The reckless attack on United States foreign policy by the more extreme American critics during the past few years has far exceeded in shrillness and volume the irresponsible outburst of the Joe McCarthy era. There has been an alarming deterioration in the quality of dialogue and debate on the vital issues of war and peace. This disquieting development cannot be explained, much less justified, as a plausible response to the occasional imprudent official statements that sectors of the press delight in exploiting. The virulent critics who attack the motives of the President and other high officials without substantiating evidence subvert civility and fair play and appear to reflect a profound and perhaps unconscious alienation from the mainstream of Western morality.

The problems confronting the President in Southeast Asia and the Middle East were never more perplexing. The need for rational and responsible criticism was never greater. The President needs and wants the honest criticism or support of all citizens who seek to make their consciences felt by voice or vote. Mr. Nixon's plea that dissenters lower their voices and strengthen their arguments by facts and logic has gone largely unheeded. The dialogue between people and President and between the Executive and Legislative branches continues to be poisoned by inflammatory rhetoric and impassioned code words that confuse the issue, distort the options, undercut the majesty of the presidential office, and erode the President's capacity to act effectively for peace and justice.

The reckless use of the English language is not confined to the libelous and obscene assaults of the Black Panthers, the Weathermen, and other semi-revolutionary or nihilistic groups who explicitly reject majority government, the rule of law, peaceful change, and our other cherished democratic practices as "reactionary." Nor is it confined to the increasing number of confused adolescents and junior academies who have adopted with little change the revolutionary rhetoric and abusive epithets of the elitist and authoritarian Left.


The new verbal assault on the character of our political leaders and the integrity of our democratic institutions has made serious inroads on hitherto responsible and rational circles that stood fast against the crude, and by comparison mild, rantings of the first McCarthy. Today, small but significant sectors of the church, the university, and the mass media have unwittingly or unwittingly fallen prey to the demagogic slogans of the new revolutionaries and the catch phrases of the nihilists, though the rhetoric of those with liberal leaning is often more polished and subtle. Yet these learned leaders frequently use emotive terms like imperialism, repression, systemic violence, white power structure, military-industrial complex, racism, and mercenaries—terms calculated to condemn rather than to inform. Since these words convey no coherent or accepted meaning, they confuse rather than clarify responsible discourse on the complex problems of Vietnam, civil rights, or the allocation of Federal resources. It is tragic when academic and religious leaders lay aside rational argument in favor of the inflammatory code words of an Angela Davis, a Rap Brown, or a Jerry Rubin.

Sweeping pejorative terms are almost always employed without factual evidence to support their use. To be constructive, expressions of dissent or support must be buttressed by facts, and fortunately the relevant facts are almost always available. The New York Times, other influential media, several Senators, and some religious leaders have accused the U.S. Government of subsidizing "mercenaries" in Southeast Asia, with the clear implication that this practice is immoral. There are honest differences about the wisdom of our material support of Korean or Thai volunteer units in South Vietnam to fight aggression (i.e., organized military forces that violate an international frontier to forcibly overthrow an existing government) from North Vietnam, but the introduction of the pejorative term "mercenaries" hardly clarifies the problem. In simple English, a mercenary is one who volunteers his military services against reimbursement. The Times, I believe, has seen merit in a volunteer army—an army of mercenaries. The term, of course, takes on a different meaning when the volunteer fights on alien soil. But even here the Times supported the mercenary units from two dozen coun-
tries who performed military service in the U.N. expeditionary force in the Congo. Perhaps for the Times and Senator Fulbright the volunteers they don’t like are mercenaries and the mercenaries they do like are “volunteers”! Is this kind of double-talk a reflection of a split-level ethic, or merely a subtle ploy to persuade by catch words rather than by honest argument?

Out of their deep concern for building a better world the contributors to religious journals and drafters of church pronouncements, particularly in the Protestant community, have increasingly fallen into the prose of protest and the rhetoric of revolt, again often without indicating the precise meaning of their words or the supporting empirical evidence. The emotive symbols are not limited to angry clerics like Father Daniel Berrigan, William S. Coffin, Jr., and Robert McAfee Brown, but have found their way into wider church circles.

Ever since the Detroit Conference on Church and Society in October, 1967, for example, the vague and ill-defined term “systemic violence” has been used to indict the “system” rather than to identify specific faults in American society. The term, and its several variants, implies that poverty or functional illiteracy are manifestations of violence imposed by “the system.” This debases the language and makes moral discourse almost impossible. There are important moral differences between poverty and violence. Where is the evidence that poverty is “caused” by the system? What about the great variations in individual ability, initiative, and responsibility? And what is meant by “the system”—the U.S. Government, local government, the market, labor unions, local prejudices?

The militant civil rights leaders, who are increasingly attempting to internationalize their concern for men of color, have been among the heaviest users of unsubstantiated accusatory code words and slogans. As early as 1963, the relatively moderate Martin Luther King, Jr. asserted that Birmingham’s “white power structure” left the “Negro community with no alternative” but to violate the court injunction against a planned demonstration. He seemed to overlook the obvious alternative of awaiting the verdict of a higher court. The very term “white power structure” suggests a collective racial indictment that ignores compassion among the whites and callousness among the blacks. Does it mean all whites in the “structure” are equally guilty? What does it mean? Is not this changing structure of law the bulwark of our democratic rights?

