

Connections

The Realities of Defeat

On September 20 a Columbus, Ohio, factory worker accused Senator McGovern of advocating surrender in Indochina. The worker said he favored Nixon because Nixon was bringing our boys back home and ending the war. "What do you want then," asked the Senator, "a slow surrender?"

Surrender is a distasteful term and in its technical sense will probably not apply to the manner in which the U.S. sooner or later extricates itself from Indochina. The reality of U.S. defeat, however, cannot be disguised. The stated purposes of American intervention range from "nation building," to demonstrating our ability successfully to wage limited counterinsurgency warfare, to establishing democracy in Southeast Asia, to securing an independent neutralist South Vietnam, to proving the credibility of the U.S. system of alliances, to saving American face. All these goals seem almost certainly frustrated. When one uses force to achieve a goal and fails to achieve it, one can, as the Administration has, redefine the goal. But avoidance of defeat by redefinition is a probably futile exercise in public relations at an unconscionable price in human life and destruction. This moment in which we must recognize American defeat in Indochina should be one of unspeakable sorrow for all who love America, whether or not they approved the original intervention. Those of us who thought the policy morally and strategically wrong from the start have no cause for satisfaction in its disastrous outcome.

The political defeat of U.S. goals in South Vietnam has long been evident to many thoughtful observers. The effort to secure democratic self-determination for the people of South Vietnam was, if students of Vietnamese culture and politics are to be credited, probably hopeless from the start (see Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*, which offers a thorough explanation of the historical and cultural dynamics militating against Western democratic assumptions). The failure of that effort is symbolized by the Thieu regime's September removal of the last of the elected village officials and closing down of most of the opposition press. With the Assembly suspended and the regime ruling by decree, there is not today one official or agency empowered by democratic political processes. The South Vietnamese people face a tragic choice between two dictatorships. The one (Saigon) corrupt, arbitrarily brutal and incapable of governing; the other (Hanoi) ascetic, efficiently brutal and

absolute in its control. That the choice will not, in either case, be made by the people of South Vietnam only compounds the tragedy.

Militarily the situation is at best a stalemate. Even that judgment must be modified, however, by the memory of major offenses launched by the PRG and North Vietnam when Saigon and the Pentagon had claimed "the other side's" resources exhausted. Talk about our ability to destroy North Vietnam "in an afternoon" (President Nixon) is no doubt technically accurate, but it is also morally obscene and militarily and politically irrelevant. The international consequences of such a qualitative escalation, notably in U.S. relations with the Soviet Union and China, is clearly an unacceptable price to pay for whatever "victory" the obliteration of North Vietnam might constitute. Irresponsible talk about what the U.S. can still do militarily that it has not already done is like Boris Spassky's claiming he could have checkmated Fischer if only Bobby's bishop was not covering the squares it was covering.

Even with some quantitative escalation of the bombing policy, as described by McLellan and Busse in this issue, military spokesmen speak of the need for two more years before the bombing will decisively affect the other side's fighting capacity. Those who hinge their judgment of the situation upon elusive turnings of the corner and lights at the end of the tunnel have long since forfeited any right to be trusted. As for reintroducing large numbers of U.S. ground forces (for whatever military purpose that may serve a second time around), that move too is effectively checked, one fervently hopes, by domestic political considerations.

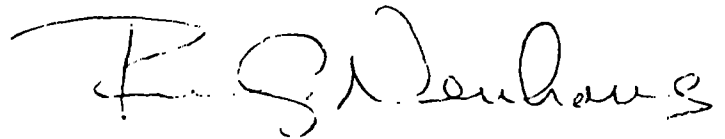
Meanwhile, both sides continue to fight, at great cost in human life and suffering. According to just war theory—and appeal to some version of just war theory is as inadequate as it is inevitable for all but absolute pacifists—the costs of a conflict must be proportionate to the chances of success for the cause in whose name the costs are inflicted. In light of all the above it seems obvious that the political-military goals of North Vietnam are much more likely of success than are the goals of Washington-Saigon. The withdrawal of the U.S. and the domination of the South by the North offers a clearly foreseeable, if unhappy, *terminus* to the war. Of course the withdrawal of North Vietnam from the South might likewise end the war. But North Vietnam will not withdraw and the U.S., sooner or later, certainly will. In

such ways does sheer facticity come to bear on moral judgment. As we should have noted a long time ago, the Vietnamese have nowhere else to go.

