

EXCURSUS I

Francis J. Murphy on Solzhenitsyn and the Splitting of Opinion

A year ago, on June 8, 1978, Alexander Solzhenitsyn broke his self-imposed silence to deliver his widely publicized and highly controversial commencement address at Harvard University. In the two previous years of his America exile in rural Cavendish, Vermont, the celebrated Russian dissident had made no public announcements and rarely ventured beyond his immediate vicinity. Understandably, therefore, his appearance at Harvard University stirred great expectations, especially on the part of the media. The *Boston Globe* reported that "the largest crowd in memory jammed the outdoor Tercentenary Theater for Harvard's 327th commencement exercises."

The title of Solzhenitsyn's address was "A World Split Apart," but its central theme was the decline in courage that Solzhenitsyn considers to be the most striking feature of the West in our era. He sees the root cause of this decline as "rationalistic humanism or humanistic autonomy: the proclaimed or enforced autonomy of man from any higher force above him." The fruits of this rationalistic humanism in the West are everywhere evident: excessive legalism to the detriment of self-restraint; moral mediocrity that is "paralyzing man's noblest impulses"; "destructive and irresponsible freedom"; and "hastiness and superficiality"—especially conspicuous in the press—that constitute the "psychic disease of the twentieth century."

The manifestations of this malaise are many, according to Solzhenitsyn. The decadence of art, the lack of great statesmen, and rampant criminality all signal a "social system quite unstable and unhealthy." For these reasons the Russian author and exile cannot recommend Western society in its present state as a model for the transformation of Soviet society. In Solzhenitsyn's words:

After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression [in the East], the human soul longs for things higher, warmer and purer than those offered [in the West] by today's mass living habits, introduced by the revolting invasion of publicity, by TV stupor, and by intolerable music.

This "moral poverty," so evident to Solzhenitsyn, has stripped the West of its willpower and has made a "cult of material well-being." However, since "only moral criteria can help the West against Communism's well planned world strategy," nothing is left for the West but "con-

cessions, attempts to gain time and betrayal." The "hasty Vietnam capitulation" by the United States and the role of Western diplomats in the "shameful Belgrade conference" are not only examples of Western weakness but symptoms of a "society that has come to the end of its development." In both the West and the East, for different reasons but with the same result, man has been deprived of his most precious possession, "spiritual life." Therefore, Solzhenitsyn concluded, "No one on earth has any other way left but upward."

Americans have traditionally been fascinated by the impressions upon foreign visitors concerning their land. Thomas Paine and Alexis de Tocqueville, in a sense, paved the way for Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who was received at Harvard with standing ovations before and after his speech. The full apparatus of the American media quickly spread Solzhenitsyn's words across the land and the world. The Harvard News Agency has distributed well over five thousand copies of the speech and continues to receive requests for reprints. The full text was printed in the *Harvard Gazette* and the *Harvard Magazine*. All major television networks included coverage of the address, as did the major newspapers and magazines. The text was reprinted *in extenso* in the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, and the *National Review*. Lengthy excerpts were reprinted in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the major metropolitan newspapers. However, it has been not in the news reports but rather in the editorial columns and the journals of opinion that the fuller, more nuanced, and frequently critical reactions to Solzhenitsyn's speech have been voiced. While it would be impossible to attempt any complete survey of all that has been written, it is instructive to examine the main lines of discussion and the most influential opinions concerning the Harvard address.

A popular cry in the United States in the late 1960's was the slogan "Love it or leave it," made by defenders of American involvement in the Vietnam war who resented antiwar critics within the United States. In light of the sensitivity of some Americans toward native criticism of U.S. Government policies, Solzhenitsyn's criticisms of the U.S. were especially resented because he is an emigré. This sentiment was best captured by the nationally syndicated columnist Mary McGrory, who wrote that "...nothing Solzhenitsyn said went so much against the grain as his negative view of our society. The unspoken expectation was that, after three years in our midst, he would have to say that we are superior, that our way is not only better, but best."