In addition to the code words designed to incite by appealing to the confused, frustrated, and guilt-ridden, there is the more refined but equally dishonest device of pretending to present facts, but actually distorting or falsifying them. Both forms of reckless rhetoric found ample play in a remarkable and little-remarked speech of Martin Luther King in Riverside Church on April 4, 1967. In this strange and somewhat uncharacteristic lecture, King sought to weld the civil rights and peace movements into a single crusade. Sponsored and apparently ghost written by Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, the speech received little critical attention, but it was reprinted in Ramparts (May, 1967) and was distributed by the executive director of the Society for Religion in Higher Education because King was “a social, religious” and “to some extent an educational leader.” King said the moral “burden” of the Nobel Peace Prize and the “burnings” of his “heart” compelled him to speak out against the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam.

Bowing at the outset to “the ambiguity of the total situation and the need for a collective solution,” King quickly leaves ambiguity behind and accuses the United States of the primary if not exclusive responsibility for the Vietnam conflict and its termination. From then on the speech is a simple devil-theory indictment, with Washington and Wall Street the arch villains, supported by the pervasive white “racism, materialism, and militarism” in an American “society gone mad on war.”

In his copyrighted speech in Ramparts, King makes no positive references to the U.S. Government but makes numerous attacks upon the motives of American leaders. Let him speak for himself. The Vietnam war devastates “the hopes of the poor at home” and exacts an “extraordinarily high” proportion of deaths upon the American poor in battle. We are sending “young black men . . . crippled by our society” to fight for a “freedom” in Vietnam they have been denied at home. America has used “massive doses of violence to solve” its problems and “my own government” has become “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”

Our “madness” in Vietnam, King continues, where “we may have killed a million [presumably civilians]—mostly children,” must stop. We “test out our latest weapons on them, just as the Germans tested out
new medicine and new tortures on the concentration camps of Europe.” We herd Vietnamese into American-made “concentration camps.” “They wander into the hospitals, with at least 20 casualties from American firepower for each Viet Cong-inflicted injury.”

We, not the Communists, have become the “real enemy.” We justify our brutality and inhumanity because of alleged “aggression from the North.” How dare we “charge them with violence while we pour new weapons of death into their land?” On all vital issues, King is vague or ambiguous, except in his condemnation of the United States.

The outrageous charge that the U.S. forces killed one million civilians originated with a Communist propagandist and was picked up by American peace groups without verification. (In a private conversation with the writer and one or two others, a Protestant clergyman said he was the author of the civilian casualty section of the King speech. When asked where he got the figure of one million, he replied with emotion that “We in the Movement make up facts” to suit our needs. Perhaps he did not mean this literally, but those who heard him were appalled by his apparent nonchalance toward relevant facts.) Unfortunately, many civilians have been killed by air strikes against military targets in spite of our extensive efforts to evacuate the population beforehand—perhaps as many as one-tenth the number King mentioned—but each death has been unintentional and regrettable. And every proved case of rape or murder by a U.S. soldier—the number has been small—is punishable under our strict code of military justice. The enemy, in contrast, from the beginning has deliberately killed civilians, including the throwing of grenades in schools and hospitals. The Hanoi and N.L.F. forces have murdered, tortured, and kidnapped tens of thousands of civilians. In 1960-61 alone, the Viet Cong murdered 6,130 and abducted 6,213 important persons. If America were under similar subversive assault, 72,000 prominent U.S. citizens would be murdered or kidnapped annually. King was silent about this massive atrocity.

America’s soul, says King, is in danger of becoming “totally poisoned” as long as we continue to destroy “the deepest hopes of men the world over.” In Vietnam we “have no honorable intentions.” Our minimum objective is to make it “an American colony” and “our maximum hope is to goad China into a war so that we may bomb her nuclear installations.” How can he say this when successive Presidents have made it crystal clear that our fundamental intention is to make Southeast Asia safe for self-determination and peaceful change. There is ample room for debate on whether our Government has chosen the best available means for achieving these objectives. But certainly they are honorable, though their fulfillment may be beyond our capacity to ensure.

Vietnam, says King, is “but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit.” We are “on the wrong side of a world revolution. During the past ten years we have seen emerge a pattern of suppression” by Washington that uses “U. S. military ‘advisers’” in Latin America to protect “the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits” of American investors who have “no concern for the social betterment of the countries.” To get on “the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution” against “racism, materialism, and militarism.” We “must support” revolutions “all over the globe.” Because of our “morbid fear of communism” we have become “anti-revolutionaries.”

This remarkable speech—it’s blunt, lopsided, unfactual, and unfair attack upon the United States; its more subtle praise for the Communist and revolutionary forces of “liberation”; and its frequent use of Communist clichés and slogans (in contrast to King’s customary Biblical allusions) could have been drafted in Moscow, Peking, Hanoi, or Havana, except for one thing—no seasoned Communist propagandist would have dared to be so utterly one-sided in his condemnation of America, in addressing a Western audience, for fear of a credibility gap, even among the guilt-ridden and naive itching to hear the worst about America.

