EXCURSUS I

Elliott Wright on
The Structural Contradictions
of the National Council of Churches

For fifteen or more years after its founding in 1950
the National Council of Churches caused excite-
ment in American religion. It stimulated ecumenical
theology, focused church concern for international
affairs, provided a platform for social reformers and,
later, for minority groups seeking justice. Simulta-
neously, the Council raised the hackles of conserva-
tives and thereby reaped favorable publicity at the
expense of critics. Nonetheless, by the late 1960's
some radicals were accusing the ecumenical
agency of bowing to the status quo.

In truth, the Council's verve and visibility have
steadily decreased over the past decade. In part this
is the price paid by established organizations that
have simply learned how to absorb criticism. Then
too, all conciliar Christianity suffered as the old faith
and order movement floundered when, beginning
about 1964, theology meandered into the land of
fads. The mix of stagnation, intellectual addiction to
novelty, and resulting institutional anxiety undercut
the mainline Protestant denominations upon which
the stability of 475 Riverside Drive (NCC headquar-
ters) depended. But the most important factor
weakening the Council is its effort to project for itself
two incompatible roles in church and society.

The Council sees its task as one of radically
revising the myth of a righteous America. At the
same time, the Council is to be representative of a
major segment of American religion. There are thirty
Protestant and Orthodox member communions, al-
though no one pretends the Orthodox are more than
tenously involved. These incompatible, indeed
contradictory, roles set up a tension that some
describe as a creative ecumenical force. The result,
however, is more accurately comparable to an un-
certain mammal that persistently howls, then whim-
pers, producing a cacophony easier to ignore than
interpret.

Whatever its faults, the Council continues to main-
tain significant programs in relief, refugee resettle-
ment, civil and religious liberty, and other areas. And
the Council could again be important to the quest for
Christian unity were that quest to be resumed someday. But the Council is now retarding its devel-
opment by trying to be at the same time both
radically revisionist and representative of the
American churches.

Judging by the numerous resolutions on Amer-
ican-Third World relations flowing from semiannual
meetings of its Governing Board, the Council ac-
cepts a reading of history that equates the U.S. with
colonialism, imperialism, and exploitation. Again
and again the Board urges President and Congress
to support "liberation" and "self-determination" of
peoples in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Council
officials would no doubt maintain that such appeals
are aimed at recalling the nation to its best ideals,
and many members of the Governing Board cer-
tainly understand the pronouncements in that light.

Yet resolutions and statements go much further
than that. The impression is conveyed that America
has so betrayed the ideals of liberty and justice that
their revival is virtually hopeless. The Council pos-
tures itself as one of the very few voices of righteous-
ness remaining. That voice is angry and strident;
one suspects it might be disappointed if Uncle Sam
and his minions did anything right. Little room is left
for any American good intentions in fostering the
"solidarity" and "interdependence" of peoples. For
example, a resolution on Southern Africa adopted
last October made no direct reference to Henry
Kissinger's work to promote black rule in Rhodesia
and Namibia, not even to observe that Washington
had finally turned toward policy favored by the
Council in that part of the world. Rather, the resolu-
tion asked the U.S. Government to make sure that
no non-African diplomatic overtures "compromise in
any way the efforts and goals of the forces of
liberation." That is a most revealing statement in
light of the fact that no African overtures had been
able to persuade Ian Smith to discuss majority
rule. The message: Under no circumstances is America
to be trusted. The ideology lacks Gabriel Kolko's
deliberateness (see Main Currents in Modern
American History) but shares the same spirit.

The radical revisionist view of America's role in
the world could be correct, the National Council
might be right in advancing it. To do so seriously and
consistently, however, is to make the agency margi-


quences (the howling and the whimpering). To illustrate: At its October meeting the Governing Board had before it a thunderingly anti-U.S. "Open Letter to North American Christians" from thirteen Latin Americans, eight of whom, all recognizable Protestants, were identified. Che Guevara would have applauded the letter's critique of "Yankee imperialism." The Board was asked by the Council's Division of Overseas Ministries to approve a reply. As anyone familiar with such proceedings would expect, a draft reply was on hand and duly adopted, putting the Council on record as confirming the letter as a statement of "the authentic and key issues" affecting relations not only between the U.S. and Latin America but the U.S. and "other parts" of the world as well.

