forseeable in a modern nation?

CONQUEST: The whole question this raises is the idea of "subsidiarity"—which was Thomas Aquinas's word, I think—the idea that everything which doesn't *have* to be done centrally ought to be handled lower down by a more indigenous authority: the county instead of the state, the family instead of the county, and so forth. The larger state should have to prove that its involvement is absolutely necessary before it takes on something centrally. That hasn't been fully observed anywhere, but it's similar to the American principle of federalism.

I think it's perfectly true that the more the villages can decide for themselves the better. But not to the extent of forming independent units where their militia end up fighting other villages.

TAE: Given that the record of state economic planning and communism is so unambiguously awful, why did communism's collapse not stain more of its defenders in the West?

CONQUEST: The whole question of communism became a matter, in America particularly, of partisan fervor. All anti-communists were called McCarthyites, and so forth. Many of those defending the Soviets in this country were fighting not so much *for* Russia as *against* their own citizens who took the opposite view. Something similar took place in France.

That feud continues, particularly in academe, though the terrain being fought over has shifted. There are as many academics today who are fanatically wrong about other subjects as there were academics who were wrong on communism.

TAE: But why have persons proven to have been calamitously mistaken been allowed to wriggle away? For instance, in a recent issue we quoted Lester Thurow—dean of MIT's *business* school, for heaven's sake—writing in 1989: "Can economic command significantly accelerate the growth process? The remarkable performance of the Soviet Union suggests it can. Today it is a country whose economic achievements bear comparison with those of the United States." Why isn't this fellow laughed out of court?

CONQUEST: These people were had for suckers. They believed figures and images and statements about the Soviet Union that did not accord with reality. This was also enforced in the Soviet Union. You had to believe the place was a happy, well fed, and so forth. Arthur Koestler writes about how astonished he was in the 1930s when he found himself in Kharkov, Ukraine, and read in all the papers of wonderful achievements in economics, gymnastics, citizens as happy as kings. Yet in that very city if there was any electricity two days a week you were lucky, and people were dying of starvation within five miles. He said there were two different Soviet Unions, the real one and the one put forward in the West. Often the unreal one was backed by huge amounts of impressive, phony statistics.

It takes two to sell the Brooklyn Bridge; you need both a crook and a sucker. The apologists in this country swallowed the rubbish about communism because they didn't like the people putting forth the opposite view. Their minds were blanked out by ideological opposition to what they viewed as injustices at home.

There's a Tennyson poem where some hysteric sees a fly on the windowpane and mistakes it for a huge bull in the field. He's focusing incorrectly. These incidents raise questions about the intelligence of the so-called intelligentsia. It's a problem by no means solved.

TAE: It's strange that those who were so forgiving toward the Soviet Union are tremendously critical toward their own society.

CONQUEST: Oh, yes. Yet they also believe any guff about the progressive wonders of Nigeria or Cuba.

Some years ago, someone at the London School of Economics got a lot of students to sign a petition on behalf of an oppressed province in South America which didn't even exist. The signers professed to "fully support the poor suffering workers of so-and-so."

It's amusing. But also tragic.