It is difficult to determine the extent King was being used by Clergy and Laymen, but his name appears with that of John C. Bennett, Edwin T. Dahlberg, Harvey G. Cox, John Wesley Lord, Paul Moore, and other clerical signers of a statement introducing In the Name of America, published by the organization in 1968. This statement, like the King speech, is a highly distorted, one-sided, unfactual, and inflammatory critique of U. S. policy in Vietnam, which vaguely condones or excuses the murder, torture, kidnapping, and other forms of brutality by the Communist forces while charging the United States with the “indiscriminate killing of civilians” and other “war crimes.”

The In the Name of America statement asserts that the “persistent” U. S. “violation of the rules of war . . . must inevitably induce the enemy to feel a compulsion to commit similar acts of moral lawlessness.” Certainly the signers were not unaware that the Communists used torture, murder, and kidnapping as acceptable instruments of “wars of national libera-
tion" long before U. S. combat troops ever arrived in Vietnam. And the so-called "documentary" section of the book fails to provide convincing evidence that U. S. forces persistently or even frequently violated the rules of war.

Whatever his motives, King's Riverside speech gave aid and comfort to the enemies of peaceful change in Southeast Asia as well as to their allies in Moscow and Peking. It directed anger against the U. S. Government—perhaps the major temporal force for peace in the world. It pronounced an indirect benediction upon the revolutionary and nihilistic agencies seeking to destroy the foundations of Western justice and freedom. There is, of course, some injustice in our society and some justice in Communist states, but in the West, and particularly in the United States, the political institutions and practices of fair play and freedom have seldom found fuller expression. In the endless quest for dignity and justice, we Americans are sustained by a long tradition of humane law and the Anglo-Saxon conscience against all forms of human exploitation.

Whatever one might think about the necessity or wisdom of America's involvement in Vietnam, it should be clear that there are morally permissible limits to support or dissent of the Government's policy. The same rules apply to both sides. Every President needs constructive criticism, but none deserves irresponsible attacks which imply that he is less concerned about peace and justice than Clergy Concerned or the leaders in Hanoi and Peking.

King's Riverside Church speech seriously violated the moral limits of public debate and advocacy. His unrelenting attack on American society and government, its distortions and falsehoods, all presented in the garb of self-righteousness, was a disservice to the American people and a service to forces of revolutionary violence. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that this speech and other equally extremist and ill-informed statements by well-intentioned "children of light" have harmed the prospects for a responsible exercise of U. S. power abroad.

King's attempt to join the causes of "freedom" and "peace" appears to have had the effect of sowing confusion in both camps, thereby making more difficult the achievement of equality under law at home and a sound policy toward the Third World.

Since there is a close psychological and moral connection between incendiary rhetoric, anger, and overt violence, it would be fair to assume that King's speech contributed to the very violence he so frequently deplored. While he cannot be held responsible for the orgy of black terror that followed his death, it is true that he anticipated some of the angry slogans of the Black Panthers and the S.D.S., both of whom have supported their violent words with bombing and other brutal acts of terrorism against innocent persons, all in the name of revolutionary justice.

By far the most serious verbal and political assault on reason, civility, the rules of evidence, the rule of law, and majority government comes from spokesmen of America's extreme Left and their knowing or unknowing supporters here and abroad. In sharp contrast, the extreme Right poses little danger to the survival of our fundamental democratic institutions. Never strong in the United States, the radical Right finds virtually no support in the church, the university, or the mass media, and has no connection with foreign based groups seeking to undermine U.S. foreign policy. With a severely limited capacity to win converts, to command the attention of intellectuals, or even to pull off local acts of violence, small groups like the K.K.K. and the Minutemen are not in the big-time league with the Black Panthers and the Weathermen. Both extremes advocate violence, but the Left employs violence on a much greater scale and against far more consequential targets.

One major target is the free university. In its attempt to destroy the university, the S.D.S. during the 1969-70 academic year was directly involved in 247 arson cases, 462 personal injury incidents, and 300 other violent acts on American campuses. Both extremes are morally repugnant and socially destructive in any democratic country, such as the United States, where the channels of political organization and peaceful change are open and responsive to the majority will, where minority rights are guaranteed under law, and where the right of peaceful dissent is protected by the government.

Whatever the motives behind foreign policy pronouncements, the words will enhance or diminish the capacity of the President to act wisely. Reckless rhetoric, especially from Senators and other influential leaders, has damaged our foreign relations. It comforts our enemies and confuses our allies. The damage is increased by major sectors of the press and electronic media which over-report the absurd, magnify America's shortcomings, and exaggerate the popular support of the extremists. Has the time not come for religious leaders dedicated to truth, for academics dedicated to reason, and for humane citizens dedicated to justice to insist, at least for themselves, on a quality of dissent and support equal to the seriousness of the problems we confront?