I will have such revenges . . .
That all the world shall—I will do such things,
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth.

The words are those of Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger as they confront North Vietnam. Does North Vietnam resist our will? We will bomb their missiles, their trails and bases. Do they attack again? Do they punish the South Vietnamese? Interfere with our plan to win victory while withdrawing? We will do such things . . .

Yet we know not what they are. Our bombers make cautionary raids across the border. We feint with naval forces along the North Vietnamese coast. We avow to the North that we will no longer be bound by the conventions of the past. We make vague threats of invasion, deny them, disclaim the denials. Our officials call attention to President Eisenhower’s warning, twenty years ago, that he might use nuclear weapons in Korea; then we deny that we would use such weapons—in foreseeable circumstances. We will, we say, win through withdrawal, give victory to Saigon through our air power. But how to do it if North Vietnam will not yield?

What we see is this Administration hard at work carrying out those theories which the defense intellectuals of the 1950’s and 1960’s, Mr. Kissinger among them, had brought to so satisfying a symmetry—escalatory warnings, threats (carefully distinguished), “sending messages,” the competition in risk-taking, P versus Q. One might think that we had been through all this once before, under Mr. Johnson and the Democrats, but the new wisdom is that the Johnson escalations were too calculated, too gradual. This time the implied threats are of new and sudden escalations which would not make the old mistakes. The trouble is that, just as in 1965-67, the new threats are not compelling ones. They are not credible. They are threats to hurt North Vietnam at the cost of hurting ourselves even more. There is something here of the manic child screaming about what terrible things he will do—to himself—if he is thwarted.

What is astounding is that the White House could have convinced itself that it could force the Communists to yield, through, on the one hand, our withdrawing American troops from Vietnam, or, on the other, by doing such things as would promise catastrophe to America. There is real delusion here, a determination to make reality conform to what Mr. Nixon wants and needs reality to be. The United States today is attempting to impose a fiction about Vietnam upon the real Vietnam.

We have already threatened (if that is the word) to leave the North Vietnamese to deal with the South alone—which was certainly no threat able to make them conform but, rather, a welcome promise. That failing, we launched into Cambodia, bringing war to a million more innocents while worsening our own eventual condition. Then into Laos, where, at this writing, the elite units of the South Vietnamese Army—Rangers, Airborne, Marines—await the counterattack of what by now is the most experienced and skilled ground army in Asia. If the North Vietnamese accept the invitation now offered them, there may well be no battle-worthy South Vietnamese Army left by summer.

We now hint at an invasion of North Vietnam. We threaten a new air assault on the North—on the cities and harbors, the Red River Delta dams. We hint at bombing them back to the Stone Age. But would they go? We have bombed before; they endured; their talent is to endure. The Chinese and Russians are calculating their own measures to deter us—if we can be deterred; their warnings are unconvincing too. The threat of a South Vietnamese invasion of the North is derisory. The suggestion of an American invasion is more plausible; but that means Mr. Nixon has not brought the boys home—he has sent them back to the holocaust. And when that is done, what have we accomplished? No doubt we could eventually occupy much of the North. What then? Sit on our bloody bayonets? And the campaign to conquer the North would be the worst campaign the American Army ever waged—a Wilderness and Guadalcanal again, but now with every civilian the enemy. We would be drawn to make a My Lai of the North.

Mr. Pfaff’s book on the crisis of liberal politics, Condemned to Freedom, will be published by Random House later this year.
So what is the alternative? We could use nuclear weapons against North Vietnam. That is the one threat which has credibility: the only one which meets the American need to administer horrors against them while remaining safe, antiseptically isolated in all dimensions except the moral, and in that dimension we should be monsters.

Mr. Nixon denies that he would use these weapons. The moral and political penalties for doing so are huge and obvious. But the day will come when he must ask himself what other choice he has that makes any kind of sense—except the choice which he rejected in 1969 and 1970, that of conceding our failure in Vietnam. In 1969, the Nixon Administration could have left Vietnam on terms which at least reconciled the United States and left the Vietnamese in no worse a condition than they shall yet experience. He did not. He failed the supreme test of political leadership, to see the truth even if it is a bad and costly truth, to accept it and be done. He chose illusion—the illusion of American omnipotence, of history's inevitable benevolence towards America. But he will have neither victory nor withdrawal, and when this is driven home to Washington, Mr. Nixon will be left alone with the alternatives of failure and the recourse to nuclear weapons. What will he do? Lear went on:

You think I'll weep;
No, I'll not weep.
I have full cause of weeping, [Storm heard at a distance.] but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep...

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PHILOSOPHERS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Bernard Murchland

When I first began to study philosophy, there was not much concern with its political implications. One thought of philosophers as being a few removes from the public forum, concerned with loftier matters, operating far from the untidiness of the social scene in a cool oasis where the imagination could play and consciousness unfold at its own pace. It was a pure world, to be sure, and the purist view is by no means an obsolete one. Just the other day I heard a well-known philosopher in heated argument with a campus activist say that the responsibilities of a professional philosopher end with his profession, that his political obligations qua philosopher were nil. This attitude is echoed with some frequency in the academy: I have rarely attended a professional convention where it has not been defended at least once, for example.

Yet times have changed, and some version of Marx's plea that philosophers change the world rather than just interpret it, that they concern themselves with the data of experience rather than transcendent realities, is gaining the ascendancy. Thus, Noam Chomsky avers that there is no profession that can claim with greater authenticity that its concern is the intellectual culture of society or that it possesses the tools for an effective analysis of ideology and critique of social institutions. A milestone of sorts was marked in December, 1966, when the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association passed an unprecedented resolution criticizing American involvement in Vietnam. “The traditions of our vocation make it appropriate,” the resolution read, “that we express our concern on issues of great moral urgency.” Even more significant was the formation in 1969 of the Society for Philosophy and Public Policy. The aim of the Society, according to its charter, is “to promote the application of philosophic techniques to the consideration of public issues, and to give substantive political and social questions a central place in the professional concern of philosophers. The subject is not political philosophy or ethics in the abstract but rather concrete contemporary problems like conscription, police power, methods and occasions of warfare, treatment of individuals charged with crimes, population control, compensation for social disadvantages, eugenics, and so forth.”

One might well wonder how the problem of phi-

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A collection of essays by Bernard Murchland, The Age of Alienation, has just been published by Random House.