

FROM SUPPORTER OF WAR IN 1941 TO CRITIC IN 1966

Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the founders of Christianity and Crisis and co-chairman of its editorial board, writes in the special Twenty-fifth Anniversary Issue of the journal (February 21) that "the moral crisis is ever changing, but all changes reveal one constant factor. The moral life of man is continually in the embarrassment of realizing that the absolutes of biblical and rational norms—which enjoin responsibility for the neighbor's welfare—can never be perfectly fulfilled, either by the use of or abstention from any of the instruments of community or conflict. Therefore, religious and moral guides must teach the necessity of discriminate judgment."

In another editorial, reprinted below, editorial co-chairman John C. Bennett explained the journal's response to the present moral crisis, in Vietnam.

Some of our readers may wonder how it is possible that a journal founded in 1941 to support the war against Hitler and to combat pacifism in the churches can now be highly critical of the American Government's policy of belligerence in Vietnam, often finding itself making common cause with today's pacifists. The point of this editorial is suggested by Paul Ramsey, who writes: "Even Reinhold Niebuhr signs petitions and editorials as if Reinhold Niebuhr had never existed."

Christianity and Crisis has not come to share the religious and ethical assumptions of Christian pacifism; we still recognize the necessity for the military ingredient in national power and the moral obligation to use power at times to check power. Yet we believe that the circumstances under which military power is being used in Vietnam are sufficiently different from those under which it was used to defeat Hitler to lead to quite different political and moral judgments concerning the issues raised by this war.

This is not to say that we are now advocating immediate withdrawal from Vietnam. Rather it means that we are on the side of those who keep pressing for the reduction of the violence, for a negotiated end to the fighting and for a political settlement that will not depend upon the defeat of the other side. We have welcomed the President's emphasis on negotiations and his appeal to the United Nations, but these are accompanied by state-

ments and policies that threaten to nullify them, especially in the context of commitments made to the Saigon government. We deplore the resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam.

We see at least four differences between 1966 and 1941:

- What is at stake in the case of communism is different from what was at stake in the case of national socialism. Stalinism had many of the worst features of Hitlerism, but it proved to be a passing phase of Soviet communism. It showed itself more open-ended than we had supposed, capable of varying degrees of humanization if not democratization. It is not monolithic, nor is it permanent slavery; and, in its later phases, cooperative as well as competitive coexistence becomes politically and morally possible. We doubt if such coexistence would have become possible with nazism.

- The threat of communism is not primarily a military threat, as was nazism. We have supported the policy of developing military strength to deter Soviet communism from taking a military short cut, but even in so doing we realized that developing the political and social health of the nations of Western Europe was more important. Communists readily use force but they have not chosen to rely on massive military attacks on other nations. They prefer to exploit revolutionary situations and situations of disorder with a limited use of military force. In this respect they are quite different from the Nazis. This fact alone, as we have pointed out with regularity, means that the repeated use of the Munich analogy in the context of today's debates about Vietnam is misleading.

- The Munich analogy is misleading also because of the differences between what was defended in Europe and what can be defended in Asia. Against Hitler we could help defend nations with real or potential political strength and a will to be independent. Against Stalin the same was true. Also, the nations of Western Europe had already achieved some of the results promised by a Communist revolution: modernization and a high degree of social justice.

In Asia there are greater limits to what we can do with our military power to help countries to maintain their independence of communism. This does not mean that we have no responsibility to help na-

tions remain free. But we need to be realistic about what we as a predominantly white country can do to counteract communism in Asia, especially when nations that are threatened need stable governments and revolutionary changes that we may not be able to help them achieve.

Whether our responsibility extends to the creation of a nation in South Vietnam that can only be kept independent by American power is at least an open question. It is different from the question of whether we should have supported the freedom of Western Europe by war against Hitler or by the presence of force that could be used against Stalin.

• It should also be said that our decisions today, unlike those of the Forties, must take account of the danger of nuclear war. How this factor is to be weighed in relation to the others may be debatable, but one of the reasons for opposing escalation in

Vietnam and pressing for a negotiated end of violence (whether we call it "peace" or not) is that we can never be sure this conflict will not lead to a nuclear war. At present our Government is intent on avoiding the bombing of North Vietnam cities and the Chinese nuclear installations; but if the war should continue for years, we might not be able to hold the line against such brutal and provocative acts.

We hope we are still "Christian realists" and that we are as "realistic" in emphasizing the limited relevance of American military power today as we were in calling for its use to defeat Hitler in 1941. Those who speak with most conviction in favor of our Vietnam policy seem to us to be blind to many intangible factors in the Asian situation that could cause military successes to lead to political and moral defeats.

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