

# THE DARKER SIDE OF THE EARTH

Victor C. Ferkiss

Washington is a tired city. Recent revelations about the extent of C.I.A. penetration of American institutions have been greeted with a cynicism that is less a reflection of a lack of standards than of weariness. The silliness over Adam Clayton Powell coincided in impact with the sordidness over the Manchester book; the memory of Camelot has been tarnished and we are left with the theatre of the absurd that is the Johnson era. Few in Washington are able to grasp the very real possibility that the Republican victories of last November portend a political revolution; widespread as is contempt for the Johnson Administration it is hard to take any of his potential opponents seriously. The prevalent mood is one of drift.

The weariness of Washington is most noticeable in its attitude toward foreign policy. Not only are the managers of our foreign policy almost palpably exhausted, physically and mentally, their fatigue casts a pall over what might otherwise be valuable initiatives in domestic social policies. The Great Society has been killed by Vietnam, not merely because of cost factors and the new right-wing Congressional strength to which the present impasse in Southeast Asia has contributed, but because everyone believes it to be dead. The mood of malaise which has infected Washington since the early days of the present Administration has now apparently spread throughout the nation. The American people are as tired of foreign aid as Congress is, as bored with Europe, as querulous toward our "allies," above all as sick of Vietnam. Even protest has lost its bite if not its shrillness. There seems to be a general acceptance that what will be will be, that this is a crippling sickness of which we shall not die. Thanks to the internal problems of China and the caution of the Soviet Union the war will not escalate and we will gradually force our enemies to some mutually unsatisfactory resolution of the situation. There is simply no other alternative available.

Our inability to cope with Vietnam is symptomatic of a general inability to function in the field of foreign affairs. It is generally felt that things have somehow changed, that the cold war is over, yet what has suc-

ceeded it no man can tell. In foreign policy we are living on the intellectual capital of the past — the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine, containment and security through unilateral commitment. These concepts are obviously meaningless today, yet what else is there? The opposition — especially the intellectual Left — has shown itself as bankrupt of ideas as the Establishment. New initiatives propounded usually consist of such time-worn suggestions as disarmament, greater foreign aid, more sympathy for the developing nations, admitting Communist China to the United Nations and similar tired nostrums *Plus ça change . . .*

One result of this intellectual sterility is the generally unreadable quality of most books on foreign affairs, the triteness of most public discussion. It is difficult to believe that anyone but professionals inured to boredom and trained to look for the slightest nuances of policy, or fanatical amateurs for whom a concern with world affairs fulfills some necessary function in their personal psychic lives would be bothered to read most academic or journalistic discussions of foreign policy, to say nothing of the intellectual offal promulgated by governments, not least of all our own.

A shining exception to the dominant intellectual torpor has been the work of Edmund Stillman and William Pfaff in recent years. In a series of books — *The Politics of Hysteria*, *The New Politics*, and most lately *Power and Impotence: The Failure of American Foreign Policy* (Random House, 1966) — they have challenged the whole frame of reference of current foreign policy, the hidden consensus on which supporters and critics have both based their arguments. Their reviews have been mixed — with some approving their originality and others bristling at their crankiness. As far as affecting anyone's action is concerned, they have been shouting down a rain barrel. But they deserve to be heard, and given the increased obviousness of our present political sterility, their day might yet come.

Although in their new book — which again covers much of the ground traversed by the earlier ones — they make many incidental points in passing about problems on every continent, their underlying theme is governed by a central proposition which runs coun-

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ter to the whole contemporary American ethos. They commend Talleyrand's maxim to the young diplomat: "*Surtout, pas trop de zèle.*" America, they say, "should do less not more." Their basic conviction is that American foreign policy has become ideological, that we have turned into a crusading nation bent on the messianic dream of making the world over in the American image. They hold that the new globalism—which they deplore—is simply the old isolationism in new clothes, a fear of a world in which everyone will not be like us, a fear in turn based on our inability to define our own identity. Our anti-communism is less the cause than the result of this attitude: if Russia did not exist it would have to be invented. Thus better relations with the Soviets must be compensated for by a crusade against China. Realistic almost to the point of perversity, they caution that not only is China essentially a paper tiger, unable to hurt America for any foreseeable future, and Japan potentially the great nation of Asia in any event, but they warn that all of Russia's teeth have not been pulled and her hostility to us remains a basic if finite problem.

