The Judgments of History—A Symposium

Not by Power Alone

James Reston

These are hard days for men and women who believe in the moral judgments of history and cling, for all our doubts, to the Christmas ideal of world unity and brotherhood.

For there is no unity in the world at the end of 1971, and far from supporting the religious mission of peace and goodwill on earth, the saddest and bitterest quarrels of contemporary history are between Moslem and Hindu on the subcontinent of South Asia, between Jew and Arab in the Middle East and between Protestant and Roman Catholic in Ireland.

Even that other forlorn dream—that women might one day lead the nations into a more peaceful and considerate world—gets little support from Cold War warrior policy in Israel or from the smiling picture of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, hands folded as in prayer, rejoicing over the military dismemberment of Pakistan.

So for the moment it would seem that the bawling demands of nationalism are louder than ever, and while the leaders of the world talk incessantly about cooperation, consultation and the common problems of a distracted world, each grasps what he can for himself and his own people, and the whole machinery of time works blindly on, in disregard of the humble and the poor, and realpolitik and the steam-roller advance of organized force not only prevail but, as Herbert Butterfield puts it, actually seem "to be blessed with the final favor of heaven."

The evidence of this is all around us—led indeed by the so-called "great powers" of the world. The Soviet Union has changed its tactics but not its strategy. It is much more polite in its discussions with the United States on arms control at Vienna and Helsinki, and it welcomes Willy Brandt and Richard Nixon to Moscow and appeals for a European security conference to reduce tensions in the Old World, but when it has an opening for a power play to expand its influence in India and outflank China, or is threatened by freedom in Czechoslovakia, it ships out the tanks and planes and then turns smiling for cooperation if cooperation, like violence, serves its national interests.

On a wholly different level, the United States has recently been acting on its own nationalistic interests, making vast and sudden switches in its foreign policy and its economic policy without prior consultation with its allies, whose interests and confidence are deeply involved in Washington's decisions. And there is a lot to support this sort of action by the United States and the Soviet Union, if you assume that the world is a jungle in which power is the one and only decisive element in human affairs. And also if you assume that it works.

Well, maybe it does, and there is a lot of evidence to support the idea. But what happens in the world over the longer perspectives of history is not really decided by military or economic power alone. The United States has more military or economic power than any other nation on earth, and this has been true for more than a quarter of a century, but its military power didn't work in Vietnam, and, though Secretary of the Treasury Connally has lately been shaking his fist at the world and telling our natural allies in Europe and Japan to "shape up," the fact is that he is now devaluing the dollar and, being not only a tough but a realistic politician, he and the President have finally decided that they can defend America's vital interests better by cooperating with the other commercial nations than by commanding and brutalizing them.

And this is really the fundamental question: whether the nations have more to gain by competition, protectionism and war for their national interests or by creating that different world of unity and brotherhood, which is what the Christmas ideal is supposed to be all about.

This is not only a theological but a practical political question. It is not really proved that power alone determines the destiny of the human family, or that nations, any more than individuals, are immune to the moral judgments of history.

The history of Germany and Japan are only the latest dramatic illustrations of the point. In the short run, military power served them very well, but later on they were destroyed by military power, and they have now risen near the pinnacle of influence in the world by rejecting it.

The war between India and Pakistan is only the latest illustration of the point. Pakistan was vicious toward its rebels in East Bengal and was almost destroyed by its savage repression and wholesale murder of the people of Bangladesh. Likewise, India, seeing a moment of stupidity on the part of Pakistan, sacrificed her own moral law and made war on Pakistan and won—but only for the moment.

No sooner had India's victory at Dacca in East Pakistan become apparent than China spoke out: "History has proved," said Peking, "that no aggressor comes to a good end. Relying on the support of the Soviet Union... the Indian expansionists have now occupied large tracts of Pakistani territory... henceforth, there will be no tranquillity for India on the South Asian subcontinent..."

For those who reject the notion that there are moral judgments of history, that nations, like individuals, in the end have to face the consequences of their acts, the problem can be put in terms of physics. Every force creates a counterforce, and this is the weakness of nationalism. It works for a while, and power is essential to meet the power that it opposes, but there is still a moral law of compensation in the world. There is a moral judgment of history on nations as well as on individuals, and this is the point the men of power seem to miss, even after all the failures of power in Vietnam and elsewhere.

History
as We Would Like It

Isaiah Berlin

I should be glad to believe with Mr. James Reston that God is not mocked and that the crimes of statesmen and of peoples obtain their just due at the hands of history. But I find it difficult to divorce myself from the thought that, at any rate in the long run, it is the conquerors and the big battalions that determine the verdicts (despite some shining exceptions) of historians. Over a century and a half ago, Immanuel Kant wrote, "If those revolts which gave Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Great Britain their constitutions, and which are now praised as so felicitous, had failed, historians would see in the execution of their originators the deserved punishment of major criminals" (from an essay entitled "That may be all right in theory, but it does not work in practice," 1793).

