

AMERICA TODAY: ARE WE AT A WATERSHED?

The following articles are a response to a single question or, perhaps more accurately, comments on a single theme. In January of 1967, in his State of the Union address, President Johnson said: "We are in the midst of a great transition — a transition from narrow nationalism to international partnership; from the harsh spirit of the cold war to the hopeful spirit of common humanity on a troubled and a threatened planet."

In the following month W. W. Rostow, a Special Assistant to the President, picked up this theme for an address he delivered at the University of Leeds. In that address, entitled "The Great Transition: Tasks of the First and Second Postwar Generations," he said, "I believe we are now — potentially — in a true watershed period. We can make some shape out of the major experiences through which we have all passed since 1945. We can define some of the dangers, challenges, and possibilities which are beginning to grip the world community and which will increasingly engage it in the years ahead."

Mr. Rostow's view is one which many people share — but from which many dissent. For example, in a notable essay which he wrote as a student in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, A. Michael Washburn, a member of the "second postwar generation," concluded: "I should say that Rostow's view that Vietnam will be the last great confrontation of the postwar era is wrong because

it underestimates the potential for violence in the present international system, because it underestimates the stability of the standoff between East and West and the impediments to the development of regional and international institutions, and because it misjudges the role of the United States in this future world by making the assumption that this country will continue to be as powerful, independent, influential, respected, and right as Rostow thinks it has been in the past. At the base of these calculations is a profound preference for the status quo, for order and moderation, and it is in this preference that Rostow is most out of touch with world preferences and probabilities. The danger is that the United States, in pursuing the maintenance of the status quo, will increase the scope and intensity of violence and will lose the opportunities it has for guiding the considerable forces for revolutionary change which exist."

It is evident that Dr. Rostow has raised large questions of immediate importance. And it should be equally evident that they are to be answered less on the basis of expertise in a particular discipline than on the basis of a worldview that is responsive both to the individual person and to the political communities of which he is a member. For the tenth anniversary issue of this journal, various members of the Board of Trustees of the Council on Religion and International Affairs were asked to comment on Dr. Rostow's observations.

Ed.

Our National Policies: Time For a Change

John C. Bennett

I think that Dr. Rostow imposes upon the present situation a mistaken view of "dangers and challenges and possibilities." As I understand him, he thinks of the war in Vietnam as a war against aggression or against "wars of national liberation" which, if successful, will help humanity to turn a corner and to

enter upon a more stable and peaceful stage of history. On the contrary, this war causes us to miss opportunities to create some conditions for peace through agreements with the Soviet Union as the other major nuclear power, to improve through cooperation with the Soviet Union the actual institutions of world order represented primarily by the United Nations.

Also, in Vietnam we are not dealing primarily with aggression, for the frontier between North and South Vietnam is only a temporary line of demarcation rather than a firm international boundary. What our government calls aggression has the psychology of a civil war. We are dealing with a dual civil war, a civil war between the North and the South involving

people with a common sense of nationality, and a civil war within the South. Our massive presence as a predominantly white and seemingly imperialist power goes against the grain of nationalism in Vietnam as a whole. The fact that we increasingly appear as an alien intruder reduces what is believed to be the stabilizing effect of our being there.

The assumption that the defeat of the forces of revolution and subversion in Vietnam will give considerable assurance that similar forces will not have success elsewhere is highly questionable. The effect of such forces will depend upon the local situation. If they can only be defeated by the presence of a half-million Americans and by our enormous technological power, that is an indication that in other situations such forces may well win because the American people are unlikely to permit their government to repeat this degree of intervention.

But the most serious aspect of Dr. Rostow's view of this period of history is the apparent assumption that the United States should be poised to strangle movements of subversion and revolution wherever they appear, especially in Asia and Latin America. It is time for our country to renounce this ideological stance. American policy is distorted by the professional preoccupation with "counterinsurgency" in our government and by the widely accepted dogma that, in defense of the status quo, we should oppose all insurgents. It is not for us to say that, given the actual alternatives, a revolution, even a Communist revolution, is the greatest of evils. If the unity of international communism had been preserved, there would be something to be said for this determination to prevent Communist revolutions from being successful because of the threat that "the free world" might be overwhelmed by a growing and united world communism. The break-up of the Communist monolith greatly reduced this danger. We should not deny other nations the right to have their own revolutions. To intervene unilaterally wherever we smell a danger of revolution is to play God with the destinies of nations. It is to put us in many cases on the side of oligarchies that lack the will to do anything to rescue the majority of the people from poverty and hunger. It is preposterous for this wealthy country to decide unilaterally what is best for the more deprived half of the world's inhabitants.

