

PERPETUAL CRISIS

Edmund Stillman

and now. Kissinger fails to spell out a conception of the sort of world America should seek, beyond calling for equilibrium, order, stability and peaceful change, none of which are likely to be realistic goals in the 1970's. Walt Rostow, Kissinger's immediate predecessor, is generally considered more utopian than Kissinger. But he had a better perspective on possibilities in the remaining decades of the twentieth century when he concluded his *The United States in the World Arena* (1960), "The United States, child of the Enlightenment, favored adolescent of the nineteenth century, powerful but erratic youth of the first half of the twentieth, must now confirm its maturity by acting from the present forward to see the values of the Enlightenment—or their equivalents in non-Western cultures—survive and dominate in the twenty-first." If this is to be done, then one can try to answer Kissinger's two questions, "What is it in our interest to prevent? What should we seek to accomplish?" America has little choice but to continue to try to forestall Communist expansion (recognizing there is no "monolithic communism" today) as well as to foster both West European and Third World political and economic strength and cohesion and security burden sharing.

President Nixon, as was President Kennedy, is primarily interested in foreign rather than in domestic policy. At a time when so many want priority to be given to our pressing domestic problems, this bent alienates various critics. But the problems of the world will not disappear and permit such a concentration of American energies. We must mature, i.e., get over our historic single-track mindedness, and recognize that we have no choice between improving ourselves and dealing with menaces to our security and with the problems of the Third World. One could wish that Nixon and Kissinger were more perceptive and responsive to the legitimate demands of American blacks and the Third World alike. This lack could prove to be the Achilles' heel of the Nixon Administration.

Obviously America's domestic performance affects its world standing. Nixon and Kissinger are both more at home in Europe than in the non-Western parts of the globe. They are also squares. Nevertheless, Nixon could have done far worse than elect Henry Kissinger as his Advisor on National Security Affairs. For Kissinger is one of the most balanced and brilliant students as well as polemicists in the general area of foreign policy. And he has demonstrated a capacity to grow. He may be in part a "realist," but at least he is a flexible one.

The British Minister of Defense, Denis Healy, has informed us that within minutes of the outbreak of hostilities every Soviet fleet unit in the Mediterranean would be sunk. Let us hope that he has supplied us with a long-overdue corrective to the near-hysteria evident in the press about the Soviet naval presence in the area.

Presumably by citing the destruction of the Soviet fleet "within minutes" Mr. Healy is making reference to nuclear weapons—a most implausible scenario. But even in a limited encounter, held short of a nuclear exchange, it is hard to believe that the Soviet fleet would fare well in combat.

Where is the Soviet naval tradition? The last time a Russian fleet sailed to battle it was to destruction at the tragicomedy of Tsushima. The Soviets are grotesquely overmatched by the American Sixth fleet; and they are not even a match for the British and French units singly available to oppose them. The fleet, for one thing, has no air cover: the Soviets have developed helicopter assault carriers, but these could not hope to dominate a beachhead—even against a determined Israeli airforce.

But merely to talk in such terms comes close to the absurd. Once again we have seen in action the American penchant for exaggerated response, the inability to view any new development with skepticism and reserve. This is partly national character. Americans, it seems, thrive on excitement. Partly too it is something a little less general: the hunger of the press for a daily sensation and the less-than-candid military appreciations of American admirals who know that the money lies in the exaggerated response.

We need to understand that we pay a price for rhetoric. Not only does it hinder the process of factual analysis that precedes the definition of a wise foreign policy; it operates as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, sometimes calling into existence the very thing it purports to fear.

The real trouble with the rhetoric about the new Soviet Mediterranean venture is that it has pretty well given the Soviets what they want—an effective

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presence, for diplomatic purposes at least, in a region where, in fact, they are weak. There is nothing the Soviets want more than to cut a stylish figure for the Arab world, and to do that without risk.

Alas, we are helping them, by our cries of alarm over what is very nearly a toy flotilla, and by our uncritical acceptance of the judgment, on nearly everybody's tongue, that the Mideast Crisis is very grave indeed, that unless something is done very, very soon to head off trouble there is going to be a great power confrontation in the area with every danger of escalation to nuclear war.