By the text and tone of its response the Council endorsed the proposition that Latin American miseries are caused by U.S. Government and business. It accepted the letter's demand that U.S. churches transfer their "apostolic duty" from foreign mission fields to their own backyard. The Council may know the truth about Latin America, and it may know where God most wants missionaries. But truth of the analysis is not the issue here; the issue is that the Council's loud "Amen" rang hollow.

One might have reasonably anticipated that, after endorsing the letter, the assembled Christians would fall on their knees, beg God's forgiveness for what the U.S. is doing in the Southern Hemisphere, and then rise to vigorously plan for removing missionaries from Latin America and extricating church institutions from the evils of capitalism. None of that. While a lone delegate complained that proposed actions seemed weak compared to the vigorous letter, the Board was content in asking member denominations to communicate the epistle to constituents and urge parish study of it. Anyway, the hour was late. A presentation on U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico was running overtime.

The most ironic part of the response to the Latin Americans was the expressed hope that congregations would "meditate" upon the contents of the letter before and after the November U.S. Presidential election. In fact no denomination has a public or other means to communicate or mass distribute anything on such short notice. And in fact no denomination was going to make a special effort to get out a document guaranteed to offend almost all its members. And, in further fact, one assumes everyone on the Board was fully aware of these facts.

In short, a house of prophecy with budgets to raise and bureaucrats to feed is self-contradictory. If it is again to be credible, the National Council of Churches must reexamine what it means to be disenchanted with the American nation while, at the same time, wanting to represent the nation's central religious heritage.

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**EXCURSUS II**

**Hans Blix on Banning Some Nonnuclear Weapons**

Ever since World War II the major efforts in the disarmament sphere have been devoted to nuclear weapons. These weapons undoubtedly pose the greatest threat to humanity. Less attention has been paid to the conventional weapons. Yet these are the weapons that have been used in the postwar conflicts: napalm, antipersonnel fragmentation cluster bombs, new high velocity rifles, fuel air explosives, mines used for large area seeding, etc. International public opinion has reacted against some of these weapons, especially during the Indochina conflict. At the intergovernmental level they have been discussed since 1971 in the context of the efforts to update international humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts (conferences in Geneva and discussions in the U.N. General Assembly). It would seem important that nongovernmental organizations take an interest in this work and make their influence felt. Such interest would now be particularly timely, for results now depend mainly on the political will of governments. Almost all relevant facts have been compiled.

The starting point for all these discussions is that weapons should not be so designed or used as to cause any "unnecessary suffering" (to quote the language of the Hague Convention) or to give indiscriminate effects. The dumdum bullet that flattened against the human body and tore its way through was banned for this reason. No one will contend that this ban or the ban on use of bacteriological and chemical weapons (1925) achieved more than a marginal humanitarian gain. But even marginal gains of this kind must be looked for, so long as we have not succeeded in the main aim of preventing the use of armed force.

Which are the dumdum bullets of today? Years of discussion have resulted in a number of reports and proposals from which the answers might be drawn. Attention may be drawn to the Report by the U.N. Secretary General on Napalm and Other Incendiary Weapons (1972), the Report by the International Committee of the Red Cross on Weapons That May Cause Unnecessary Suffering or Have Indiscriminate Effects (1973), the Reports on the ICRC Conferences of Government Experts in Luzerne (1974) and Lugano (1976), and to the proposals and debates in the Ad Hoc Committee on Conventional Weapons of the Geneva Diplomatic Conference on International Humanitarian Law, as well as to the debates of the First Committee of the General Assembly on the item "Napalm and Other Incendiary Weapons."

There can be no doubt that napalm and other incendiary weapons is the category of weapons