

stand as an unfortunate precedent for others.

The recent debate on supplying AWACS to Saudi Arabia is another example of our inability to consider Middle East questions on their merits. There was a strong case to be made against supplying AWACS to Saudi Arabia, but not one that was based on the opposition of Israel, which every day presses for more weapons. Surely the time has come for the United States to put *all* parties on notice that they must seek peace through realistic negotiations, not through constant rounds of purchasing ever more sophisticated arms.

Serious suggestions about reexamining American policy are met by a torrent of criticism and abuse. Those who are Arabists are, by definition, suspect. Government officials who express the need for careful consideration of the views of all parties to the dispute are subjects of vicious whispering campaigns, some officially inspired. An effort by Flora Lewis of the *New York Times* to question the policies of the prime minister of Israel was met by "mostly irate, and in some cases shrilly insulting and even menacing" letters. Many of the letter writers, according to Ms. Lewis, took the position that "any criticism of Israeli policy or leadership automatically makes one pro-P.L.O., anti-Israel or even anti-Semite."

My own experience is not too dissimilar to Ms. Lewis's. But it has an equally menacing counterpart in the reactions of those who are indeed anti-Semitic and look upon honest efforts to weigh the merits of all parties as support for their own repugnant views. Frankly, the embrace of supporters sometimes can be as uncomfortable and as deadly as the wrath of critics.

At the risk of both wrath and deadly embrace I suggest that the time has come for Americans to open their ears and minds to the full range of views on the issues of the Middle East. Perhaps ours is the correct position, even when we find ourselves consistently at odds with our European allies or with an overwhelming majority of United Nations members. In that case, we should proceed with our position. But surely we should recognize that the very distance between our views and others' makes it incumbent upon us to reexamine our position and be alert to the views of others and to new ideas.

In this regard it cannot be said that we have a full picture unless we are at least willing to talk with all parties. Specifically, we must talk with the Palestine Liberation Organization. We must do so directly lest, in addition to continuing to antagonize, we fall victim to that old parlor game whereby views are distorted as they pass through various intermediaries. Among other things, direct contact will give us an opportunity to say directly that we are committed to the existence and security of Israel and also to demonstrate that our commitment to Israel is not inconsistent with a just settlement of the question of Palestinian nationalism.

Of this I am certain: Neither the Palestinian people nor their views will go away because the United States refuses to listen to them. And the problems of the Middle East cannot be resolved without them.

Our conduct now has important implications for the future. When there were people in Portugal and Iran seeking a just solution to the situations in those countries, the United States cut itself off, refusing to listen to or even have contacts with them. When change did come in both countries, the United States was without the necessary contacts in either one. In both cases the refusal of the U.S. to listen was cited as evidence of our support for those who opposed peaceful change.

There should be no misunderstanding of what such conversations mean. Conversation does not mean love, affection, or sympathy. Conversation does not mean agreement with policies or actions. Conversation does not mean recognition or status.

The time is also ripe for greater debate in this country on United States policy in the Middle East. At present there is very little. At four-year intervals and during other important election campaigns we have no debate at all. It is ironic that at this point Israel frequently debates American policy more vigorously than does the United States.

Finally, our debate must be free of the straitjacket of simplistic anticommunism. With a few exceptions there is a great deal of sympathy in the Middle East for the only real objective of Secretary of State Haig's strategic consensus: the right of the people of the Mideast to live free and at peace. But there is little prospect of the United States gaining much support among Arabs as long as the Palestinian question remains unresolved. On the contrary, many in the area believe that the failure to resolve the Palestinian question is what promotes Soviet aims, that our one-sided approach places in jeopardy the very objective we and they share.

My observations deal with procedural matters rather than substantive ones — though admittedly there are substantive implications. But such procedural changes are essential if we are to build on the outstanding achievements of Camp David and assist a troubled area in finding peace.

Donald F. McHenry was United States Representative to the United Nations in the last administration.

EXCURSUS 2

Thomas Land on A BENEVOLENT INTERVENTION

The United Nations University has deployed its considerable international resources to help the Chinese Academy of Sciences confront an ecological disaster of yet unassessed proportions arising from the conversion to agricultural land of vast stretches of marshlands in the northeast. Their first joint move is the establishment of a series of agro-ecosystems research and monitoring stations in the area. The project may well lead to greater consultation between the universities and the agricultural and development planners of many countries.

The joint program has been worked out after a visit to Heilongjiang Province — an area producing a sixth of China's total commercial wheat yield — by scientists of many disciplines brought together by the U.N. University from ten countries. Nearly two million hectares of forest and swamp have been reclaimed in the Sanjiang Plain since the 1950s, leading to wind erosion, a sharp drop in rainfall, and declining soil fertility.

The visiting specialists were told that the local water table had declined by more than two-and-a-half meters at some places. Nature had shown a frightening ability to react to changes imposed by man. After a sandstorm whipped by winds approaching ninety kilometers per hour, the ditches along farm roads were filled with precious black topsoil from fields nearby. Elsewhere, thousands of hectares of wheat seedlings were swept away and buried.

Dr. Joseph Needham, director of the East Asian History of Science Library at Cambridge, observes in a new U.N. University paper that behind China's aggressive reach for new arable lands lies an ancient tradition of confronting nature's adversities. The earth's land surface transfers water back to the atmosphere through evaporation and transpiration — and the land reclamation scheme, originally intended to enable China to cut its wheat imports, may well have interfered

with both of those vital processes.

