

The Practice of Realpolitik: Two Approaches

DURING THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, a new generation of conservative leaders emerged who were proud of being practitioners of *Realpolitik*, the “politics of reality.” Two of the most prominent were Louis Napoleon of France and Otto von Bismarck of Prussia. The first selection is taken from Louis Napoleon’s proclamation to the French people in 1851, asking them to approve his actions after his coup d’état on December 1, 1851. The second and third selections are excerpts from Bismarck’s famous “iron and blood” speech to a committee of the Prussian Reichstag and his 1888 speech to the German Reichstag on Germany’s need for military preparation.

Louis Napoleon, Proclamation to the People, 1851

Frenchmen! The present situation cannot last much longer. Each passing day increases the danger to the country. The [National] Assembly, which ought to be the firmest supporter of order, has become a center of conspiracies. . . . It attacks the authority that I hold directly from the people; it encourages all evil passions; it jeopardizes the peace of France: I have dissolved it and I make the whole people judge between it and me. . . .

I therefore make a loyal appeal to the whole nation, and I say to you: If you wish to continue this state of uneasiness which degrades us and makes our future uncertain, choose another in my place, for I no longer wish an authority which is powerless to do good, makes me responsible for acts I cannot prevent, and chains me to the helm when I see the vessel speeding toward the abyss. . . .

Persuaded that the instability of authority and the preponderance of a single Assembly are permanent causes of trouble and discord, I submit to you the following fundamental bases of a constitution which the Assemblies will develop later.

1. A responsible chief elected for ten years.
2. Ministers dependent upon the executive power alone.
3. A Council of State composed of the most distinguished men to prepare the laws and discuss them before the legislative body.
4. A legislative body to discuss and vote the laws, elected by universal [male] suffrage.

This system, created by the First Consul [Napoleon I] at the beginning of the century, has already given France calm and prosperity; it will guarantee them to her again.

Such is my profound conviction. If you share it, declare that fact by your votes. If, on the contrary, you prefer a government without force, monarchical or republican, borrowed from I know not what past or from which chimerical future, reply in the negative. . . .

If I do not obtain a majority of your votes, I shall then convoke a new assembly, and I shall resign to it the mandate that I received from you. But if you believe that the cause of

which my name is the symbol, that is, France regenerated by the revolution of 1789 and organized by the Emperor, is forever yours, proclaim it by sanctioning the powers that I ask from you. Then France and Europe will be saved from anarchy, obstacles will be removed, rivalries will disappear, for all will respect the decree of Providence in the decision of the people.

Bismarck, Speech to the Prussian Reichstag, 1862

It is true that we can hardly escape complications in Germany, although we do not seek them. Germany does not look to Prussia’s liberalism, but to her power. The south German States—Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden—would like to indulge in liberalism, and because of that no one will assign Prussia’s role to them! Prussia must collect her forces and hold them in reserve for an opportune moment, which has already come and gone several times. Since the Treaty of Vienna, our frontiers have not been favorably designed for a healthy body politic. Not by speeches and majorities will the great questions of the day be decided—that was the mistake of 1848 and 1849—but by iron and blood.

Bismarck, Speech to the German Reichstag, 1888

When I say that it is our duty to endeavor to be ready at all times and for all emergencies, I imply that we must make greater exertions than other people for the same purpose, because of our geographical position. We are situated in the heart of Europe, and have at least three fronts open to an attack. France has only her eastern, and Russia only her western frontier where they may be attacked. We are also more exposed to the dangers of a coalition than any other nation, as is proved by the whole development of history, by our geographical position, and the lesser degree of cohesiveness, which until now has characterized the German nation in comparison with others. God has placed us where we are prevented, thanks to our neighbors, from growing lazy and dull. He has placed by our side the most warlike and restless of all nations, the French, and He has permitted warlike inclinations to grow strong in Russia, where formerly they existed to a lesser degree. Thus we are given the spur, so to speak, from both sides, and are compelled to exertions which we should perhaps not be making otherwise.

Q Why did Louis Napoleon’s argument to the French people have such a strong popular appeal? What are the similarities in the practice of Realpolitik by these two leaders? What are the noticeable differences in their approaches? Are the similarities more important than the differences? Why or why not? What can you learn about Realpolitik from these three selections?

Sources: Louis Napoleon, Proclamation to the People, 1851. From *The Constitutions and Other Select Documents Illustrative of the History of France 1789–1907*, by Frank Maloy Anderson (Minneapolis: H. W. Wilson, 1904). Bismarck, Speech to the Prussian Reichstag, 1862. From Louis L. Snyder, *DOCUMENTS OF GERMAN HISTORY*, Rutgers University Press, 1958, p. 202. Bismarck, Speech to the German Reichstag, 1888. From Brian Tierney and Joan Scott, eds., *WESTERN SOCIETIES: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY*, Vol. 2 (Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 366.