

Moral Dilemmas in Foreign Affairs

Ethics and United States Foreign Policy by Ernest W. Lefever.
Meridian Books. 196 pp. \$1.25.

by Will Herberg

Twenty years ago, Charles A. Beard could write with considerable plausibility that foreign policy in America was little more than a reflection of domestic politics. Today, the paramount part that foreign policy plays in the life of the nation is too obvious to require comment. Never before in our history, and rarely in the history of any other great nation, has the international power struggle loomed so large in the life of the people, with so much at stake on the outcome. Foreign policy has become America's destiny—indeed, in Barbara Ward's words, it has become "everybody's destiny."

And yet the American people seem largely unprepared for the destiny that has come upon them. Our thinking is still provincial in scope and moralistic in temper; we still seem to understand little of the realities of international life and therefore are particularly prone to both the illusions of peace and the passions of war, clamoring for total extermination of the enemy one day and for total disarmament the next.

What Americans need as much as anything else, perhaps, is experience in world leadership, hard and sobering experience, but also experience illumined by some sort of understanding of the nature of world politics and the part men and nations play in its day-to-day development.

Ernest W. Lefever has written a book that can teach us much we need to know. The strength of this work lies in its ability to combine religio-ethical insight with detailed knowledge of diplomacy and foreign affairs. The problem, as Mr. Lefever sees it, is how to formulate and carry out a foreign policy that serves its own proper

Mr. Herberg, the author of *Catholic, Protestant, Jew and Judaism and Modern Man*, is a well-known writer on political and theological questions.

purposes and yet is somehow based upon moral principle.

Mr. Lefever's essay is therefore essentially an attempt to survey the field of America's international relations from the standpoint of the Judaeo-Christian ethic and the understanding of man that underlies this ethic. His competence in both fields—he is a trained theologian as well as a specialist in international affairs—and his practical shrewdness in politics, are evident on every page of this book.

The starting point of the analysis is the Judaeo-Christian, or Biblical, understanding of human nature in history, which Mr. Lefever presents in familiar Niebuhrian terms. Man is a creature capable of transcending himself in his urge to justice and community, yet ever prone to employ his self-transcendence as a vehicle and instrument of his self-interest; this fusion of self-transcendence and self-interest becomes particularly significant when the self-interest is the corporate self-interest of class or nation and the self-transcendence is the transcendence of the individual self in some larger social whole with which it so readily identifies itself. All of the ambiguities and contradictions of human nature are then transferred to the social plane, and politics, including international politics, confronts us as a paradoxical mixture of justice and power.

"The moral dilemma of foreign policy," Hans J. Morgenthau points out in his introduction to this volume, "is but a special and particularly flagrant case of the moral dilemma which faces man on all levels of social action," and is not to be conjured away by either moralism or cynicism.

Without power, the strivings for higher levels of justice in social life are bound to remain impotent; yet the justice that is implemented by power is at the same time imperilled and qualified by it. The tension remains, and it is within this tension that a responsible course is to be charted.

Mr. Lefever is thus an ethical and religious realist, and he carries his realism into his understanding of foreign policy. He contrasts his realistic perspective, stressing as it does "the limits of man's moral capacity and the tragic character of history," with the "liberal" idealism and moralism so rampant in American political life, in which ideals are confused with realities, and the intractabilities of man's historical existence are ignored out of an excessive confidence in human goodness, rationality, and progress.

Realism need not be amoral; indeed, if it is so, it ceases to be realistic. Mr. Lefever's realism is, in fact, grounded in a firm moral commitment to freedom, justice, and peace; its realism consists in an open-eyed recognition of the recalcitrances and contradictions of the actual conditions under which this moral commitment has to be implemented and these moral values have to be embodied. So that what is involved is never, or hardly ever, the simple translation of ideals into policies, but almost always the far more complex, and often disheartening effort to find one's way in a moral jungle where every attempt to realize one's ideals also involves compromising and endangering them.

Mr. Lefever develops his realistic approach, for which he acknowledges indebtedness to Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Morgenthau, and Kenneth Thompson, in a systematic and fairly detailed manner, dealing in succession with most of the major aspects of American foreign policy in mid-twentieth century America. His fresh, unstereotyped way of thinking, together with the sober responsibility of his judgments, make the book absorbing reading as well as a valuable handbook for the informed citizen.

A number of problems emerge from Mr. Lefever's discussion. There is first the problem of the conduct of foreign affairs under a democracy. Over a century ago, Tocqueville pointed out that "for-

oreign policies demand scarcely any of those qualities which are peculiar to a democracy; they require, on the contrary, the perfect use of almost all those in which it is deficient . . . [since a democracy] cannot combine its measures with secrecy or await their consequences with patience."