Had Solzhenitsyn lavished praise on the United States he would undoubtedly have become a national hero. However, not only did he fail to

praise America, but he struck the jugular vein of the secular humanist intellectual establishment in the United States. It has been from their ranks that the harshest criticism of Solzhenitsyn has come. The internationally recognized columnist James Reston, in uncharacteristically sarcastic language, wrote: "Mr. Solzhenitsyn entitled his address at Harvard 'A World Split Apart,' but for all its brilliant passages, it sounded like the wanderings of a mind split apart." The *New York Times*, the generally acknowledged oracle of secular humanism in the United States, editorially rejected Solzhenitsyn's position in toto:

The argument he raises is not new; it goes back to the beginnings of the Republic and has never disappeared. At bottom it is the argument between religious Enthusiasts, sure of their relationship to the Divine Will, and the men of the Enlightenment, trusting in the rationality of humankind....The trouble is, of course, that life in a society run by zealots like Mr. Solzhenitsyn is bound to be uncomfortable for those who do not share his vision or ascribe to his beliefs. Dissent was punished long before there was gulag.

Secular humanists tended to reject Solzhenitsyn's critique on philosophical grounds. For philosopher and former Assistant Secretary of State Charles Frankel, Solzhenitsyn's indictment of Western secularism was based on an unacceptable interpretation of history. For poet and likewise former Assistant Secretary of State Archibald MacLeish, "America was founded on a conception of human liberty which Solzhenitsyn apparently has rejected." Solzhenitsyn seems to have anticipated the wrath of the secular humanist intellectual establishment when he said at Harvard that "nothing is forbidden, but what is not fashionable will hardly even find its way into periodicals or books or be heard in colleges." Among secular humanists Solzhenitsyn is definitely not fashionable.

A less profound but more pervasive reaction has been that Solzhenitsyn does not really know America. The usually unstated corollary to this position is that had he known America better, he would not have spoken so critically. First Lady Rosalynn Carter adopted this position in her address to the National Press Club in Washington: "I can tell you," she said, "the people of this country are not weak, not cowardly, not spiritually exhausted." On the contrary, Mrs. Carter sees "a pervasive desire among Americans to live a useful life, to correct the defects in society and to make our nation even greater than it already is." In a similar vein Ellen Goodman, a widely syndicated columnist, described Solzhenitsyn as "a better historian of Russian society than chronicler of American."

In no regard was Solzhenitsyn's perception of life in the United States challenged more than in

his denunciation of America's "most cruel mistake" in Vietnam. According to Solzhenitsyn, "members of the U.S. antiwar movement wound up being involved in the betrayal of Far Eastern nations, in a genocide and in the suffering today imposed on thirty million people there." The *Boston Globe* stated succinctly and calmly what most opponents of American involvement in Vietnam felt passionately: "His [Solzhenitsyn's] suggestion that American protest against the Vietnam War reflected spinelessness, ignored the degree of moral courage it took to make that protest effective." Only among staunch conservatives and the military did this aspect of the Harvard address evoke favor.

How could Solzhenitsyn so misinterpret the antiwar movement in America in particular, and life in the United States in general? For Henry Fairlie, writing in the influential review *The New Republic*, Solzhenitsyn "has made a prisoner of himself in his house in Vermont." As a result, according to Archibald MacLeish, "He [Solzhenitsyn] sees few Americans, speaks little English, and what he knows of the Republic he knows not from human witness but from television programs which present their depressing parody of American life to him as they present it also to us, but with this difference—that we know the parody for what it is."

In presuming that Solzhenitsyn has little knowledge and less understanding of American life, his critics were undoubtedly unaware of two facts that the *Boston Globe* brought to light a bit later. The first fact was that "Solzhenitsyn travelled extensively before settling in Cavendish." The second fact was that "Solzhenitsyn is a regular reader of newspapers and magazines and listens to the radio a lot." Clearly, the Russian author is much better informed than his American critics realized.

In sharp contrast to the secular liberal press, the American religious press has proven not only more sympathetic but more penetrating in its interpretation of Solzhenitsyn's Harvard sermon. James Wall, writing in the ecumenical review *Christian Century*, astutely noted: "At Harvard, Solzhenitsyn was not giving political advice; he was preaching, and he has left his detractors squirming. They have preferred to attack his political views and ignore his prophetic vision." This "prophetic vision" was well expressed by Harold Kuhn in the theologically conservative Protestant review *Christianity Today*.

Underlying all this is his [Solzhenitsyn's] conviction that where the intrinsic evil of the human heart and its corollary of man's need for God's grace is lost, man falls prey to a loss of spiritual responsibility—to freedom from religion. Such loss opens men and societies to a materialistic humanism.