Sir Robert Thompson's escalating speculations, in this issue, about a "bloodbath" are made less credible by the sources he cites, including the notoriously hysterical "Walker Report" of the Senate Judiciary Committee. With regard to reprisals, return of POW's and other questions following America's withdrawal, carefully reasoned risks must be weighed

against present policies of proven failure.

The maturity to acknowledge our defeat in Indochina must be accompanied by a different American leadership determined to shape a new role for American power in the world, a role in which America might become a blessing rather than a curse to the nations of the earth.



On Body Counts and Moral Rhetoric

It has been the deliberate policy of *Worldview* to forego an editorial political line of its own and to open its pages to different viewpoints on the ethical implications of international affairs. The present issue contains three articles on Vietnam that (albeit in the less than evenhanded ratio of 2:1) provide ammunition to both the contending rhetorics. For those to whom the McGovern candidacy represents a morally acceptable exitus from the war, there is the McLellan/Busse article with its reiteration of the cumulative tonnage of American bombs and Tran Van Dinh's reassurance that this is the most barbarous war in history (the barbarity, needless to say, being all on the American side). For those who continue to invest moral hope in the Nixon Administration's strategy, there is Sir Robert enumerating once more the atrocities the other side committed and projecting those it might yet commit in the future. Each rhetoric has its own body count. Neither shows much inclination to double-entry bookkeeping.

The ethical calculus would be greatly simplified if it were possible to dismiss either side of the ledger. The truth of the matter is that, after due allowance for rhetorical exaggerations is made, both sets of accusations are essentially valid. The United States and its allies have waged a barbarous war in Vietnam, and so have Hanoi and the NLF. Each rhetoric has its own noble-sounding moral justifications and each camp desires to end the war in a manner that will, somehow, be morally redemptive. The terrible truth is that this is no longer possible. Unless this truth is faced, the choice is between two varieties of self-delusion.

The Nixon Administration seems ready to end the war on just about any condition, except the one condition of turning American power around for the removal of an allied government. Rather than do this, it is apparently willing to pay the price of an indefinite continuation of American bombing. Hardly a morally uplifting course. But what about the other

camp? The McGovern formula for ending the war is simply to get out, at the price of abandoning all those Vietnamese who trusted their lives to American commitments and, quite possibly, of even abandoning the American prisoners to the putative generosity of Hanoi. The Administration subsumes under the heading "ending the war" a strategy that continues to turn vast sections of Indochina into lunar landscapes. The McGovern camp calls this mendacity. Its own painstaking regard for truthfulness gives the name "coalition government" to the installation of a Communist-dominated regime in Saigon and explains that this course means "letting the people of Vietnam decide their own destiny." As to the possibility of the bloodbath projected by Sir Robert, the McGovernite moralists tell us that this is by no means certain. Exactly. Their worry on this count is a precise measure of their moral concern.

Ice-cold calculations of *Realpolitik* could be cited in support of either policy. The Nixon strategy, whatever its moral ambiguity, may be the only course dictated by the national interest of the United States and by the requirements of an international system based on the balance of power. Alternatively, it may be argued that the same national interest and the quest for international peace dictate the termination of the war at whatever moral cost. In either case there is pitifully little possibility of moral redemption, and none whatever of avoiding *les mains sales*.

The shadow of Vietnam will continue to haunt the American conscience for many years to come. The future will reveal the possibilities, if any, of moral redemption. At the present moment the self-righteousness of either rhetoric only serves to obfuscate the task at hand. That task is to end the war as swiftly, as humanely and as responsibly as is feasible under the circumstances. It is by these criteria that the two policies must be weighed, politically as well as ethically.

