

## MORALITY AND MERE POLITICS...

"There is in this land a certain restlessness, a questioning," the President acknowledged in his State of the Union message. And to his own question of "why, why this restlessness?" he responded: "Because when a great ship cuts through the seas, the waters are stirred and troubled. And our ship is moving. . . ."

What the President overlooked in his neat metaphor is that not only the waters but a large number of passengers and even part of the crew are stirred and troubled too. The reasons are many for the dissatisfactions in our society are great. Undeniably, however, Vietnam has become the focus as well as the source of many of these dissatisfactions. One result is that people who have previously given little serious thought to politics generally and even less thought to international politics are now intensely involved and speak with deep and sincere conviction about Vietnam and its myriad attendant problems. Since Vietnam is an extremely serious problem for America, serious interest must be welcomed and encouraged. Unfortunately some of the most resounding statements made by ordinarily thoughtful people — statements quite evidently born of anguish and concern — are intellectually frivolous rather than grave, confusing rather than clarifying, damaging rather than helpful to the position they would uphold.

When, for example, a number of religious journals acting in cooperation took strong stands against the war in Vietnam, one of the Catholic journals, *The Critic*, declared: "It is now clear that the war can no longer be considered merely a political issue. Rather, it is a moral question which American citizens as individuals must resolve for themselves. To us only one conclusion seems valid: the United States should get the hell out of Vietnam."

The conclusion aside, these assertions are intellectually disgraceful, making a hash of any meaningful politico-moral discriminations. In saying Vietnam is "*no longer . . . merely a political issue*," the journal implies it once was. But when was the war in Vietnam — or any war for that matter — "*merely a political issue*," divorced from moral considerations? What wondrous line of demarcation was crossed when the issue ceased to be "*merely political*" and entered into the apparently higher realm of being "*a moral question*"? And having become a moral question, is it to be answered according to some moral framework marvelously free of the hard, gritty particulars in which the political issues are imbedded?

The journal further suggests that having become a "*moral issue*" it must, apparently, be decided in a fashion that differs from the way in which political decisions are made: it is one

"which American citizens as individuals must decide for themselves." But to pursue the meaning that supposedly inheres in this sentence is to get entangled in another series of unanswered questions. For how else do American citizens decide questions except as individuals, and for themselves? That they depend for information, guidance and support upon the various communities of which they are a part is both true and inevitable. But so must anyone who attempts to think through the troubled situation in Vietnam.

Any publication that enters our national debate about Vietnam on the level of this journal not only confuses important issues that need constant clarification, and damages the very cause it purports to uphold, but exposes itself as an easy target to those who would dismiss critics of Administration policy. For it badly confuses the relation between politics and morality, and the way in which citizens exercise their political will. A moral problem in the political arena is also a political problem and must be solved by political means. Those who, adopting a high moral stance, suggest otherwise are simply being self-indulgent.

## ... POLITICS AND MERE MORALITY

Those who would sever the relation between politics and morality, asserting the priority of morality, have their counterparts in those who would make the same disjunction but would assert the priority and even superiority of politics. For example, earlier this month the *Chicago Tribune* carried an editorial entitled "No 'Moral Nonsense' for de Gaulle." The editorial praised the way in which France, in contrast to the United States and the United Kingdom, was conducting its policies with South Africa. For France now expects to sell to South Africa the several hundred million dollars worth of arms that Britain refused to sell for stated moral reasons. "The truth of the matter is that moral considerations have very little more to do with the positions of Britain and the United Nations and the United States than they do with the position of France or, for that matter, South Africa." And the *Tribune* went on to develop this proposition:

"Britain and the United States are in a jam because we have tried to clothe our actions in moralistic arguments which, in fact, had relatively little to do with matters. By doing this, we have shackled ourselves to a policy which is as senseless as it is futile. The Afro-Asian leaders know this and are making the most of it. President de Gaulle has left morals out of it, has assumed no commitments, and is thus free to do what he wants without offending anyone."

President de Gaulle's approach to this particular problem may have virtues absent from the approach of Britain and the United States, but if so it is not because those policies are divorced from morality. Both *The Critic* and the *Chicago Tribune* have attempted to support partisan opinions not by confronting the admittedly tough problems of making decisions that are practically desirable and morally acceptable, but by dissolving them. There is little to recommend the approach of either — basically so similar — except to say that they have a number of supporters. But their positions are not those that provide the guidance that we need so desperately in our present crisis.

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### OUR NEXT ISSUE

is devoted to politics and the church. *Thomas S. Derr* distinguishes between ethical rhetoric and ethical reality as he examines responses to both the war in Vietnam and the recent war in the Middle East. *Paul Bock* considers the ways in which the churches have spoken on the issues of disarmament and arms control. And *Edward Duff, S.J.* offers a considered comment on a much debated book, *Who Speaks for the Church?* by Paul Ramsey.