From the perspective of national restraint they attack the fondest beliefs of left and right alike. The cold war crusade was largely nonsense, a perverse exercise in which we acted even more ideologically than the Russians. The United States must get out of Europe for Europe's sake, the exclusively American nuclear deterrent is folly of the highest order, and Eastern Europe can only become free through the essentially Gaulist solution of a reunion of Europe with both great powers eased out. In short, bury the corpse of NATO. Vietnam is an unnecessary tragedy, where we demean ourselves by fighting local nationalists under the guise of fighting an unreal Communist conspiracy. We should only counter "wars of national liberation" if the country involved is politically capable of defending itself. Nationalism not communism is the driving force of politics in virtually all of the world; indeed, it is the most important factor within the Communist "bloc" itself. With the exception of Western Europe and Japan the United States has few interests worth fighting for outside her own borders. So much for the hawks, which for Stillman and Pfaff are only one species of globalist fanatic.

But the doves come in for their licking also. Foreign aid, while justifiable to a limited extent on humanitarian grounds, is largely a fizzle—necessarily so, since the underdeveloped world is in a state of almost hopeless moral and political disorder as a result of the impact of Western civilization upon traditional societies. "There is no single world revolution." There is widespread disorder and turmoil not because most of mankind are marching toward a brave new world

—a march requiring and justifying our assistance—but because they are unable to cope with their multiple problems. In cautionary words addressed to doves and hawks alike Stillman and Pfaff contend that certain areas especially are of marginal concern to the United States. Africa should be kept quarantined from the cold war, while Latin America is really remote from us geographically as well as culturally. In general their advice is to let the developing nations stew in their own juice. Their attitude toward the United Nations is one of disdain, exemplified by the lack of attention they give to it. This is a blow at globalists of both stripes, though perhaps more wounding to the liberal ideologues with their visions of U Thant as the Messiah of Peace. Stillman and Pfaff also—quite significantly—give little attention to nuclear weapons. The implication is clear: whatever their destructiveness they have not changed the shape of world politics, an opinion closer to that of the Air Force generals than the peaceniks but of small comfort to either. In sum, the authors' attitude is negative and isolationist. The purpose of foreign policy is not to change the world but to protect nations—in this case America—so that they can go about their business of building better societies, physically and spiritually, at home. The quality of one's own life is the measure of one's national greatness.

The questions of the validity of their arguments and of their political relevance are difficult to separate since Stillman and Pfaff have challenged the mainstream of American self-evaluation on the broadest front possible. Many publicists in recent years have adopted a neo-isolationist position on considerably less than adequate grounds. Perhaps the most influential of these is Walter Lippmann. His notion that the United States is a distant sea power unable to make its will effective on the Asian mainland is only an archaism masquerading as profundity. Modern technology makes it possible for a major power such as the United States to act anywhere in the world insofar as sheer distance is concerned. We can do anything in Vietnam or Tibet for that matter that we can do in Harlem. The real point—which Stillman and Pfaff make—is that there may be little we can do in places such as Harlem either. American troops may be able to conquer any particular part of Asia or Africa as they did Mississippi when it barred a Negro student from its university. But can they change local attitudes in a desired direction by doing so? In their worldview most of the world is a Harlem or Watts or Alabama and we had better give priority to cleaning up our problems at home, though they are somewhat inconsistent as to how well we can do even here. In the contention that our power to effect social change

abroad in a desired direction is almost infinitely less than our ability to gain military control, they are clearly correct, indeed they make more sense than the conventional wisdom on almost every point. Where they go wrong—as in their optimism about India as a possible anchor in Asia—it is largely in not being faithful to their own general pessimism. They grossly underestimate the speed with which modern ideas will replace traditional ones in the underdeveloped world, but their belief that the end result will not be any happier for us or for the people involved is probably correct.

Above all, Stillman and Pfaff are clearly right about the essential motivations of American policy. President Johnson's fantastic speech to the American troops he visited in Korea last year—all the more significant because apparently off the cuff—in which he conjured up the spectre of a wealthy America outnumbered fifteen to one in a world where we desperately needed allies to survive is a sincere because unguarded reflection of the essential paranoia underlying our policies, a revelation of the madness behind the mask. Our inability to conceive of an America happily going about its business in a pluralistic world, our fear of a world not under our direct control or not remade in our own image is, they perceptively note, reflected in the talk of a Russo-American hegemony which will not only ward off China but in effect keep the de Gaulles and Castros and their ilk in their proper places. Uncertainty is the enemy.

But what happens if we turn our backs on most of the world and cultivate our garden? As Stillman and Pfaff recognize, the resources presently devoted to the arms and aid races will not be used for domestic reforms and needed public services. But what they do not sufficiently recognize is that our unfinished business at home is socially divisive. American globalism may serve many of the same functions for American politics that the partition of Africa did for the 19th Century balance of power in Europe, acting as a defusing and stabilizing force. Are we really ready to face the unfinished business of creating a great American society and letting the rest of the world be itself? Much would depend on the political and psychological conditions that inspired our new policies. A lofty, highminded, intellectually motivated renunciation of global ideologism as suggested by Stillman and Pfaff is unlikely; more likely is a turning inward in frustration and fear. Perhaps we can only save our souls by attempting to save those of others, however they may resent our attentions.