Alexander, Selipio, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, won their wars; our history books would have been very different if they had not—not merely because events, the course of human history itself, would have been different, but because the judgments of the world upon them are part and parcel of this course and would have been very unlike the conventional wisdom that would have resulted from their failures. Could anyone doubt what "the verdict of history" of every journalist and schoolmaster and the vast majority of educated men would have been if Napoleon had successfully invaded Russia and England and established his laws on his entire empire for any length of time? If Hitler, or even the Kaiser, had won their wars?

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, of a Belgian who, after his country had been invaded in 1914, and resistance cruelly repressed by the German armies, asked a German officer whether he was not afraid of the judgment of history. "No," the officer is alleged to have replied, "for we shall write the histories." Victor are seldom judged: the defeated, the minorities, the persecuted, sometimes leave memorials of themselves in the light of which later generations modify conquerors' accounts of their successes. But this does not happen often: the Romans won, but the writings of the Jews are there to testify against them; Europeans exploited and humiliated the Chinese, but now there are Chinese writings to shame their descendants whose own histories used to record little or nothing of this. There is more hope at present that this will not automatically prevail, because the enormities of our own century have been such as to provoke indignation within the ranks of the conquerors themselves. This is still new, but it does offer hope for greater justice in terms of those deeply held human values that have not altered all that much in the course of the centuries. Yet the price that we, in this century, have had to pay for this more universal awakening of the moral conscience has been appalling.

It is, I think, this sense of outrage which Mr. Reston has in mind; and although I am somewhat skeptical of its efficacy, I share his attitude: I should like this doctrine to be true, even though history does not afford too much evidence for it.

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Organizing Morality
Michael Harrington

My first reaction to James Reston's remarks is to marvel at their naiveté. Here is an exceedingly sophisticated working journalist, the author of that extraordinary series on Mao's China who conducted a brilliant interview with Chou, indulging himself in a banal sadness. So I would respond initially by saying "of course."

Of course history is and has been immoral. It has always been the scene of self-interested conflicts between classes and nations. Of course people of religious faith kill one another, usually reserving the greatest enthusiasm for a slaughter conducted in the name of different interpretations of the same God, as in Ulster, but also avenging one deity against another, as in West Pakistan's genocidal attack on the Hindu minority of Bangladesh. I would add only that these theologically inspired enormities are usually based upon a substratum of class or national interest too.

Of course the poor and the humble are history's victims. Since the beginning of time most lives upon this globe have been only a little better than animal and very much less than human.

Of course the United States is not exempt from these cruel facts. Because this country became a world power late, it often disguised its egotism as a selflessness. We were not interested in having our sphere of influence in the old China, not the least because the spheres had already been divvied up; all we wanted was an "open door," i.e., an access which would guarantee dominance to the strongest trader—which just happened to be us. We magnanimously offered the Russians a deal after World War II where both the United States and the Soviet Union would forswear research and development of those atomic weapons which we alone knew how to make.

Of course the Soviet Union acts like an imperial nation, for it is as internally class ridden as America and its ruling class is as determined to assert its power and influence as ours. The "socialist" rhetoric functions in Russia, like the democratic rhetoric in the United States (which is the facade of an undemocratic economy and class structure), to conceal and rationalize this anti-socialist reality.

And finally, of course this is a horrible way to run a world. There is no doubt that, in an unprecedented period of thermonuclear weaponry, the persistence of history's traditional immorality poses the utterly new possibility of blowing up the planet or at least a good portion of its people.

These unconscionable facts being the reality, how can they be changed? I am not at all sure—or even sure that it can be done at all. But I do know that it will not be accomplished by counterposing a sweet and disinterested morality to this pervasive immorality, as Mr. Reston seems to do in part. If there is a solution it will be found, I think, in following another one of Reston's leads, but with greater vigor than he employs: that the continuation of the old orders of dominance are profoundly counterproductive from the point of view, precisely, of the self-interest of the majority of the people of mankind. That—to cite another "of course"—has, of course, always been true, but now one can at least speculate that a mass consciousness of the fact might be the point of departure for transforming it.

Marx was one of the first to outline this scenario, and his principles are still quite useful, even if the expectations he derived from them have been brutally disappointed. The workers, Marx said, will not make a revolution because they are nice, or moral, or have been persuaded by reading the Manifesto or Kapital. They act, like everyone else, to maximize personal and class interests which are inextricably interwoven. But as the propertyless and dispossessed majority, they are the first class in history whose egoistic interest coincides with the best interest of mankind. They will, therefore, be driven out of rude necessity to a practical idealism.

