

EXCURSUS I

Richard Neuhaus on Disenthraling Ourselves From Vietnam

Maybe we need a Kübler-Ross of international affairs. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, it will be remembered, is the student of death and dying who has analyzed the stages of our coping with tragedy. The dying person's first response is denial and isolation, the next stage is anger, then bargaining, then depression, and finally one reaches acceptance and new hope. There are no doubt parallels in our response to tragedy in international affairs.

In view of the collapse of Saigon in the spring of 1975, the genocide in Cambodia, and the unspeakable plight of the fleeing "boat people," almost everyone today recognizes the tragic nature of America's involvement in Vietnam. Americans differ on the dating of the tragedy. Some think it began in 1954, others would specify Kennedy's sending of advisors, others fix on Johnson's deceptions in the campaign of 1964, while many date the tragedy from our "bugging out" on our commitments in the years following 1972. Inevitably a major academic industry has sprung up around the justification of different positions taken toward the American involvement. Studies aimed at demonstrating "the lessons of Vietnam" will be with us for a long time. They manifest most of the stages delineated by Kübler-Ross—denial, isolation, anger, depression, plus bitter recrimination, which may be a form of moral bargaining.

A few critics think we have yet to learn the lessons of Vietnam, that the United States is still inclined to reckless and self-righteous adventurism in foreign affairs. Many more critics, both here and elsewhere, believe we have learned the lessons of Vietnam all too well, or else that we have learned the wrong lessons. They believe American policy is crippled by uncertainty and guilt. We cannot think straight, they say, with minds haunted by the memories of Mylai and the mad scramble for the last helicopters out of Saigon. The very disagreement over what are and what are not the lessons to be drawn from the Vietnam experience reinforces our thralldom to that experience. Whatever one's attitude toward the war then or now, there is widespread agreement that America's role in the world should be marked by strength, compassion, and wisdom. Although these virtues may be differently defined, there is equally widespread agreement that, by any definitions, these are not the marks of American policy today.

In the irony of history it may be that the tragedy of Indochina today could help break our bondage to the tragedy of Indochina yesterday. That is, while some argue that the nightmare of Vietnam will be ended only when the United States believably shows the flag at some point of conflict, perhaps in Africa, it could be argued that the showing of heart would more effectively end our bondage than the

showing of the flag. The reeducation camps in Vietnam, the genocide in Cambodia, and the countless thousands of refugees from both countries, plus Laos, challenge America to a bold demonstration of strength, compassion, and wisdom. So far we have met the challenge inadequately and uncertainly.

If it is to be met, the divisions of 1968 must be tempered, if not set aside, in 1978. Those who supported the U.S. involvement should stop their obscene chortling over how they have been vindicated now that they have their bloodbath after all. Those who opposed the war should restrain themselves from pointing out who launched us, and the Indochinese, on this course of manifest madness in the first place. In sad truth, and that also is why it is tragedy, the best intentions of those on both sides of yesterday's debate have been thwarted. Admittedly there were a few in the peace movement whose goal was Hanoi's victory and who to this day refuse to acknowledge the horror of what has happened since 1975. There were also a few among the war's supporters who, if they had their way, would still today be dropping bombs to bounce the rubble of Hanoi and cheering a preemptive nuclear strike on Peking. But for the overwhelming majority of people engaged in the debate of 1968 what has happened is not of their desire or design.

The responsible opponents of the war urged support for a "third force" that was both anti-Communist and against the Thieu dictatorship. That, they believed, offered the chance of a negotiated settlement, opening the way toward a gradual and peaceful reunion of Vietnam, if that is what the people of the South desired. Responsible backers of the war viewed the unseemly alliance with Thieu as a necessary price in forcing a negotiated settlement or surrender-by-exhaustion from Hanoi. Their scenario required an open-ended American military effort that many Americans—who had no particular views on what should happen in Vietnam—believed was exacting too high a price in political division and the draining of resources here at home. Nobody who took a position back then can today claim clear vindication. Obviously, each retains the right to his personal judgment and each must consult his conscience. But our response as a nation to the present stage of the tragedy of Indochina must not be weakened by recriminations about who is guilty of bringing Indochina to this unhappy moment.

Indeed there can be and there should be a convergence among old foes in responding boldly and generously to the plight of the Indochina refugees in particular. Restored American confidence can be demonstrated by compassion as well as by confrontation. It takes a confident, productive, and growth-oriented America to welcome the infusion of tens of thousands of immigrants. It takes a decisive America to employ its maritime fleet as well as its navy in picking up the thousands of refugees who would otherwise die at sea. And surely conservatives have every reason to want demonstrated

again, as was demonstrated after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, that this nation is safe refuge for the victims of Communist oppression.