One special reason that the strictures of the authors of *Power and Impotence* will fall on deaf ears is the present state of American religious thinking and its

new relevance to public affairs. While their particular judgments and remedies are based on a hard-headed appraisal of things as they are—with which this writer at least finds it difficult to quarrel on most points—their basic attitude stems from a view of the nature of man and history. They are in tune with the so-called “neo-Augustinianism” of the “realist” school of international politics; they are spiritual exemplars of the movement of which Reinhold Niebuhr was a leader. Man is wicked, the world basically irredeemable, in the course of history new problems always replace the old. “History is flux; politics is human experience, dense and contradictory, and without ultimate fulfillments.” A decade ago this attitude could still be hailed as reflecting a perspective based on Christianity as well as common sense. Today, however, this kind of thinking is *vieux jeu*. The dominant impulse among Christians is toward redemption of the world. The old American messianism deplored by Stillman and Pfaff has been given a new lease on life. Churches that have long accepted the status quo and condemned the world as a veil of tears have discovered that whether or not God is dead man is alive. Among both Protestants and Catholics figures such as Harvey Cox stand for the rediscovery of a barely chastened social gospel, while among Catholics especially Teilhard de Chardin becomes the symbol of what is for them an unprecedented wave of optimism and commitment. As a result, churches and cloisters are bursting open as clerics and formerly withdrawn laymen alike seek ways of doing good. On the domestic scene the objects of reform are fairly obvious. The race problem is there and requires action, however effective some of the solutions offered by the religiously motivated may or may not be. But what of international politics? Is the parousia of peace and prosperity for all a meaningful goal? Stillman and Pfaff believe that both peace and freedom are geographically divisible, the world can exist half slave and half free, a decent American must live in a world of woe. The new breed of Christians will refuse to accept such a statement. To the essentially cyclical or at least static view of the human condition offered in this book, the new Christians oppose a linear conception of man's destiny. 1984 can be a happier year than predicted. The new breed may be wrong, but at least they are consistent. For if America is redeemable so too is the world; if the world is irredeemable because of man's innate ill will and necessary folly, so too is America. In asserting their doctrine of American “exceptionalism” Stillman and Pfaff are guilty of that very American pride and self-centeredness of which they so trenchantly accuse our policy makers. Perhaps we humans live or die together after all.

**Utopia, the Perennial Heresy**

Thomas Molnar. Sheed & Ward. 245 pp. \$5.95

Dr. Molnar devotes this book to "criticism of the utopian pattern of thought," a pattern which he discerns not only in the works of Karl Marx, for example, but in those of Terhard de Chardin as well. He attempts to show "that utopianism" is "not only wrong in the light of rational arguments and by the experience of life, but that it is also a demonstrably moral evil."

**Religion and the Search for New Ideals in the USSR**

William C. Fletcher and Anthony J. Strover, eds. Praeger. 135 pp. \$5.00

An editorial note explains that from Russian publications "it is apparent that important elements in Soviet society are dissatisfied with the officially promulgated tenets of Marxism Leninism and are searching for an alternative to what they consider an obsolescing ideology. In order to assess the role that religion is playing in this process, the Institute for the Study of the USSR in Munich, Germany, held an international symposium from April 25 to 27, 1966. Specialists from seven countries, including representatives of the Christian Churches, Islam, and Judaism, took part. The chapters of this volume grew out of the papers presented to the symposium and their discussion."

**Parasitism and Subversion: The Case of Latin America**

Stanislav Andreski. Pantheon. 303 pp. \$5.95

The author, who has lived and taught in South and Continental Africa and in Latin America, interprets and explains attitudes, structures and mores of the various Latin American nations, and discusses the revolutions in Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala and Cuba at some length. His aim, he says, "has been to provide new insights into casual connections rather than to present hitherto unrecorded data"; and he offers these "as a contribution to general understanding of the factors which foster or impede the progress of human societies towards a decent social order."

**Vietcong**

Douglas Pike. M.I.T. Press. 490 pp. \$8.95

Douglas Pike has for the last six years been attached to the U.S. Embassy in Saigon as an official of the USIA. His study of the National Liberation Front, written while on leave at M.I.T., focuses on the organization of the N.L.F. and its communication activities. It is based upon some 800 internal documents captured in battle, 2,000 examples of printed propaganda, and interviews with 100 Viet Cong defectors, and much of this material is reproduced in this volume.

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