

# worldview

A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

## OUR NATIONAL PURPOSE

In his essay "The Recovery of Ethics," published this month in *Worldview*, Paul Nitze argues that we have reached a historical moment propitious for discovering a relevant ethical framework for our national policy decisions. "It seems to me," he writes, "that there is today a convergence of a number of factors which give grounds for hope that vigorous effort can, in the not too distant future, restore a glimmering of light in the existing darkness."

Mr. Nitze's view, as he supports it in his essay, is especially welcome in a year when the nation's need for a "sense of purpose" has become a major theme of public discussion. For some months now, Walter Lippmann has been developing this theme with increasing urgency. He has argued that Americans on the whole lack an understanding of the historic challenge and trials that lie before them if freedom is to survive in the world. He has claimed that, at a time when our attention as a people should be turned to questions of the public good, we are devoting our energies and genius almost exclusively to the pursuit of private pleasures. In the terms of Mr. Nitze's essay, we are committing ourselves, as a nation, to ends which are essentially trivial in a decade which is sure to demand great vision.

These doubts about the largeness and stability of our national purpose have now appeared even in the pages of *Time*. This magazine, which usually dismisses such doubts as forms of left-wing deviation, reports soberly in a recent issue that, of twelve prominent American intellectuals interviewed on the subject, eleven were pessimistic about the long-range prospects for Western freedom in its competition with Communist totalitarianism. And the reason for their pessimism, in almost every case, is a belief that the American people have no idea of what is demanded of them for the long-range struggle against Communism.

"The people," of course, are not statesmen; neither are they philosophers. They cannot, as "the people," shape the nation's strategy nor develop the great ends towards which it should be di-

rected. But a democratic society, if it is to be viable at all, rests upon the supposition that the people can discern great ends and support the strategies necessary to attain them if these are made clear to them by the leaders of their society. It is when the leaders themselves are uncertain or timorous that the people falter and, perhaps, finally perish.

Whatever administration comes to power in 1961 will face the task of awakening a complacent nation from its dreams of effortless victory; it will have to spell out the hard realities of competitive coexistence in today's world. And an adequate sense of national purpose can be grasped only within the framework of such a relevant ethic as Mr. Nitze explores.

It is the lack of an adequate ethical framework for our policy decisions—an adequate public philosophy—that has led us to the curious moral desert in which most of our thinking on the problems of modern war has taken place. The majority of Americans (including, certainly, the majority of American leaders) has evaded these problems by pretending they do not really exist: no real attempt has been made to relate the strategies of defense planning to the new moral elements which nuclear weapons of mass destruction have introduced into history. A minority of Americans, on the other hand, has evaded these problems through a retreat to neo-pacifism. In neither case has there been a public effort to relate the exigencies of contemporary power to the imperatives of moral concern. In this we have brought ourselves perilously close to the dread alternatives of either surrender or annihilation in the event of a military challenge from the Communist powers.

President Eisenhower has recently pleaded with the American people to "have faith" in the triumph of their system. Yes. But, in the order of politics, there can be no salvation by faith alone; here, faith without works *is* dead. This is the unpleasant but saving truth which we as a nation must quickly recover.