

CONTRIBUTOR BIO

ANDREW SMITH, 21, political science student. Right now I'm busy with my senior project, a paper on naturalism in legal philosophy. I enjoy words, music, and not eating meat (vegetarian since fifth grade). Who knows what the future holds. With any luck it will involve at least two of these things and unfold here in SLO County, which, no matter where I go, will always be my home.

RICHELIEU AND WORLD TRENDS

Andrew Smith

In some ways it makes little sense to compare Cardinal Richelieu's *Political Testament* and the National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*. The former is a theologically-inspired political manifesto in the form of a handbook (written for King Louis XIII of France); the latter is a report, an analysis of contemporary politics and economics and a forecast for these over the next two decades. Further complicating matters is that centuries have passed since Richelieu wrote *Political Testament*: our international world is very different from the European theater he knew. What could such a work have to tell us about modern politics? If one reads Richelieu literally, importing his seventeenth-century beliefs into the twenty-first century, I think the answer is "very little." So I propose a compromise. I believe that if by comparing these works one hopes to learn something relevant about governance or political theory, comparing them position-by-position is misguided: *Global Trends*' dispassion does not lend itself to this approach, and Richelieu's thought is too dated for serious consideration. Even so, I believe that the authors of *Global Trends* are not without goals or values, though generally these must be inferred, and I believe that Richelieu is far from being so dogmatic that a modern reader can't extract the essence of his thought and imagine—were he here to

pass judgment—what a modern Richelieu would think of our world. (Note that from now on I will use “GT” in place of “the authors of *Global Trends*.”)

For Richelieu, the ideal society is a society governed in accordance with God’s will. It is therefore static: a society governed in accordance with God’s will could change only for the worse. This alone puts him at odds with GT, for whom change is not just acceptable but inevitable. Consider these illustrative differences: Richelieu believes that most people should be kept illiterate; GT predict the rise of an educated middle class and take for granted the ubiquity of advanced information technology. Richelieu favors absolute monarchy; GT predict a nonstate world (one of several possibilities) in which networks of private interests predominate and nation-states that succeed are those that cooperate with emerging nonstate coalitions. Some preliminary points: First, this proves beyond all doubt that Richelieu’s historical views are incompatible with the modern world (consider that I need Internet access to do this assignment), which is why I believe that comparing them with the futures sketched in *Global Trends* is a waste of time: we learn nothing because Richelieu cannot help seeming an archaic mumpsimus. Second, if GT has any overarching value or goal, it is human health and well-being. And here, I think, lies the chief difference between these works’ visions for governance and for humanity. GT see human well-being as interchangeable with the empirical reality of widespread human health and happiness—that is, the subjective experience of leading a life relatively free of fear and danger, having time and opportunities to pursue one’s interests, and generally enjoying substantial autonomy in a free society.

For Richelieu, though it might be going too far to say that all such concerns are trivial, well-being is more collective and abstract. Under a literal reading of *Political Testament*, well-being is social and political conformity with God’s plan for mankind. And even under a reading of the work’s bare principles, well-being similarly refers to the status of state and society. The assumption seems to be that this leads to “enough” empirical well-being, which in turn leads to broad social stability. Order, stability, and the integrity of the state are what matter to Richelieu, which is why he not only tolerates but accepts as a matter of course social and political inequality that today many would find repellent at best. Most of his recommendations exacerbate and enshrine inequality in ways that GT disapprove, whose work propounds very different ideas about the role of government, the nature of the state, and therefore about how the state should pursue its national interest.

To understand Richelieu's thought one must appreciate that he is fundamentally a hierarchical thinker. At the top of the great chain of being (a Christian cosmological hierarchy widely accepted during Richelieu's time) is God, "the first essential." Beneath God are his angels, and beneath angels are Earth's highest political authorities: kings. Here is where Richelieu drastically departs from GT and from modern thought generally. That there should be a king is for Richelieu self-evident. The king's role is to preserve this hierarchy, understood to constitute part of God's divine plan. Just as man is ordained to reign over the beetle, so is the king ordained to reign over all other men. (Below the king there is some fuzziness. It is clear that Richelieu believes further distinctions of rank are part of the great chain of being and that they must be acknowledged, but it isn't clear whether he believes that each rank present under the France of Louis XIII was necessary as such or whether these were merely the ranks that naturally arose under reasonably competent leadership.) Richelieu sees kings as stewards of God's earthly kingdom, which, to be kept pristine, needs rule by an authority who commands total obedience. But Richelieu's thinking is as practical as it is theological. In his view, such an arrangement leads to a stable society, and in some sense he is undoubtedly correct. During times of peace and under competent, compassionate rule, it would have been true that most people's basic needs were met. In a minimal sense, then, even by modern standards, empirical well-being would have been achieved.