Dr. Bennett is President of Union Theological Seminary and Chairman of the Editorial Board of *Christianity and Crisis*. His many books have dealt with the interaction of ethics, social justice and politics. Most recently he has published *Foreign Policy in Christian Perspective*.

Often it is assumed that it is our responsibility to intervene in such a way as to help other nations find the way to democracy. Where we can help other nations to prepare the way for democratic institutions, well and good, but let us not decide to do this at *all* costs to their people or to our own society, even to the morale of our democratic institutions. The experience of Greece has often been used to refute the optimism of this kind of American idealism. The assumption that if we try hard enough we can bring about the realization of a democratic alternative in most situations is an illusion. The experience of scores of new nations, including one that seemed to be as promising as Nigeria, should give us pause. There are aspects of a political structure that is based upon law and that provides freedom for persons and for political minorities which are very precious. Where they exist they should be preserved, and nations that lack them will for the most part have to find their own way to them. I wish that it were easier to help them without doing more harm than good, but we need to be aware of all of the pitfalls.



Professor Reischauer, while careful to warn against what might be interpreted as defeat in Vietnam now that we are there, uses our effort in Vietnam as an example of what not to do. He says: "Vietnam has shown all too clearly the absurdity of the concept that we can play the role of policeman for all Asia." He also says, in suggesting a rule of thumb to guide policies in Asia: "Any regime that is not strong enough to defend itself against internal enemies probably could not be defended by us and may not be worth defending anyway." This is not "neo-isolationism" but a realistic recognition of the limits of the power of the greatest power when it seeks to influence the political life of another people.

History does have its watersheds, but they cannot be seen in terms of Dr. Rostow's view of this period of history. I do not see that we are at the beginning of a new era in which American power, *used as it is*

now being used, can open hopeful doors. Our power was used successfully in Europe after 1945 to help nations to recover from the war's devastation. We did not have to help them to establish political institutions for the first time. Above all, we did not have to help them to find constructive alternatives to a Communist revolution. Already the nations of Western Europe had found their way to such alternatives. Already they had, as a result of an evolutionary process, two of the major effects promised in the case of a Communist revolution: modernization and a considerable measure of social justice. This is what makes what we helped come to pass in Europe so different from what we are trying to bring about in South Vietnam.

The real watersheds suggest the need of a radical change of American policy.

These watersheds should cause us to work with the Soviet Union for maximum agreements in the area of the control of nuclear weapons and in the reduction of tensions in Europe and in the Middle East. The cold war in Europe has lost most of its importance but we are prevented in part by our involvement in Vietnam from making the most of this change.

They should lead the United States to take a more sympathetic attitude toward Communist China, to seek to overcome its isolation, to be more aware of our responsibility for China's fears for her own security. Let us extricate ourselves completely from the part that we play now in the Chinese civil war through our commitment to the Nationalist government on Taiwan. China has enormous potential power; she is now weak and cautious; she is a human community that seeks a position of dignity among the nations; her power, as it develops, can only be balanced by the vital national power of her neighbors. The American presence in Asia should not be designed to surround China with a wall of hostility but to help her neighbors that seek our help to achieve their own national health and strength. At present we are in the process of destroying the national substance of one of these neighbors.

They should cause us to look to our own moral and social and political health as a nation. We cannot do much to help others find the way to justice and freedom when our own government and even our political processes are distrusted by our people as much as they are, when we are so helpless in the presence of the failure of our cities, and when we are torn by racial conflict growing out of this failure. We should care for others, but should know the limits of our power and the extent to which our most relevant power abroad is diminished by our failures as a community at home.

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