China's own scientific community is only too aware of the dangers, yet it must find a way to increase food production. Despite all efforts to limit the birth rate, China is expected realistically to add at least 200 million to its present population in less than two decades. At present, only 10-15 per cent of China's 9.6 million square kilometers is cultivated because much of the rest offers little hope of agricultural productivity.

Disruptions in agricultural production caused by recurring natural disasters regularly affect vast populations in China. In 1981 the worst drought in thirty-seven years in the north and northeast and extensive flooding in the south have affected tens and perhaps hundreds of millions of people, with heavy losses of agricultural productivity. Hence China's recent urgent appeal to the world community for help through the United Nations.

There is, therefore, no question of halting the land reclamation scheme. Indeed, the primary task of the U.N. University specialists is to contribute to the development of guidelines for future reclamation. The new monitoring and research stations are to gather the kind of scientific information about environmental changes essential for an agricultural development strategy. The studies are intended to enable specialists to stop and reverse the process of land degradation at the Sanjiang Plain and also to avert similar disasters in the wake of other ambitious land reclamation projects elsewhere in the world.

Thomas Land writes from Europe on global affairs.

EXCURSUS 3

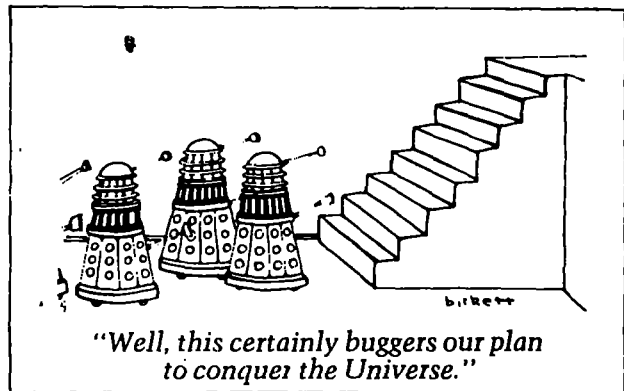
Sy Syna on GREAT ADAPTATIONS

The great excitement in the theatre this season has been generated by *The Life & Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, which The Royal Shakespeare Company brought to these shores for a limited run with seemingly limitless costumes, props, and scenery. Part of the excitement is artistic, part is controversy. Never before has the American public been asked to pay as much for a regular theatre ticket — \$100. Rarely has an audience been asked to sit through so much theatre in a day — nine hours.

Why transport such a monumental theatrical work? In a pointed article in the *Village Voice* the critic Robert Massa provides some answers. The production, budgeted at \$4.4 million, could generate a profit of as much as half a million dollars above and beyond the manager's fee and what the Shubert Organization, a co-producer, pays for theatre rental. More than likely, though, the show will just break even.

Massa shrewdly notes the side benefits for Broadway. Theatre-goers who have paid \$100 for a ticket hardly will quibble over a \$30 or even \$50 tab in the future. Then there is the matter of prestige: cover stories in national magazines, sophisticates picnicking on the theatre steps during the dinner break, etc.

Ironically, the production is based on the work of Charles Dickens, a writer keenly aware of social injustice and the gaps between the "haves" and "have-nots." (During its original London run it could be seen for as little as \$9.) Perhaps there is even subtler irony here, for the play takes as its theme the contrast between the givers and the takers of this world.



The production is staged as a Brechtian epic (e.g., stagehands dump buckets of confetti upon the actors who are miming a tramp through snowdrifts; the cast fashions a stagecoach out of trunks, boxes, and bales and then pulls it off stage to thunderous applause). The acting is a triumph of the British style — accent, mannerisms, and costume contribute to the rendering of sharp cameos. It should be noted that David Threlfall plays Smike superbly — not as the retarded boy Dickens intended, but as a cerebral palsy victim. It is a compelling portrayal and still demonstrates that Nicholas out of his innate goodness extends love and succor to this unfortunate.

David Edgar's adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* makes figures of fun out of the Crummies's theatrical troupe while they remain good-spirited souls. Though more Edgar than Dickens perhaps, their *Romeo and Juliet*, with its happy ending, is the funniest travesty I have ever seen performed on the stage. Here, at the close of the first portion, the entire cast sings an ode to Britain that is heavy with satire and includes the ample Mrs. Crummies as Britannia, wrapped in a Union Jack.

Most of the actors play several roles and, in keeping with the Brechtian epic style, mingle with the audience before and during the show. Some are called upon to sing an entire scene, in costume, from a Mozart opera while others pantomime another scene below.

Is all this worth \$100? Let's see. A two-hour Broadway show now costs \$20-30 a ticket. *Nicholas Nickleby* runs nearly nine hours. The price per hour works out to about the same. But if one feels, as I do, that the arts are not a luxury but a necessity, then the price of any Broadway show or opera is now too high; for those who no longer can afford to attend the theatre, it reduces the quality of life.

Nicholas Nickleby is part of yet another trend this New York season, which finds an unusual number of literary works adapted for the stage. Dean of this assemblage is William Shust and his one-man production of *Chekhov on the Lawn*, with which he has been touring since 1972 in the U.S. and abroad.

Sy Syna, a New York-based theatre and film critic, writes frequently for *Worldview*.

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