

worldview

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POETS AND POLITICS

It is a fact that most practicing American poets are opposed to the war in Vietnam and are producing a large number of protest poems. But what is one to make of the fact? Is it a passing curiosity worth only a moment's attention? does it simply confirm a popular notion about poets? or does it tell us something about ourselves as a people?

Those who have a professional interest in politics and international affairs are not likely to pause long over the opposition of the poets. The reasons are simple: the poets are few in number; granting some few exceptions, they tend to be politically unsophisticated; they are generally critical and not constructive; and, in terms of organizing for a political purpose, they are ineffectual. A number of the poets would admit these charges as valid descriptions but would reject the conclusions that are generally drawn; they would insist that their response to the war is not insignificant and should not be brushed aside. Confronting each other over Vietnam, the poet and the politician would each feel that he had devastated the other's position while remaining untouched himself. In fact, their arguments would have bypassed each other in an almost total lack of communication.

The poet and the politician in this paradigm can fairly be said to represent two different ways of viewing not only Vietnam, but political affairs generally. The literary approach of the poet tends toward an extreme in which the world is seen as material to be shaped rather than as an arena in which continuing intractable problems demand continuing decisions and acts. In this approach the "significant" concrete particular is of high importance and is used to communicate the quality of experience and to evoke a response appropriate to it. But the decision-maker, the political scientist, tends toward an approach which emphasizes quantification, the measurable, the balancing and choosing between relativities of greater and lesser evil, the advice of the specialist and the expert. The vision of a sensitive, and talented artist is altogether too vaporous and intangible an ingredient to introduce into the decision-making process.

It may be that the differences drawn here between simplified concepts of the poet and the politician are constant fac-

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**RELIGION, PEACE
AND THE REALISTS**

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tors in human affairs and are not to be overcome. Perhaps there will always be an irreconcilable difference between those who emphasize the unique, irreplaceable value of the individual person and who spend their lives in an attempt to understand and communicate that value, and those who stress the significance of the quantifiable aspects of existence and the need to find and act upon them if society is to develop in some rational fashion. Perhaps. But it is not evident that the familiar distinctions between the "tender minded" and the "tough minded," between the visionary and the planner, the subjective insight and the objective conclusion, the artist and the scientist — it is not evident that these distinctions establish human divisions which cannot be overcome. What is evident, however, is that they do now exist and are disturbingly apparent in our present debates.

It would not change the essential terms of our present national controversy if those on each side recognized what can *not* generally be expected from those on the other side. The politician is not to be considered inhuman and unfeeling, for example, because he does not publicly express compassion for the individuals suffering under the

punishment of his nation's weapons. If he acknowledges such suffering he must, inevitably, attempt to diminish its importance relative to proclaimed national goals. And this, in fact, is what happens when the government officials respond to questions and charges about, for example, civilian deaths, torture, and especially repugnant forms of warfare. Those who support U. S. policy must see these aspects of war as part of the "lesser evil" which is enjoined if a greater evil is to be avoided. Without the political person who will bear this burden, we would not have an organized society.

The poet, on the other hand, is not to be dismissed as fatuous or foolish because he does not suggest politically viable alternatives to the actions which he criticizes. Even those who regard themselves as fair, humane people can become hardened to the sufferings of others, particularly if they are at a cultural distance. The poet acts to overcome that distance, and to stress that evil is evil even when it is lesser. At his best the poet is upholding high ideals and standards which in times of great conflict are slighted or discounted. Without the poet, and all that he represents, we would not have a society worth organizing. J.F.

in the magazines

No flags or hortatory orations marked *The Spectator's* celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, whose signatories renounced war as a solution to international problems. For shortly thereafter, the British weekly recalls (issue of February 24), "Hitler was master of Germany, and the world had embarked on the bloodiest phase in its history." And yet today, at Geneva, "the world leaders are . . . engaged in drafting a second Kellogg — this time to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons." While "there is no reason to believe that it would be followed by the disasters that followed its predecessor, there is

equally no reason to suppose that it would be any more effective in preventing them."

For one thing there is vigorous dissent by members of the European community. Their "crucial objection" to the enterprise "is that the draft treaty that Britain, America and Russia have agreed rules out any possibility of a European nuclear force until such time as the six countries of the E.E.C. are genuinely one. That is, it rules out a European nuclear force at the intermediate stage envisaged by the Rome Treaty and almost all believers in European unity as the only possible route towards full integration: the stage at