In part Marx was right. The working-class movement has been the major force in the industrialized lands fighting not simply for better wages and hours but for better health, education, child care and care for the aged, etc. as well. One should never forget that Cantabridgian England supported the Confederacy during the American Civil War, while the multihands, with superior intelligence and morality, stood by the Union.

In part Marx was wrong. The one thing the Socialists have really nationalized, Paul Henri Spaak once said bitterly, is socialism itself. Therefore, even if one can see a modest Marxian possibility within the advanced societies, what reason is there to hope for an internationalism which will extend not simply to the affluent but to that majority of the human race which lives in the Third World?

There is only one reason to even hope for such a development. It is—and this is the important truth which Reston does understand—that present global immoralities are in conflict with the interest of the workers in the rich nations as well as those of the peasants in the poor countries. For example, the American unions have recently learned the grim truth that the super-exploitation of Mexico, Taiwan, the Philippines and South Korea provides a capitalist Shangri-La for American industry which can there-

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fore take jobs overseas and cut back on jobs here.

One response to that fact is protectionism, and that trend is certainly stronger today in American labor than at any time in a generation. But another response is to use American union power to try to raise the wages in the poorer countries. The Auto Workers Union has already taken a very deep interest in a Ford strike in England out of precisely such reasons of self-interested solidarity; and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions is giving new functions to its international secretariats in the struggle against multinational conglomerates.

Obviously I have only named the problem, not resolved it. But I think that there is a methodological point involved in my example and it is relevant to Reston’s concerns. A national and international morality will develop only because great masses of organized men and women first recognize that it is in their selfish interest to act decently. Then, and only then, and only with enormous travail (and I am here describing the hopeful possibility), it may be possible for a mankind which is no longer starving to recognize its own humanity, not out of necessity but out of an appreciation of its value and potential.

I am not in the least bit confident that my perspective will work. I do think it offers the only chance that anything will work.

The Task of Man Is Man

Friedrich Heer

I t is not easy for a European to take a dispassionate stance toward the USA. The waves of idiotic anti-Americanism and the (smaller) waves of undiscriminating glorification have distorted the face of the America seen by many Europeans. My remarks are those of a European, more particularly of an Austrian from Vienna, a city that decisively stamped the character of a Sigmund Freud and of an Adolf Hitler. Mine is a stance rooted in the experience of critical love which feels itself co-responsible for both the super-strength and the super-weakness of this American dinosaur, this giant baby that, in its relatively brief history, has contributed notably and bloodily to the world’s genocide and ecocide; first and foremost in exterminating the Indians and the buffalo. A look into Dee Brown’s Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (New York, 1970) brings into view abysses, abysses in man, in the beast man (the animal is never bestial). America has added its contribution to the genocidal destruction of peoples and to the desolation of landscapes, just as practiced in Europe for over two,500 years, ever since the days of the Roman Empire.

Of course the decline and fall of the Roman Empire comes to mind, and one asks if America does not face a similar fate because it cannot resolve its slavery question or end the revolt of all its disenfranchised, of red, brown and black, of women and of children doomed to poverty. The disputation over what caused the fall of the Roman Empire has raged for about two hundred years and will probably never end. But I do not believe Rome and Washington are comparable (despite Washington’s architecture). Nor do I think much of moralizing observations about the causes of the American debacle in the world-historical arena. If there is a devil (and I am not so sure about the matter), he is the one who invents happy endings that exercise the tragic from human life. The current euphoria about China, combined with flights to the moon, is such a superficial exorcism and escape from reality.

A dangerous simplification lurks in Mr. Reston’s assertion: “There is a moral judgment of history on nations as well as on individuals.” The history of man, or of insects for that matter, is not so simple. I shudder when I hear the word “moral,” especially when I hear of a moral judgment “on” man or peoples or nations. The contorted Calvinist-Manichean politolgy and practice, in pursuance of which the American children of light were called upon to wage war against the children of darkness, against the “satellites of the devil,” must not be forgotten nor revived in new cowlings. (Calvin persecuted his mortal enemies, whom he branded as “satellites of the devil.”) Man does not come close to himself with “morality.” The ethics, or moral sensibility, for which James Reston so marvelously strives must be rooted in something deeper than the proclamation of a “moral law of compensation in the world.” The shabby “realism” of the “realist politicians,” of the petty bourgeois, of the philistines who today make “world history” in an entente cordiale among international foes, cannot be overcome by moralizing.

There is no moral compensation for the one million Jewish children murdered by Adolf Hitler. There is no moral compensation for the cross on which, yesterday and today, man and the Son of Man (Jesus, his ancestors, his sisters and brothers) are suspended.

Moral reckoning does not make anything go away. Every morality, even the veiled morality of do ut des, runs aground on the complex reality of man. If only

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it were so simple: “Don’t kill little children in Viet-

am so that it may go well with you on Wall Street

and elsewhere.” Were it so simple, we could indeed

leave politics to the “moralists.”