American foreign policy goals are clear enough: in Mr. Lefever's formulation, "the maintenance of our national independence, without war if possible, and the creation of an international climate where government by consent can flourish." But the pursuit of these goals in the actual world in which we find ourselves involves more than the proclamation of ideals; it involves long-range planning, careful calculation, negotiations, adjustments, and maneuverings that can hardly be carried on in the full light of publicity.

Yet the American democratic ethos, particularly since the first world war, requires just such publicity: "open covenants openly arrived at." Nor, as a matter of fact, is the old-line diplomacy always the special province of an aristocratic elite any longer possible, not only because of the democratization of public life, but also because of the fact that "the crucial diplomatic problem of our day," which has to do with "the profound differences which divide the Soviet world from the free world . . . is primarily a political and moral problem and only secondarily technical," so that it falls into an area in which public opinion must have a direct and continuing influence.

Mr. Lefever attempts to deal with this dilemma by a careful distinction between the responsibilities and duties in the making of foreign policy on the part of citizens, experts, and policy makers respectively; but he, I am sure, would be the first to recognize that this is primarily a more orderly way of posing the problem rather than of solving it.

The same dilemma emerges in an acute form on another level. Mr. Lefever contrasts the old diplomacy with the new, the professional diplomacy of moderation, concession, and limited goals with the "shirt-sleeve" diplomacy of idealistic sloganeering in the

style of Woodrow Wilson. He has no difficulty in making us see the merits of the former, at least in its own time, and the perils of the latter. But he himself recognizes that the old diplomacy is no longer to be resuscitated; all he apparently hopes for is to infuse the newer democratic diplomacy with some of the ancient virtues.

But is that a realistic approach? The traditional diplomacy of moderation, concession, and limited goals emerged under very specific historical conditions, and was apparently appropriate to the nearly three centuries that came between the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648 and the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917. But even within this period there was the French Revolution, during which the traditional diplomacy broke down, to be reestablished only with the Restoration.

One may therefore well ask what sense a diplomacy of moderation and limited goals can have today for a free world that is confronted not with a rival bloc of national states, but with a totalitarian enemy whose goals are unlimited and whose very law of being is expansion and domination to the ends of the earth. Mr. Lefever does not quite see this, and therefore his discussion of the kind of diplomacy demanded by contemporary conditions does not altogether measure up to his own standards of realism.

But one can have nothing but praise for Mr. Lefever's profound discussion of the various plans (the so-called Radford Plan, for example) to develop a unitary and comprehensive "Free World Ideology" with which to launch an ideological crusade against Communism. Mr. Lefever makes it quite clear that the very notion of such a total political ideology runs counter to the pluralistic ethos of American democracy, which does not have or espouse an official ideological system to sell to the world, but rather aspires to make it possible for people to work out their own salvation as they see fit under the conditions of the community and cooperation made necessary by life in society.

It is not the business of the government, nor does it fall

within its competence, Mr. Lefever insists, to "proclaim *The Truth*, which is of course an essentially religious task clearly beyond the capacity of governments, and perhaps of religious institutions as well, which *witness to* rather than *proclaim* ultimate truth." For our kind of democracy to survive and prove effective in the struggle with totalitarianism, it is necessary for it to understand its own nature and limitations, which paradoxically are also among its sources of strength.

Mr. Lefever's fundamental presuppositions and conclusions are profoundly religious; yet, ironically, he is forced to note that "religion is often a source of confusion rather than understanding in foreign affairs, and that efforts to apply morality to foreign policy frequently end in disaster."

This is so because religious leaders, especially in America, are particularly prone to a delusive idealism; for many, indeed, religion and idealism are virtually synonymous. Perhaps this is the reason why, as Mr. Lefever also notes, the best of our statesmen have shown a deeper understanding of the actual relation of ethics and religion to politics than have most of the official spokesmen of religion.

"Some of these men"—one thinks here of Abraham Lincoln—"have been morally sensitive and politically wise enough," Mr. Lefever points out in his concluding words, "to see the relevance of the 'ideal ends' of the preacher to the limited means of the politician. They have learned the art of relating ethics to political necessity without slipping into moral pretension on the one side or cynicism on the other . . . These statesmen have been better able to relate the wisdom of the Judaeo-Christian heritage to the tragic realm of politics than most professional churchmen because the statesmen had been disciplined by a more profound understanding of history and chastened by political responsibility."

It is this creative combination of religious insight and political realism that is our best resource in the present hour.

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