

EXCURSUS I

Richard John Neuhaus on Mr. Teng and the Making and Unmaking of History

We may be witness to the sudden rewriting of the geopolitical script of our century. Indeed rapidly accumulating evidence edges that possibility toward probability. The seaquake of China's latest opening to the West has tossed ships of state and ideology into quite new relationships. The signs of turbulence have been there since Mao's death more than two years ago. In fact, according to his American biographer, Edgar Snow, Mao realized toward the end that the Soviet Union was not the model for the future he envisioned: Thus Mao would "place his hopes on the American people." Since, given his record of political convulsions, nobody can know what Mao might have done, what has happened is attributed to the persistence and daring of Deputy Prime Minister Teng Hsiao-p'ing. Mr. Teng helped generate the turbulence and has now ushered it to the surface in a display of leadership that gives new heart to all the foes of deterministic theories of history. Nobody in the West could have, and nobody did, predict the massiveness of the change apparently now under way. Teng's is an exquisite lesson in the primacy of politics—of personality, will, tactics, and ideas—in the making of history.

Or so it would seem. The very massiveness and suddenness of the proposed change invites caution. Mao too, turning Marxism on its head, asserted the primacy of ideas over economic and other determinants. In view of the "objective conditions" that prevailed in China, his may have been the only way to make any version of Marxism seem plausible there. Teng's axiom, "truth from facts" (rather than from dogma), might be welcomed by more orthodox Marxists, except that the prime "fact" being declared is that Marxism doesn't work. Not of course that Mr. Teng is putting it that baldly, but some of his colleagues and many of the intellectuals now issuing wall posters in printed and mimeographed book form clearly are.

Thus it might be argued that Teng's political exercise in repudiating Maoism has challenged Mao's way of asserting the primacy of the political. If that way was required to make the claim that Marxist theory is applicable to China, and if it has now been exposed as false consciousness, then it would seem that Marxism in any form has been repudiated by the new leadership. In today's world it is hard to know what is and what is not Marxist. Marxism has demonstrated a protean capacity to survive myriad and contradictory redefinitions. Perhaps Mr. Teng's passion for facts has mooted the question of whether or not China will continue to be a Marxist society, if in truth it ever was. But intellectuals who are addicted to explaining the permutations of Marx's

nineteenth-century theory have been given much to ponder by China's new direction. One hopes they will appreciate the elegant ironies in Mr. Teng's turning of events. More important, one hopes the turn lasts long enough to permit such leisurely analysis.

It is possible that what we are witnessing is a momentary aberration. Most observers are still dazed by the pace of the change and, quite rightly, they remind us of the "Hundred Flowers" movement of the mid-Fifties. "Let a hundred flowers bloom," declared Mao Tse-tung. Thousands raised their heads to criticize the revolution, the more conveniently for the regime to cut them off.

Mr. Teng and the cadres dancing at Peking's new disco have extended their necks very far. In the military and other bureaucracies, it may be assumed, there are many powerful persons who owe their place to the policies that are now condemned. Even without a violent backlash, one remembers that Mr. Teng is an old man. He must know that he will not live to secure what he has begun. In his case, the famed Chinese patience with history must be combined with a powerful sense of urgency. In his lifetime he has been to the political heights and depths often enough to know that no policies are irrevocable. In the time remaining to him he can hope to implicate enough of the leadership and commit enough of China's honor, power, and resources so that the course he has charted cannot easily be reversed.

"They can't put the toothpaste back into the tube." That is the judgment of one friend just returned from several weeks in "the new China." It is also the judgment of many Western business interests that are lusting for, and sometimes consummating, multi-billion dollar deals. A Houston oil entrepreneur speaks confidently about the future. (His card describes him simply as "China Trader." China trader! It sounds like something from the bad old days of the opium wars.) He has been to China more than twenty times in the past two years and has obtained substantial commitments on what he and others estimate are the 30 to 150 billion barrels in China's oil reserve.

One is impressed by, but at the same time suspicious of, "hard-nosed" business types who believe peace and amity can be assured through commercial intercourse. My favorite example is the letter Andrew Carnegie wrote to the trustees when he founded the Council on Religion and International Affairs, the publisher of this journal. The goal, Carnegie wrote, was the abolition of war. As a man experienced in the ways of the world, he could assure the trustees that the goal would be achieved sooner than most people thought because the "sacred bonds of commerce" had linked Germany, Britain, and the United States in a relationship of peaceful cooperation. Therefore, he solemnly adjured the trustees, when that goal is achieved they

should disperse the remaining funds to "the deserving poor." That was February, 1914. In August the world blew up, and the deserving poor wait still.