In defending Solzhenitsyn against his secular humanist critics, John Garvey pointed out in the liberal Catholic review *Commonweal* that the cherished liberal ideal of freedom of opinion can and has itself become an ideology. For secular humanists, "the belief that all ideas are *really equal*" has displaced "the belief that no idea may be forced down another's throat." It was precisely this ideology which underlay the editorial anxiety of the *New York Times* that Solzhenitsyn "believes himself in possession of The Truth." Even in the religious press, however, Solzhenitsyn was subject to criticism on precisely theological grounds. Commenting upon the Russian tradition of spiritual growth through suffering, Jerome Perlinski asked: "Must we be forever slave to the notion that what is good and joyous in life is to be denied, is no valid way to God—that only that which causes pain, suffering and defeat is uplifting?" In answer to his own question, Perlinski remarked: "The most direct response to Solzhenitsyn comes from a Westerner, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who knew well the psychic torments of Western life."

Another and particularly intriguing interpretation of Solzhenitsyn's address was adumbrated by Mary McGrory and developed by Olga Andreyev Carlisle. Mary McGrory pointed out: "Maybe we would be better off if we stopped grappling with the politics and even the morality of what Solzhenitsyn said at Harvard and look at it in a different way—as a personal statement of a conservative, religious and terribly homesick Russian." Olga Carlisle, who helped arrange for the publication of two of Solzhenitsyn's books but is no longer associated with him, developed the Russian interpretation of the speech more fully. She noted that:

Solzhenitsyn, the spokesman for a new, ascetic religiosity, was addressing his U.S. audience only incidentally. He was really speaking to the Soviet leaders and the Russian people. He wanted them to know that he had not been seduced by the false values of the West. His soul was still Russian.

For many Russians, especially the *Russity*--the new nationalists, ascetically orthodox in religion and conservative in politics--Solzhenitsyn is like John the Baptist, preparing the way of the Lord.

In spite of the extensive criticism and publicity for Solzhenitsyn's Harvard speech, it was by no means the focal issue in America at that time. In fact, it was California's proposition 13 that overshadowed the Russian author in June, 1978. That very fact adds credibility to the exile's critique of Western materialism and its "cult of material well-being."

Francis J. Murphy, a Roman Catholic priest, teaches history at Boston College, Chestnut Hill.

EXCURSUS II

Seth Tillman on Camp David and the PLO

Vast though their differences of attitude and outlook are, Israelis and Palestinians have one attribute in common: pessimism about the future and a penchant for the worst-case scenario. Interviews with Israeli officials and intellectuals, and with Palestinians on the West Bank and in the PLO leadership, reveal profound apprehension on both sides toward the Camp David plan for Palestinian self-rule. Palestinian spokesmen tend to regard the plan as a means of perpetuating rather than terminating Israeli control, as a scheme for "using the natives" to run a "modified occupation," in the words of a professor at Bir Zeit University on the West Bank. In a television interview last September 18 Prime Minister Begin told Israelis that the reference in the Camp David accords to the "legitimate rights" of the Palestinians "has no meaning." Palestinians seem readily to agree.

Israelis, on the other hand, a few on the left with equanimity, a good number on the right with horror, and most in between with uncertainty and apprehension, see the Camp David program as leading inevitably to Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, if not to the bugbear of a Palestinian state. A poll published by the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot* in October showed that 90 per cent of those polled opposed an independent Palestinian state, but 50 per cent nevertheless expected Camp David to lead to that result. Begin, in the view of a former Director General of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is fighting a "rearguard action," with no realistic expectation of retaining more than "some residual Israeli presence" on the West Bank after the five-year transition period.

Now that Egypt and Israel have signed a peace treaty, the success of the Camp David accords as instruments toward a general settlement will depend upon the willingness of Palestinians to participate in the autonomy plan for the West Bank and Gaza. As a condition of their participation Palestinians both in and out of the occupied territories are insisting upon assurances that the plan will culminate in self-determination, but this the Begin government adamantly refuses. If the Palestinians were permitted the attributes of statehood, Begin said in an interview in October, 1978, "they would determine not only their own fate, but also ours—a fate of killing, murder and war." The United States is confronted with the difficult task of convincing the Palestinians that their "legitimate rights" and "just requirements," as referred to in the Camp David framework, can be fulfilled through that process.