

OLD YEAR OUT, NEW YEAR IN

Edmund Stillman

The last days of the old year underlined the painful truth once again — America is the blind giant, its three astronauts circling the moon in a dizzying display of technologic expertise, while on earth its diplomats and statesmen played out the bizarre farce attending the release of the *Pueblo* crewmen from North Korean captivity and simultaneously lapsed into an exchange of invective with the Saigon junta we once hailed as a vehicle for the constitutional salvation of South Vietnam.

The Apollo 8 journey was, of course, wholly admirable—a stunning reversal of America's space fortunes in little more than a decade. What money, organization, application, and no doubt a vast engineering talent can do, the United States has done in space. But what a sad contrast is the *Pueblo* affair!

At Panmunjom the United States signed a confession of guilt—an admission that the *Pueblo* on its espionage mission had penetrated North Korean waters—in order to free the crewmen, even as its representative denounced the confession as false. Alas, the world is not likely to believe America. Not much is left of the old American reputation for reliability and a naive addiction to the truth. There have been too many expedient choices made since we took up the cold war challenge more than a fifth of a century ago, too many evasions, too many outright and clumsy lies told, as often as not when the truth would have been served as well.

•

But the *Pueblo* incident was always an essentially trivial affair—public rhetoric to the contrary. The sad truth is that the general public, which had reacted with a rush of blood to the head when the ship was captured, had pretty well forgotten the men when their release was obtained. And the real position of the United States as the dominant power in East Asian waters was never really at issue either. Nor even was North Korea's "new aggressiveness," as part of that alleged orchestration of a new military threat on our Korean front to coincide with the enemy's disastrously effective Tet offensive last year in Vietnam. The expected North Korean push against the south, by armed invasion or stepped-up guerrilla infiltration, was never much more than the fevered imagining of Pentagon officials and hardshell newspaper

fancies fed by the apparently less-than-candid intelligence appreciations of the South Korean government in Seoul.

Twelve months later all is quiet, or nearly so. No doubt the Pyongyang government in the north would like to subvert the south; no doubt the north will continue to send infiltration teams below the 38th Parallel; no doubt minor military clashes will occur along the frontier. But just as likely the North Koreans—so badly hurt in their first military encounter with the United States eighteen years ago and dependent as they are on the Soviet Union, itself a state increasingly troubled on its Central European and Middle Eastern flanks—will not march.

And why should they? Surely not to open the only kind of war that the United States knows how to fight—a war to repel a clearly identifiable invader—at a time when the American electorate shows signs of increasing weariness with the whole concept of limited wars, ones fought with limited weaponry in a limited arena. America today, after the painful experience of Vietnam, is a warweary nation: it gives every evidence of a dangerous mood, a desire for withdrawal now that might, by imprudent enemy action, veer into a frantic desire to finish things off once and for all.

No, what was really disquieting about the *Pueblo* affair, and indeed remains disquieting about the whole foreign policy of the United States, is the way exaggeration has been allowed to pass for sober fact. And this is more than the defect of the men who make our policy; it is the defect of most of those who criticize policy as well.

•

The sad truth is that after nearly a quarter century of involvement in world affairs, there is a nearly universal habit of crisis in the United States—and if there is not a real crisis to be had, then we will invent one.

To listen to the official voices and to the best of the ostensibly sober press as well, when the *Pueblo* was seized one would have thought we were on the verge of a new and major conflict in the Far East. Yet the voices of dissent were hardly sounder—the critics vastly exaggerated the trigger-happiness of the United States—reflecting a parallel taste for apocalypse. After

all, it was not so long ago that serious political critics of official policy (among them Hans Morgenthau and the editorial board of the *New York Times*) held that the real folly of the Vietnam war was not that it involved the United States in an unwinnable contest in which its real interests were only problematically engaged, but that it risked escalating to an ultimate nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union. As if the Soviet Union, its millenarian talk of world revolution to the contrary, would commit suicide (which is what such an exchange would imply) for, to paraphrase



Neville Chamberlain, a “faroff people” of whom the Soviet people know nothing.

We do not really understand Communist rhetoric very well. There is a time when the Communist leaders speak quite simply, and tell us exactly what they mean—and then, often as not, we do not believe them. The Soviet leaders, for example, have repeatedly assured us that they do not wish to substitute “peaceful engagement” with a capitalist world they regard as fundamentally corrupt for their own doctrine of competitive, indeed hostile, coexistence. If we do not believe them and are repeatedly disappointed, we have only ourselves to blame. Just so, we have not understood that the Chinese Communist leaders in Peking, whether Maoist or “moderates,” whatever that may be, do not greatly suffer from isolation from the international community. They have always made it perfectly clear that they regard the external world as profoundly corrupt and indeed in its incipient death throes: they do not yearn for contact with us, and indeed derive much psychic income from their separateness.

But so too is there a level on which the statements of Communist leaders cannot be taken at face value. This is so, not because they are masters of deceit, but

because the importance of a declaration of policy in the Communist world may be far more important for its connotative values, its “affect,” as the psychologists would say, than for its literal meaning. Thus the North Korean leaders proclaim unremitting hostility to the south, the intention to liberate their oppressed brothers, and the determination to expel the United States from East Asia.

But this program is less a blueprint of policy than a device for the structuring of internal discipline. By proclaiming a doctrine of militant struggle, the North Korean leaders justify austerity and social discipline and, not least of all, themselves.

•

Struggle against the established order is the essence of the Communist system. So long as the movement remains a conspiratorial underground, in its prerevolutionary phase, there is a clarity of purpose: to overthrow by action that which exists. But when a Communist party comes to power, its position becomes highly ambiguous. Having remade social institutions, it must, like any other government, maintain a degree of order within society—thus its activism must be deflected outward upon the encircling world. And having remade society in the name of struggle, it cannot allow the spectre of that struggle to fade lest the austerities of the garrison state begin to seem superfluous.

But what if real action against the external world gives every appearance of being suicidal? The answer is that rhetorical militancy is not the same thing as action. To listen to the leaders in Peking, one would never dream that Quemoy and Matsu, those tiny offshore islands, to say nothing of Macao, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are allowed peacefully to remain in imperialist hands. Pyongyang, for all its insolence and boasting, does not really attack the south. Even in South Vietnam the Communists have fought an extraordinarily discrete and limited war—for limited aims.

This is not to say that there has never been, anywhere, a Communist military threat—especially a Soviet threat. But that threat has waxed and waned through the years. Yet for more than twenty years we have been living in a state of panic intensity, unmodulated by reality. The trouble is that we too have our rhetoric, and a functional purpose for what we say.

One is reminded of the modern Greek poet Kafavy: “Night has come and some people have come from the frontier to say the barbarians are gone. What shall we do without the barbarians? These people were a kind of solution.”