

# For America, A Special Moment

*Jerald C. Brauer*

Are we in a watershed period in the world community today? It is impossible to say. In politics, particularly in international relations, there is a general tendency to speak of turning points, basic shifts, or watersheds. This is understandable. Of all forms of politics, foreign affairs is most fraught with danger and frustration. Affairs stumble from crisis to crisis; tension is the common element. Thus concerned men are constantly searching the signs of the times for a genuine turning point in foreign affairs.

The basic problem in locating and defining such a turning point is the lack of perspective. It is easier to look backward and to note the fundamental shifts that occurred in foreign affairs than it is to mark a contemporary watershed. The problem is how far back one must look before there is sufficient perspective to analyze both the emergence and the consequence of a basic change in the world situation. A man who can do that in contemporary affairs is a political prophet, but there are few such prophets.

The temptation is to speak constantly of watersheds or turning points as a nation seeks to assess its role in a situation that is more frustrating than usual. What may be primarily the intensification of a trend or the full working out of a slow development is quickly interpreted as a dividing line between present and future. In that way a nation can be urged to take extraordinary steps to deal with the situation. *This*, it is asserted, is a turning point in history; therefore, people can be asked to sustain a special effort in the hope that it will change things fundamentally. In any watershed, the next period will be different. It must be interpreted as being potentially better, or the people will not make the sacrifice required to cross the divide. But because of immediate pressures in a critical situation, it is virtually impossible to have the necessary perspective to recognize a true watershed in political affairs.

American involvement in Vietnam is a case in point. This has become an extraordinary involvement for the United States. In order to make sense of American participation, many arguments have been advanced.

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Some argue that this marks a watershed in our foreign policy: The world situation has so developed that another Vietnam type involvement seems highly unlikely for all nations. Everybody will have learned that the price is too high. The primary aggressors (really Red China) will have discovered that they cannot gain their goals by such tactics. The secondary aggressors, North Vietnam, will have learned that they cannot accomplish their plans by force. Furthermore, this argument continues, the standoff that results between East and West will force both sides to seek ways other than massive military involvement as a strategy.

Vietnam is thus interpreted by these people as the last great confrontation of the postwar era, and it marks the watershed in the period since World War II. Is this interpretation plausible? It is fraught with wishful thinking, and it is probably a very subtle self-defense for our present involvement in Vietnam. If Vietnam is to be viewed as the last large-scale military involvement of the post-World-War-II period, then our participation supposedly can be justified. America's sacrifices will not have been in vain, they will have paved the way for a more rational, peaceful world. We will have demonstrated the folly of aggression. The situation will have proved that nobody can really win or defeat the other. It will be clear to all that the nations, East and West, have arrived at a relative stalemate in which they must live without recourse to large-scale conflict.

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I cannot see that we have arrived at such a watershed in foreign affairs. Such an interpretation appears to be more a defense of our war in Vietnam than it does an accurate analysis of the future. Our involvement in Vietnam colors so much of our thinking that it is virtually impossible to think about the immediate future. But we have no choice. We must think about the immediate future while we are in Vietnam. However, strenuous effort must be made to see the situation not apart from the war in Vietnam but apart from our justification for being there.

If we are not interested in justifying the cost of Vietnam but in understanding where the world is, several things appear clear. We are not yet at a watershed situation. Two things are basically unchanged in the post-World-War-II epoch — nationalism and revolution. Nationalism remains the predominant spirit of our age and of the immediate future, so far as I can see. Nothing that has happened in Asia (including Vietnam) or in Africa, contradicts that fact. To be sure, the forms and interests of nationalism have shifted somewhat in Europe, but they have not

been replaced by a new international spirit and certainly not by emerging international institutions. Nationalism has appeared invulnerable even to Marxism, as the Chinese and Russian experiences demonstrate.

Revolution rather than evolution, or the orderly process of development, appears as the primary force of change coupled with nationalism. Together they make a potent and disruptive team. They do not appear to be weakening or modifying. What is happening is a widening rift between nations possessing national autonomy and a developing economy and those nations struggling for national autonomy while caught in a seemingly inescapable underdeveloped economy. The situation has deteriorated in the past decade.

It appears likely that the world will see more revolutions and unrest in the immediate future. The urge for national autonomy will not diminish; it will increase. The desires of former colonial peoples and the frustrations of nations that have been dominated economically from the outside have no sign of diminution. The growing gulf between the haves and have-nots acerbates the world condition. America is sitting on a powder keg in the form of her neighbors to the south. Cuba was but the first symbol of the over-all problem. In short, the opportunities for violence and upheaval have in no sense lessened in the past decade. They have increased.

Vietnam has not taught necessary lessons to anybody. The possibility of another major clash as large as Vietnam remains constantly with the world, and would not be diminished even if peace were to come to Vietnam tomorrow. There was only one decade between Korea and Vietnam. Nationalism and revolution are conditions of our time. They cannot be argued out of existence or destroyed. It is dubious that they can or ought to be contained. Perhaps more realistic ways can be found to work constructively with them. Though one political goal must be the avoidance of violence, it inheres in the modern situation among nations. To think or act as if violence is about to be brought under rational control because of the price paid by all combatants in Vietnam is wishful thinking.