Is this true? For one thing, if the historical record has any meaning, it is pretty well apparent that the United States and the Soviet Union are deathly afraid of one another, and with good reason. Neither of us wants to be wiped off the face of the earth—and it is not really likely that the Soviets would court suicide on behalf of the Arabs, whose political loyalties are notoriously volatile.

Supplying arms is one thing; diplomatic fencing is one thing. War between the superpowers is quite another. (In passing I should like to note a dissenting belief that, the late Robert Kennedy's account of *The Thirteen Days* and Dean Acheson's acerbic "rebuttal" in *Esquire Magazine* to the contrary, the world was not close to nuclear war at the Cuban missile confrontation. Khrushchev was caught out in a bluff—in an attempted game of diplomatic sleight-of-hand in which the factors of *power* were all heavily against him. As a purely technical matter, in the Autumn of 1962 the United States still had a significant superiority, a plausible first-strike capability against the Soviets: a United States first strike could very probably have destroyed most of the Soviet strategic forces—a situation very far from the balance of forces today. And the United States had its conventional forces in Florida massing for invasion. Had they invaded, the Soviets would have been faced with a *fait accompli*. Cuba would have been occupied by the Americans, and the Soviets, having themselves no forces in the area, would have been faced with the sole and implausible alternative of replying to the American action by nuclear means.)

Having said these things, let us ask ourselves another question. Why are we so concerned to head off hostilities in the Middle East? What is the origin of this nearly automatic response of ours to call a halt to fighting—any time, anywhere, by anyone other than ourselves? For ourselves we reserve the right to an insouciant use of military force. But for others there is a kind of reflex horror—stop the fighting—when, as in the Six-Day War of June, 1967, the Middle Eastern situation could only have been *improved* had

the Israelis been allowed to go on fighting.

This is not a callous argument for bloodshed. But it is simply not true that force settles nothing: ask the Germans and Japanese. A shattering Israeli victory in 1967 would have done more than topple Nasser and the other Arab hotheads. It would have made it possible for the Arab realists—they exist—to come forward with counsels of moderation and compromise, without fear of being torn to pieces by street mobs.

They could have done so then as agents of political necessity—speaking to their countrymen as men who had at least been forced to face hard facts.

And it is precisely this which the Arab man in the street will not do. Not that there is no Arab case: the Arabs after all have been made to pick up the bill for Europe's guilt; the situation of the Palestine refugees is a scandal; Israel is an abrasive and possibly unassimilable foreign cultural body in the Arab world. (Indeed, friendly intercourse between Arabs and Israelis, say in pursuit of joint modernization schemes, may be impossible precisely because Israel is modern.)

No, there is an Arab case; but history is full of ingratitude. Facts are facts, and the misfortune of the Arabs is no worse misfortune than the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states, say, an injustice about which the world long ago grew bored. Let us go on from here.

Three times the Arabs have had a go at the Israelis; each time their cause has grown worse. A new outbreak of fighting in the area is likely to prove only a fourth disaster for the Arab cause. The Soviet equipment may be newer and shinier than ever, but the Egyptian and Syrian troops will not handle it much better. As for the Soviet advisors with these troops, we Americans ought to know as well as any nation that sending advisors to a demoralized and incompetent army, as we have done with our clients in Vietnam, is no magic at all.

Indeed, if the clash comes, the Soviets are likely this time to be humiliated even more than the last. Then the fledgling Soviet flotilla had made an ostentatious show in Levantine waters—and when the fighting broke out, put up steam in Alexandria harbor and sailed tamely to sea.

Indeed, this is what we ought to be telling the Soviets: that no one wins by meddling with the Middle East. They are playing a foolish game, as they did seven years ago in the Caribbean. They have not counted the consequences.

Cold war myth to the contrary, the Soviets do not play diplomatic chess. Oddly enough, they are not even playing poker. They are merely laying heavy bets on the turn of a random card.