Allowing, as one must, for all these uncertainties, one hopes that the new relationship between China and the West is what it appears to be. China, it has frequently been noted, has historically had a powerful attraction for Americans, as Japan, for example, has not. The monumental missionary involvement of the last century, the novels of Pearl Buck, and a host of other associations bind the American imagination to China. This attachment was evident in the passion of the "China Lobby" that poisoned political discourse with accusations about who was to be blamed for "losing" China; and that attachment was equally evident in the passion of those who, until very recently, praised the great revolutionary achievements of Maoism. If the Chinese have been erratic in their attitudes toward the West, it must be admitted that Americans in particular have never been very levelheaded about China. Americans visiting China now are astounded by the effusions of pro-American sentiment that they encounter in both official and newly permitted informal meetings. Clearly we are in for a season of euphoria celebrating a love affair that has, for thirty years, been regrettably disrupted.

Sentiment will be tested now as more is learned about the human costs of the revolution. In the past, Peking and its Western apologists, contending that Maoism was popularly supported, have said that no more than 4 per cent of the people had to be dealt with as counterrevolutionaries. In China that is a little over thirty million people. In recent months there have been reports of the release of tens of thousands of political prisoners, many of whom had been held since 1957 and earlier. Only the Chinese know how many remain. There are no doubt many ugly facts from which truths might be drawn about China's last thirty years. Perhaps Mr. Teng will arrange for the Chinese equivalent of Khrushchev's Twentieth Party Congress of 1956 in which the crimes of Stalinism were denounced. Whatever is revealed, the most deeply shadowed side of recent China may be downplayed or ignored for the sake of a new era of good will, even as it has been downplayed and ignored by sinophiles over the last three decades of official hostility.

And that brings us to a most unhappy truth that must be drawn from the facts now known: The Western world has been badly served by its establishment of "China experts." A few people, like Ivan and Miriam London, like Simon Leys, combed through facts from every available source and wrote the unhappy truths about hunger, discontent, and repression in Mao's China. More often than not they were dismissed or ridiculed by sinologists who relied on propaganda from Peking—propaganda that Peking itself has now made "inoperative," as the Nixon people used to say. The experts employed

such data to document what countless books declared, namely, that whatever the negative factors, Maoism had at least solved the food problem and elevated living standards for the great millions of China. Of course there were others who went much farther, declaring China a socialist utopia and, in some religious circles, asking whether Mao should not be viewed as a Christ figure and China as history's closest approximation to the Kingdom of God.

Nobody is suggesting that we import leftover dunce caps from the Cultural Revolution for a parade of sinologists around Harvard Yard, but some explanations and apologies are in order. Goethe wrote that it is easy to be clever if you are not serious about your own ideas. In blithe indifference to their past pronouncements, accredited sinologists now offer clever analyses of the current directions that thoroughly discredit their claim to expertise. This is but the most recent instance of academic fraud perpetrated by people who discover in closed societies—that is, in societies about which they can know very little—the future that works.

There is wry humor too in the fervent arguments now offered in defense of President Carter's single-handed recognition of Peking and derecognition of Taipei. His defenders invoke the principle of almost unlimited executive authority in foreign affairs—the same principle they condemned Richard Nixon for invoking at the time of his Cambodian "incursion," for example.

Senator Goldwater is right, the way Carter recognized Peking is highhanded and potentially dangerous. But it is not a new danger in American history, and the senator fails to weigh the procedural impropriety against the substantive gain. If Carter had recognized Peking merely in the vague hope that it might induce a more favorable attitude toward American policy, the impropriety would not have been worth the risk. But it now seems that recognition was an important component in Peking's potentially historic opening to the West. As to Taiwan's security, the evidence from both Washington and Peking is reassuring. Anyway, if the U.S. is as unreliable an ally as Goldwater and some others suggest, that defense treaty wasn't worth very much in the first place.

So Richard Nixon greets Mr. Teng at the White House, outside Chairman Hua's residence peasants hold protest demonstrations against widespread hunger, and senior party officials calmly observe that socialism has failed everywhere and that therefore the West, most particularly America, is elected as the future that works. However all this turns out, it's a bad time for the systems analysts and computerized futurologists who tell us what will be on the basis of what is. The wondrous and disturbing truth is that we know less than we think we do about what is, and are far from comprehending the potential of personal actors in bringing about the serendipity and tragedy that make and unmake our grand designs.