

# Connections

## The Death of Israel and Other Grotesqueries

Noam Chomsky figures twice in this issue. John Sisk sees Chomsky as representative of a certain style of intellectual intervention in public affairs and makes no bones about his misgivings about that style. Sisk's penetrating critique will be read, I hope, as an effort to refine the intellectual's political engagement, not as a put down of that engagement. As we now rummage through the madness of the late sixties there are some things that should be rescued from the discard pile. Not least among them is the revitalized critical role played by academia in public debate.

Hugo Adam Bedau notes that Chomsky was among those critics who resisted the temptation to describe U.S. actions in Indochina as "genocide." Bedau's own piece in this issue is a plea for precision in the use of language. As he says, it is only natural to reach for the strongest term at hand in order to condemn the horror of America's war in Vietnam. The problem is that words, and the ideas they carry, are debased by misuse and overuse. Genocide is such a word. I am not so sanguine about the possible futures of mankind that I exclude the possibility we might again have need of the word "genocide" in all its unspoiled and brutal precision.

Equally clarifying is the piece by the MacKinnons. When certain Watergate defendants compared their lawbreaking with the lawbreaking of, for example, conscientious resisters to the war, most of us lightly dismissed the parallel as ludicrous. There seemed to be little danger of confusing Jeb Magruder with Martin Luther King, Jr. The MacKinnons are right in arguing, however, that the distinctions among types of lawbreaking are not all that self-evident. By spelling out again the criteria of justified civil disobedience they help preserve a noble moral tradition both from trivialization and from pervasive cynicism that is one of the uglier consequences of Watergate. Incidentally, the authors' understanding of civil disobedience, following Dr. King, is strikingly similar to the "just war theory" which in these pages has been frequently applied to the questions of war and peace and of domestic revolution.

It tends to reinforce the suspicion that "just war theory" (or similar approaches based upon prudential considerations) is, for all its inadequacies, just about inescapable for those who can find no safe haven in the various absolutisms that are touted from time to time.

James Breig's little fantasy is grotesque and outrageous. It is meant to be grotesque and outrageous. While we might wish to think the debate over abortion was "settled once and for all" by last year's Supreme Court decision, it becomes increasingly clear it is not going to go away any time soon. The dilemma implicit in Breig's "modest proposal" is the dilemma posed by the Court's allusion to "meaningful human life." If in fact there is no legal hindrance to society's discriminating between meaningful and nonmeaningful human life, what is to prevent Breig's scenario from coming true? A number of answers might be offered to that question. Certainly we should like to think that communal values and a common sense of decency stand in the way of the horrors Breig envisions. We could all rest easier, however, were such values reflected and sustained by law. We hope there will not be too many readers who, refusing to ponder the larger questions posed by Breig, will write in canceling their subscriptions. But, then, as we have said on occasion, *Worldview* is not for everyone.

Among other provocative articles in this issue is Donald Kirk's narrative analysis of Japanese business styles. We do not claim that he has penetrated the soul of Japanese business, but he does make scrutable why we so often find our Japanese friends inscrutable. In the face of growing anti-Japanese feeling in Indonesia and elsewhere, one Japanese politician remarked: "We Japanese seem not to have the skill of making ourselves liked the way you Americans have it." In a time dominated by sundry fashions of anti-Americanism, such a remark may strike us as incredible. Perhaps it is just another sign of the Japanese being behind the times when it comes to understanding the world outside of economics. Or perhaps that politician and the businessmen Kirk talked

with are onto something. It would be ironic were the Japanese empire, now on the rise, to succeed by emulating the American empire, now allegedly in decline.

Finally there is the very impressive analysis by Ambassador Goldberg of Israel's international status and future. As this issue goes to press, the Geneva Conference on a Middle East peace has just convened. Undoubtedly it could signal the goal for which people of good will have worked and prayed for more than twenty-five years—negotiations, mutual respect and, just maybe, a lasting peace in the Middle East. I am impressed, however, by the widespread dejection among Israelis and their American supporters. Even if the conference comes up with a real peace agreement, and not simply a "withdrawal agreement," the future of Israel is depicted in the bleakest terms. As a result of the war Israel's dependence upon the U.S. is revealed in its humiliating totality. The somewhat obscene haste with which the European powers shifted course to pander to the oil-rich Arabs struck a severe blow to Israel's international standing. Above all, the past weeks have placed into stark relief the long-term brute power realities of a very small country surrounded by more than a hundred million hostile neighbors. For the first time one hears staunch supporters of Israel say

that they have come to terms with what may be the probability that they will live to witness its demise as a sovereign state.

But then there was something improbable about Israel from the beginning. There was a beautiful improbability in the notion that an idea could give birth to a nation. If that notion is now discredited it will be at the expense not only of Israel but of myriad communities struggling for national identity and liberation. One suspects that the Third World countries that have rushed to line up with the anti-Zionists have not fully reckoned what the end of the State of Israel would mean for their own, often fragile, sense of nationhood. For Western religion and civilization the death of the idea and fact of Israel would have incalculable consequences of the most ominous character. We Americans now have a painfully heightened responsibility to see that does not happen. One wishes that such harrowing issues had not arisen at a time when American leadership commands so little trust both in the world and among its own people.