Another important feature of Richelieu's thought is that he understands society to comprise three spheres: the clergy, the nobility, and the common people. I prefer *spheres* to *classes* because the former more deeply appreciates Richelieu's system, which is not merely vertical but pyramidal. Although the relationship between individual members of each sphere is vertical (the nobleman invariably outranks the commoner), the spheres themselves are equal as institutions, for each is necessary in a healthy society: The clergy are society's librarians, its guardians of forbidden knowledge (which for Richelieu is most knowledge); the church organizes and unifies society, prescribing the daily ritual on which general order depends. The nobles keep the common people in line and raise armies in times of war, serving as the king's local administrators. And the common people are the backbone of society, its laborers and producers. The need to regulate these spheres is why society needs a king, a rational overseer who ensures that each sphere fulfills its role and that no sphere dominates or dilutes the others. What one finds in reading Richelieu is that this striving for

balance is consistently what motivates his thinking and what all his advice has in common, from how the king comports himself at dinner to how he manages the realm: nobles should be given latitude to pursue their ambitions, but they must not be allowed to terrorize the peasantry. The common people should be educated, but only to the level that their jobs require; too much education would make them unruly and unproductive. This harmony of the spheres is what Richelieu means by “public good,” which he cites as the king’s highest priority. Hence, maintaining order and stability is the national interest. And for the king to promote the public good effectively, he needs absolute authority, which explains Richelieu’s other theme: quashing challenges to the same. Artists who injure the king’s reputation should be censored. Nobles who defy him should be stripped of their titles. Dueling should be outlawed because it preempts the king’s justice. Even *Political Testament’s* seemingly apolitical sections exemplify this theme—its chapters on how the king should conduct himself, what to look for in advisors and so on. Because the king’s authority depends on his being perceived as strong, competent, and masterful, nothing can be allowed to challenge these perceptions. It all fits: the sober and rational king commands trust and respect, both of which ensure compliance; the king’s advisors should never publicly question his judgment, which, after all, would tarnish his image as a leader.

Generally, then, Richelieu places little emphasis on the individual and great emphasis on the collective—on institutional balance and integrity. For Richelieu the public good is paramount: no other principle is sacred. Yet so eager is he to subordinate legalism, procedure, and private interests that his work often invites contradictions, the first being religion’s limited practical role in his system. To be sure, invoking religion is a brilliant way to justify his unobvious claim that society needs an absolute king; but this is by no means necessary—an interpretation borne out by Richelieu’s policies as France’s Chief Minister. Far from being a precisian of orthodoxy and scripture, Richelieu was an uncompromising pragmatist and Machiavellian statesman. Suspected criminals were punished promptly and terribly if accused of subversion or espionage—due process was a luxury on Richelieu’s watch. And pragmatism explains his grudging tolerance of French Protestants, his wariness of a church monopoly on education, and his stormy relationship with Rome. After Richelieu’s death Pope Urban VIII is reputed to have said, “If there is a God, the cardinal will

have much to answer for; if there is not, then he was a great man”.⁸¹ Nor did Richelieu practice servile deference to the crown. *Political Testament* reveals him to be staunchly—even condescendingly—technocratic. Despite the king’s unsurpassed rank, in practice Richelieu sees the king’s role as purely executive, the responsibilities of policymaking and statecraft falling to expert advisors. This is no contradiction for Richelieu, whose priority is the good of the realm. Religion and king are but parts—albeit essential ones—of the means to that end.

Today most reject Richelieu’s theological premise, as do GT, to whom his hierarchical assumptions would seem laughably impertinent. Nor then can GT accept his stability-as-the-state’s-*raison d’état* approach, which makes sense as he pursued it only given these assumptions and given a greatly simplified arena of world politics. We live in a world incalculably more complex than the world Richelieu knew; GT’s goal is responding to the challenges posed by this complexity in a way that encourages human thriving. Whereas Richelieu sought to use the power of the state to contain and manage society, GT have no choice but to accept forces beyond the state’s control. GT and Richelieu have different ideas about the role of the state because they have different ideas about what the state is. For Richelieu, the state is the alpha and omega; for GT, it is merely another player in a grand political and economic arena. Probably because of the modern world’s overwhelming complexity, GT do not single out a particular kind of state or society as ideal, though they prefer the democratic to the authoritarian: democratic societies have better records of empirical well-being.

GT identify four megatrends that they believe will profoundly shape the next two decades. These are individual empowerment: better education and healthcare, widely available new technology, and growth of the middle class; demographic change: an aging population, population growth, and urbanization; diffusion of power; and greater diminishing natural resources: “demand for food, water, and energy will grow by 35, 40, and 50 percent respectively.”⁸²

⁸¹ Conrad Black, “Disdain Greets U.S. Shilly-Shallying on Syria,” *The New York Sun*, June 21, 2012, accessed November 19, 2013.

