

RING OUT THE OLD RING IN...?

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"Our foreign policy must always be an extension of this nation's domestic policy. Our safest guide to what we do abroad is a good look at what we are doing at home."

So said Lyndon Baines Johnson and so say many other citizens in this country, not all of whom would agree with President Johnson's assessment of what, in fact, we are doing at home. A sound assessment is not, admittedly, easy to come by, the available facts lending themselves to the widely different interpretations that are being placed upon them. For example: how has the United States fared in confronting and coping with that now familiar trinity of poverty, racism and the war in Vietnam? Concerned observers, quite sincerely, read the evidence in different ways.

Has the once highly touted "war on poverty" resulted in any significant victories? If we can once get by the argument that definitions of poverty are totally subjective—yes, Mr. Interrogator, the poor American has more than the poor Indian in Calcutta, but no Mr. Interrogator, this does not mean that there are no objective determinants, and, yes, one can set measurable, definable standards—we can say that the number of families below the accepted "poverty line" in the United States has gradually decreased since 1959. The rate has been slow (approximately 1% per year) but the change has been in the right direction. And, in addition, even those below the defined poverty line have greater incomes than previously they did. Nevertheless, the 1968 Report of the Citizens' Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States stated that "malnutrition among the poor has risen sharply over the last decade." And as Michael Harrington pointed out, while the measurable absolute income of the poor increased, the absolute income of the average family increased at a much greater rate, the result being that "the poor had even less of a share of affluence."

What relation, if any, does this have to racism or, more innocuously, to the number of Negroes who are poor? Negroes, who make up approximately eleven per cent of the population, constituted twenty-five per cent of those below the poverty line in 1959. Of the smaller number of people below these minimal standards in 1966, Negroes constituted thirty-three per cent. Measured in these terms the gap between white and black increased rather than the reverse.

Other pieces of evidence lead to the same kind of unsatisfactory and conflicting evidence. A number of Government agencies and departments offer statistics that allow one to conclude that, in terms of economic and political power, the Negro has made appreciable advances in the last eight years of Democratic administration. Nevertheless, Kenneth B. Clark, an influential and respected sociologist has stated:

"The homicide rate and the delinquency rate in Negro ghettos, which are higher than in most other areas of the Northern cities, have not decreased. The ugliness of the ghetto has not decreased. Most Negroes are still restricted to ghettos by income and white resistance. Ghetto business continues to be unstable, inefficient and for the most part controlled by absentee owners."

And his description continues in an orderly and convincing fashion. Supporting evidence is not lacking. In his message to Congress in February 1968 President Johnson cited the existence of "shameful substandard units of misery where more than 20 million Americans still live."

There is a general agreement that our nation has the resources and ability to construct a decent home for every American family. There is less than general agreement that our nation has the will to use them.

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With no claim to editorial prescience the *New York Times* asserted that "for the rest of this century the United States probably will be judged primarily on its success in building domestic racial equality and tranquility." If this is indeed true, what future judgment can we expect on our present accomplishments—or lack thereof? If, in President Johnson's terms, we take "a good look at what we are doing at home," what are the portents? Aside from the evidence that can be totted up in terms of graphs and percentages, annual incomes and the number of housing units, there is the less tangible evidence of how people feel about our present political structures.

Late in 1968, a series of studies indicated that most of our citizens were dissatisfied not only with our Chief Executive but with Congress and the Supreme Court as well. Nor does the narrow victory gained by Richard Nixon suggest that he was swept into office with an enthusiasm that could overcome, if only temporarily, this widespread uneasiness about the political leadership and political institutions of this country. In terms of the domestic scene, Richard Nixon takes office with few of the advantages that have attended the elections of his predecessors of the last several decades.

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Is our present foreign policy "an extension of this nation's domestic policy"? Some of President Johnson's harshest critics would agree that it is.

Indeed their strongest criticism insists that both our present domestic and foreign policies stem from a central vision, a single impulse, a unified view of the world that inevitably and inexorably favors the few at the expense of the many. Still other critics of our foreign policy see the war in Vietnam as an aberration in the application of sound political principles, the result of a series of misguided judgments the consequences of which became only gradually apparent. Those who continue to defend both the policy and its implementation in Vietnam have an increasingly difficult time. Not only—or even primarily—because the "peace talks" in Paris are proving both awkward and sometimes ugly, but because they can no longer appeal to the domestic consensus which supported those foreign policies the United States has followed, with more or less fidelity, over the last several decades.

One year ago, in the pages of *Commonweal*, William Pfaff wrote:

"We have practiced consensus for the last three decades, a liberal consensus. But now things are coming apart and liberalism finds itself at a dead stop. It has nothing new to say; it does not comprehend its failure. The racial and urban crisis, the stalemated war and crisis of foreign policy, evoke only the old words, the old remedies. The liberal movement itself is coming apart."

If his analysis is accurate, the labels that are being applied to the outgoing Administration of Johnson and the new Administration of Nixon are misleading rather than informative. If the analysis is accurate and things are becoming unstuck, the new Administration—and the nation—must do more than simply accept or reject, defend or criticize the bases of present policies. Our course for the next several years is not yet charted.

J.F.

With this issue we welcome Edmund Stillman as a regular contributor to the pages of *worldview*. Formerly a foreign service officer and now a consultant to the Hudson Institute and a Senior Associate at the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, Mr. Stillman is co-author (with William Pfaff) of three books on international affairs and modern history.