The human condition is more complicated, and

more tragic. Without dragging in a perhaps no-

longer fashionable existentialism or fatalism, I

would argue that the “realist politics” of the philistines who,

in Moscow and in the USA make “world pol-

itics,” is so fatally dangerous because they align

their sights by only a few dimensions of the human

reality and thus target their missiles, bombs and

shells. Man is more than his live-weight, his income,

his apparel, his views, his statistically graspable

opinions on God, morality, custom and sex. Man is

more than all codes (the big molecule), more than

all statute books, moral teachings, philosophies, the-

ologies and other hobbies to which young bachelors,

in particular, devote their time between Plato and

Kant (estimable and interesting hobbies, to be sure,

even useful when they are recognized in their limited

game-character).

There is no moral judgment of history on nations

or individuals. To be sure, there are court verdicts

on men, but these judgments reflect the men who

pronounce them. Do we seriously believe that a

court verdict on a man “corresponds” to the total

reality of the man? Judges, teachers and hangmen

live from this pathological delusion, but the human

condition has not been bettered as a result of the

millions of court verdicts handed down. Likewise,

there is no “judgment of history” over nations that is

perceptible to man. When world cultures, nations

or peoples go under, we can, in retrospect, discern

some few causes and interconnections related to

their downfall. But I think it presumptuous, arrogant

and deeply impious, as a human being, to want to

perceive a moral law of compensation! Whoever

thinks along such lines puts himself (often uncon-

sciously) on the judgment seat of a divinity. The

European experiences with “representatives of God”
on earth and their courts (not only that of the Vat-

ican) should give us food for thought. Whoever

thinks of a law of compensation already applies it:

in judgment over one’s own nation, over other na-

tions, social systems and so forth. “The way to Hef-

cix is paved with moral theses.” No, man is not so

“cheap.” Man is the only proof of God perceptible
to men; whoever judges over him is presumptuous.
We should act morally because we should avoid the

one and only mortal sin: to injure or violate life, the

life of man. We become murderers or suicides when

we injure the life of another human being. The dig-

nity of man is so great that it is removed from every
judgment, even from every moral judgment. The

weakness of man is so great that even a “trifling

thing” is sufficient reason to kill. Criminals of world-

historical stature build empires (one recalls Con-

stantine the Great) that last a millennium, or at

least centuries. If the Soviet Union is experiencing

world-historical difficulties, it is not only because

Stalin increasingly assumed the features of a patho-

logical monster but because the Soviet Union bears

the grievous legacy of Byzantium and of Czarist Rus-

sia. World history is not a fairy tale: The moral law

of compensation prevails only in the fairy tale.

What, then, is world history? It is a consequence

of drama, of tragedy, in which lonely individuals

light a torch and are repeatedly murdered. The mur-

derers wash their hands and go to table. No abyss

yawns to swallow them. All great cultures of man

are built on Golgotha, on skeleton sites, on the debris

of older and defeated cultures, peoples and nations.

In view of this tragic situation, the noble task of

the enlightened friend of man, who critically loves

himself and his neighbor, is to build islands of mean-

ing and being in an open cosmos of which we know

so little. First we must build islands on the planet

Earth, whose “nature” is as unknown to us as the

essence of electricity. We must build freedom-spaces

and freedom-times in which man catches sight of

man, in which this being who is still unknown to

himself is recognized and respected in his total

Otherness.

Ecce homo! Ecce cruci hominis! The “case of man”
is not calculable, it is not to be “resolved” by moral

law or judgment. What, therefore, is to instruct our

“realist politicians”? Precisely this: the demand that

they effect their own anthropogenesis, their homino-

ization. They must not remain infantile, pathetic

big boys who want to eat the Gordian knot. No man

has ever become more clever, more humane, more

compassionate, more co-loving or more co-respon-

sible through the proclamation of a moral law. Peo-

ple have been all these things through the experi-

ence and consciousness of pain—this alone estab-

lishes real community. No looking at the stars for

a moral law can replace the daily and personal ex-

perience of the monstrous suffering that man inflicts

upon man—suffering that is not prevented by any

“God” or any “law.” The men of power must be en-

couraged in their hominization through daily re-

sistance, through control, through the critical co-

operation of others whose hominization is more ad-

vanced. This is the arduous road from the Neu-

therthal, who still lives in each of us, to a human being

better than the overwhelming majority of men today.

I fear that James Reston’s so well-intentioned

alusion to a moral law of compensation has meaning

for angles and other celestial beings who live in a pre-

established harmony of the “best of all possible

worlds.” But for people who are what they are, it is

but a pious utterance. In Europe, after the end of

both the First and Second World Wars, the chaplains

of all confessions spoke about “God’s judgment”

(over Germany and others)—until they received the

next call to the colors in the rebuilt Wehrmacht.

(translated by Salvator Attanasio)