

THE END OF THE '60's: AMERICA TODAY

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The end of this month coincides with the end of a decade — one of those artificial divisions of time that we take seriously enough to engage in retrospection and introspection. What, as a nation, have we done in the '60's? Or, in a falling tone, what have the '60's done to us?

Early in 1960, Paul Nitze wrote in *worldview*: "For many generations it appeared to Americans that this country was getting along very well indeed. Our founding fathers had wrestled with the basic question of the relationship of politics to fundamental philosophic and ethical concepts and had produced the United States Constitution. The political institutions which flowed from the Constitution might need minor modification from time to time, but there was little need to rethink the basic philosophies behind them. That had been done and the results were obviously good. . . . Today the context is changed. The future no longer looks obviously good. To tackle the job of thinking through to fundamentals does not today convict one of being a crank."

What have the intervening years done to these views? If anything, they have provided additional and massive support. In 1960, with the election of a new, young and vigorous President, many felt that new possibilities, new ventures, new programs were possible. Even the early Bay of Pigs fiasco only served to temper the most foolish hopes and to introduce a needed strain of realism into a new Administration. But how long ago that now seems! That event and many other events of the first half of this decade — the March on Washington and the Civil Rights bills which followed, "Black and white together, We will overcome," the Cuban missile crisis, even the assassination of John F. Kennedy — these events are already ancient history to some of our more vocal citizens.

The assassination of presidents is not new to America, but the successive slayings of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy introduced a dark strain when Americans thought upon themselves. These deaths did not overshadow but rather highlighted the violent deaths inflicted upon others in our national conflicts.

Our awareness of some of the most stressing injustices we impose upon each other in our society increases, our programs look better than they did ten or fifteen years ago, but the total situation seems to grow increasingly worse, not better.

And America's foreign policies? The high tone and the resonant terms with which John Kennedy took office would seem an embarrassment if they issued from the White House today. It is not that the policies of the last ten years failed to produce a number of desired and good results. It is, rather,

that we seem to have lost direction and that Vietnam, the one venture on which we have staked much, has been a continual drain, diverting resources, men, intelligence and time from other affairs. For those who continue to support United States intervention in the war, our nation seems to be failing an historic test. For those who are critical of the part the United States continues to play in Vietnam, the question is whether we will learn that we have extended our commitments beyond our power, and both our commitments and our power beyond our legitimate interests.

The debate that is now wracking our country — if it can be called a debate — turns on exactly those fundamental issues that Mr. Nitze discussed. “Today the context is changed. The future no longer looks obviously good.” It is not the insight of some favored individuals but a matter of general perception that things are becoming unstuck.

Our nation is presently attempting, for example, to sort out its feelings and reflections about the massacre at Songmy. That event is in itself gruesome enough to account for the attention that it is being given. But it would be foolish to see it as an isolated event, to divorce it from those other events which have led us to reflect upon our national character, upon the place violence holds in our national life.

Our national life. That is what we need to be concerned about. The phrase “the American experiment” has rarely seemed a more accurate description than it is today. We are still in the midst of an exciting experiment. While it is difficult during this season traditionally set aside for thanksgiving and rejoicing not to feel all that argues against such celebration, we must hold steadily to the knowledge that the future is not closed to us but open, that it is not predetermined but that it will be determined by us.

As Robert Good wrote in the September *worldview* when he presented his overall impressionistic view of America’s passage through the last five years: “The returns are not all in, not yet. . . . No society exposes itself to analysis, criticism and debate with the abandon practiced here. That is why we cannot yet take seriously the glib comparison between modern America and ancient Rome by those who talk of a ‘decline and fall’ syndrome.” Not yet.

J.F.

THE MEANS OF WAR

Among the consequences of Songmy is that it confirmed some people in their belief that “war is hell” and anything must be accepted, that we cannot expect to contain the irrational mess that is war within some rational limitations. It should be clearly understood that such beliefs are not only foolish but dangerously foolish. Efforts to humanize and limit the evil that is war have often failed lamentably. But not always. And even frequent failure does not dictate that the attempts were unintelligent or quixotic.

Are such reflections simply the vaporings we expect occasionally so that we can clear our conscience and then get on with the serious business at hand? Or are they serious moral-political positions with hard consequences? Fortunately, the latter is the case. And President Nixon’s decision on the use of chemical and bacteriological agents in warfare is a most welcome confirmation of this fact.

Against strong opposition from the Joint Chiefs and with the strong advocacy of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, President Nixon renounced the use of all biological weapons, pledged that the United States would not use incapacitating chemicals in a first strike, and halted germ-warfare research except for defensive measures.

While this decision is most welcome, there are other steps yet to be taken. The U.S. still uses “riot control” gas in Vietnam and its use is defended on the basis that it is humane. But on problems concerning the production, testing and use of germ and gas agents the military has been less than honest, that is, it has lied. As evidence mounts about the use of riot control gas in Vietnam, it becomes increasingly evident that it is not being used for “humane” reasons, that it can and does kill and permanently disable. There are measures yet to be taken that could narrow the boundaries of what we, as a nation, are willing to countenance and support in war.

Indexes

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