The attorney general recently used his powers to admit an additional 25,000 Indochinese refugees. The church agencies and others involved in placing refugees and finding them homes and jobs say that at least three times that number can be accommodated this year, if only the government will let them in. The United States Catholic Conference goes further, publicly guaranteeing to settle as many as Washington will admit. In the classic pattern of past immigrations, the thousands of refugees admitted so far have proven themselves to be hardworking. Their unemployment rate is lower than the national average. Although there have been a few isolated points of tension between refugees and black Americans, black leadership is supportive of the refugee program; they recognize that, if white Americans harden their hearts against the plight of the refugees, the hardening will be extended to others in need of help. Major labor organizations also support welcoming these refugees.

The American example can also spur action by other nations. Some countries, such as France, have a better record than ours in receiving refugees. But others, such as Sweden, have yet to accept their first refugee, and Swedish ships are notorious for illegally ignoring distress signals and leaving the refugees to perish at sea. Sweden and others who practically allied themselves with Hanoi during the war may be savoring their sense of rectitude with regard to America's policies in Indochina, but virtue is won by today's action, not by yesterday's easy moral posturing. A newly confident America will not be intimidated by nor hesitate to expose the alleged moral superiority of others. Let him who is without sin be the first to disclaim responsibility.

It might be countered that the rescuing of those pathetic little fishing boats on the high seas and the settling of all the refugees now in the camps would only encourage further flight. Perhaps so. There are many things we cannot control, but we are responsible for the lives we can save. In any case, the right of people to emigrate is a human right guaranteed in international law. It is up to the present rulers of Vietnam to worry about why so many of their people are risking their lives to exercise that right.

Similarly, we have little control over what happens in Cambodia. It may not do much good for Ambassador Andrew Young to walk out of the General Assembly every time the representative of Democratic Kampuchea—as the butchers now call Cambodia—rises to speak. But it would be a witness, and we are held accountable for our witness in the face of history's monumental horrors. Certainly the Cambodian tragedy cries out for much more than the two sentences of public censure President Carter has given it so far. China presumably does have some small leverage with the rulers of Cambodia. If our relationship with China is so tentative and fragile that it cannot withstand our even raising

the question of Cambodia, then in risking that relationship we are not risking very much.

Finally, whether we respond boldly and generously to the victims of Indochina's tragedy will, in large part, determine what kind of nation we will be in the years immediately ahead. The first concern, of course, is the saving of human lives, but the character of American life and of America's role in the world is also at stake. If, after the tragedy of the war, we do not move onto the stages of acceptance and hope, the symbol of America's defeat and enduring bondage will not be the last helicopter from Saigon but a little fishing boat sinking beneath the South China Sea.

EXCURSUS II

*Stephen B. Young on
Human Rights Action in Cambodia*

Something important can be done about the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. A privately organized, international commission of inquiry could examine the continuing allegations of a holocaust in Cambodia and publicize its documented findings. Cambodian dictator Pol Pot and his colleagues repeatedly are charged with crimes against humanity similar to those once charged against the Nazis. Why didn't more people try to do something to stop Hitler's genocide, people now ask? Perhaps because people in the Western democracies then felt as helpless in influencing an end to Hitler's barbarities as people in the democracies now feel about Pol Pot. But now, as then, if our present capabilities are limited, our moral obligations for action are not. And who is to say that now, as then, a more forceful international opposition might not prompt a change in the regime?

In Thailand earlier this year my interviews with Cambodians now living in refugee camps convinced me that Pol Pot's Marxist-Leninist regime and Hitler's Nazi government share a special commitment to ideologies demanding wholesale killings unique to our already bloody century, with Pol Pot perhaps worse, if the criteria is the number of people killed (perhaps two million) in proportion to the population (some six to eight million). Khmer Rouge cadres actually tell people: "If you die, the Organization loses nothing. If you live, the Organization gains nothing. So why not kill you?"

A commission of inquiry also could be a valuable addition to the small arsenal currently available under international law for defense of human rights. Unfortunately, the United Nations, with its Commission on Human Rights, is part of a world order and international legal system based on the sanctity of national sovereignty and not on the inviolability of individuals. Human rights elevate individuals for certain purposes above the state, and our concern