⁸² National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds* (Washington, D.C., 2012), iv.

Other than positing the significance of these trends, GT make few unqualified claims. Those they do submit are bold and portentous. They predict that by 2030 no country will reign supreme. Asia's economy—particularly China's—will grow as America's share of the world economy declines, and countries in Africa and other underdeveloped regions will begin to catch up with the developed world. In short, Global Trends predicts economic equilibrium. Though some countries will still be appreciably wealthier than others, the gap will no longer be politically relevant as it is today. And perhaps even more controversially, they predict that private interests will rise and the nation-state will fall, though by no means to the point of insignificance. Countries that don't adapt to this reality will lag economically.

GT also identify several “game-changers,” possible events or developments that will shape the course of history should they occur. Some of these include democratization in China, global economic crisis following collapse of the Eurozone, and American isolationism. Submitting these is GT's way of admitting that they can't predict with much specificity what will happen in each region of the globe, what role any given country will play, or how whatever happens will affect world politics. Instead they allow for possibilities, offering four possible futures. One, “fusion,” involves collaboration between China and the United States, which will be the dominant powers, and whose cooperation GT believe would be “the most plausible ‘best case’”.⁸³ Others range from American and European isolationism to the previously mentioned nonstate world. In all possible futures, what GT emphasize is that individual empowerment—though it will bring challenges ranging from new forms of terrorism to greater strain on already limited resources—and global cooperation are desirable and inevitable: “Technological innovation—rooted in expanded exchanges and joint international efforts—is critical to the world staying ahead of the rising financial and resource constraints that would accompany a rabid boost in prosperity”.⁸⁴

In short, Global Trends expects an international world even more complex than the world of 2013, itself immeasurably more complex than seventeenth-century France. Nowhere in Richelieu's work is there a discussion of resources and energy; scarcity wasn't a problem then. And as with empirical well-being generally, he was probably safe to assume that under competent rule they

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

never would be. But even hypothetical scarcity in Richelieu's time is different from the scarcity contemplated in *Global Trends*. For the first time in human history, scarcity will mean not just immediate unavailability but absolute unavailability—e.g.: Earth's oil reserves will eventually be depleted, whatever our various political and economic arrangements. So we are left with two questions: (1) How would Richelieu respond to problems such as a crisis of scarcity? and (2) How would Richelieu govern if he were politically active today? The second is the easier. Richelieu easily slips into the role of modern conservative, the inveterate realist and champion of so-called national interest. Given the primacy of the state in his system, doubtless he would emphasize national defense. But generally he is far more concerned about threats within the state than without. He would restrict speech, especially speech critical of the government or potentially damaging to national security. He would be deeply wary of corporations and other powerful private interests, seeing them as competitors of the state, which alone is qualified to make policy. But in most areas Richelieu would be unacceptably concessive in the eyes of his historical self. Democracy would have to be tolerated, as would corporations and publicly available Internet, both of which would have been unthinkable in Richelieu's France even if theoretically they could have existed. Modern Richelieu would have to settle for superior intelligence-gathering, which of course would come at the expense of individual privacy. And here again, we are back to Richelieu's collective notion of well-being. Richelieu would see thorough surveillance as necessary for the public good, as a way to prevent subversion and social upheaval. GT and I see this thinking as narrow-minded. Policies that so elevate the importance of the state as an abstraction ignore urgent problems that no lone state can hope to solve. Survival in the twenty-first century will require pooled expertise from a vast array of fields and disciplines; only our collective acumen can save us from ourselves. This means that people need to be free and educated, and it means GT are right to see individual empowerment as the national interest. No king, counsel, cabinet or president, however informed, can solve the challenges before us.

Not appreciating this is Richelieu's great failure. Even his updated counterpart succumbs to nation-state myopia. Simply put, he offers no solutions because he is wedded to ideology rather than outcome, to the intangible (or, less charitably, incoherent) "national interest" of scholars and intriguers rather than the actual welfare of human beings. Nation-state fetishism leaves little

place for considered government responses to transnational corporations or desertification or climate change, all of which exist on a global scale and all of which will require international efforts of unprecedented scope and nuance to solve their accompanying problems. In view of this, GT's definition of national interest is vastly superior. Global problems require cooperative global solutions, and for GT the goal of every nation should be working toward these solutions. Everyone with a car contributes to the problem of climate change. If Washington decides to build a nuclear power plant near the Canadian border, not only Americans will be affected. I think one of the great failures and tragedies of human history is our species' fixation on local identity, whether family, clan, race, club, or nation. In the end we are all human beings, or even more generally living creatures. Like GT, I am a firm believer in the paramountcy of empirical well-being. We each get one life on one shared world. I think we should try to make the best of them.

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