It would be far more realistic to assume that we have arrived at no watershed in foreign relations. Nationalism and revolution remain the two central forces of our epoch, and violence and irrational action are always barely below the surface. Nevertheless, there remain ways of working with such forces in order to minimize the dangers to world peace.

History is composed both of necessity and of freedom. Though we cannot escape nationalism and revolution in the contemporary world, we are not

necessarily doomed to respond in only one way. There are various forms and stages both in nationalism and in revolution. These are not abstract forces; they are always encountered in concrete form in given nations and in specific contexts. What is needed is a flexibility in the light of national purposes so that given nations and specific contexts can be approached with genuine openness, looking for a tolerable solution for all participants. The rationalistic assumption that large-scale violence is no longer possible is premature and self-defeating. It would probably lead to such violence or foreclose creative alternatives because of a gross miscalculation.

Perhaps there is one area where it is proper to speak of a watershed, but even here great care must be taken. It is clear that something drastically different has happened to the United States internally during the past decade. The domestic scene appears vastly different from the situation since World War II and since Korea. Because internal developments have a profound effect on a nation's conduct of foreign affairs, this basic shift in American life cannot be overlooked. It is not the world situation but this fundamental change within American society that will probably prevent the United States from again getting involved in a morass like Vietnam.

A special moment has arrived for American society. It takes no prophet to discuss this, and it requires but one decade of perspective to notice it. The heart of the American experience is being questioned, and the American people cannot ignore the challenge. It is the most severe test of "the lively experiment" since the Civil War. At stake is the viability of the American concept of democracy. The heart of the challenge is the ability of American society to include its Negro citizens as fully and completely as any other citizen. To date, the United States has demonstrated its inability to do this. Though genuine advances have been made in the last decade, the process of including Negroes fully within American society has barely begun.

A series of grave issues, not unrelated to the search for justice by the American Negro, now confront the American people and challenge their form of democracy. The disintegration and squalor of the major cities, the outbreak of lawlessness and violence, the crisis in public education, and the growing schism between the poor and the affluent are but the key problems now agitating the American public. For the first time in its position of world responsibility, the United States must contend with problems of such gravity at home. These are not ephemeral or passing

issues; they are fundamental for the survival of democracy at home.

A second major shift has occurred in American life, and it has significant consequences for our conduct of world affairs. In part it grows out of the above issues. A moral revulsion has gripped a significant proportion of the American population. It is utterly opposed to our involvement in Vietnam, and it is opposed on moral grounds! This is not a crackpot fringe segment of the population, nor is it Communist-inspired. The roots of the moral revulsion are found in American democracy itself and in the religious institutions of the nation. In no sense is this to be confused with the abstract pacifism of the twenties and thirties. It is in opposition not so much to war in general as it is to this particular war.

What consequences will this have for American conduct of foreign affairs? It is too early to say except to affirm that it will affect foreign policy. It is possible that this moral revulsion against the Vietnam war will develop into an opposition against all forms of war — into a genuine form of pacifism. It is more likely that it will develop a standing opposition against wars like Vietnam. That is, a sizeable proportion of the American people will not easily be drawn again into a Vietnam-type operation, and this will force a search for new ways of fulfilling our international responsibilities. Perhaps we will have to become more

open to revolutionary aspirations of peoples. Probably we will have to rethink a policy based on present spheres of influence. Certainly we will have to develop a new policy for Asia.

A growing proportion of the American people now view the price of war in Vietnam as the possible loss of democracy in America. As this issue becomes clearer either the American people will want to rethink a foreign policy that demands similar involvements in the future or they may be tempted to set aside the pressing questions at home in order to carry on the so-called battle for a free society "over there." The first case is not to be confused with earlier isolationism. The situation both at home and abroad is totally different. Sensitive Americans do not wish to crawl into their shells and let the world go its own way. They think the time has come to deal with the fundamental issues at home in order to preserve and develop the democracy which they seek to represent abroad.

One mark of this changed mood is the shift in the form of patriotism that has long marked the United States. It is almost impossible to whip up the one hundred per cent red-blooded, American-type patriotism that prevailed even through Korea. Efforts have been made but with little success. Why? For one reason, love of country and loyalty to its purposes no longer take that form. Certainly it ought not to be understood in stimulus-response terms. It is equally clear that many Americans feel ashamed of American participation in Vietnam. It is not in keeping with the highest traditions of this democratic nation. Some people support it as a nasty thing to be gotten over, but many refuse to support it at all. Few seem willing to defend our role on purely patriotic grounds.

These three factors in the domestic scene combine to produce a new situation for American policy in world affairs. We have not begun to assess their effects, but they will have profound consequences. We do not have the resources, moral or physical, to work through the basic issues confronting democracy at home and to conduct our foreign affairs in the way to which we have become accustomed. This is not just a question of economic and manpower resources; it is equally, if not more, a question of our moral stance. In a democracy such as ours we cannot long remain politically schizoid, presenting one face to ourselves at home and another to other peoples. If we have reached a watershed, it will be discerned not in our foreign policy but in the conditions of our own society — upon which our foreign policy must ultimately depend.

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