

# Connections

## The Berrigan-Nixon Connection

Daniel Berrigan, in the routine performance of his duties as America's prophet-in-residence, recently made a speech about the Middle East. Aggressively meek in form, its contents impressed a lot of people as a sort of cross between the Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the Little Red Book. And a lot of people were greatly surprised. It is difficult to see why. There is an intellectual and moral continuity between earlier Berrigan pronouncements and this particular speech. Neither the distorted perception of world realities nor self-righteousness in the speech is the least bit original.

Berrigan as an individual holds little interest, except perhaps for disillusioned Catholics in quest of new sources of infallibility. Berrigan is important as a symbol of the tattered remnant of the peace movement (or at least its Christian wing), and as a symptom of what happened to the latter, to wit, an accelerating descent into both intellectual and moral bankruptcy. Intellectually, the movement came to be dominated by a New Left view of the world, in which America was cast in the role of global villain and every revolutionary eruption was seen as a salvific event. Morally, the movement was eloquent in its denunciation of American atrocities and wonderfully silent about the atrocities of its revolutionary heroes. The emotional texture of all this came to be a vitriolic anti-Americanism.

It is difficult to date precisely when a movement, which began in honest outrage against cruelties committed in the name of America, turned into an orgy of ideological fanaticisms and pathological self-hatred. Perhaps it was when the Viet Cong flag came to be accepted as an appropriate accompaniment of antiwar demonstrations: *Their* cruelty was either denied or justified by the necessities of the liberation struggle; *our* cruelty was proclaimed as the national mark of Cain. The moral sensitivity of the movement was unruffled by the reports of returning American prisoners of war that they had been tortured, some of them apparently because they had refused to see movement representatives when the latter visited their friends in Hanoi.

The peace movement of the 1960's constitutes a tragically missed opportunity of revitalizing the American polity through a moral protest against an unjust war. The war was unjust, and it was right to protest against it. It is painful to imagine what might have happened if the protest had continued, as it began, as an expression of the most humane values of the American political creed, instead of degenerating into a massive assault on this creed and a mindless celebration of the inhumanities of others. The pain of imagining this is the measure of an historic disappointment.

If a country ever needed a government that offered the formula of being both humane and conservative it was the United States at the onset of the present decade. It is safe to assume that belief in the humane qualities of Richard Nixon was less than passionate among most

who thought him preferable to Hubert Humphrey and then to George McGovern, but the 1972 electoral landslide certainly expressed a popular intuition as to the conservative component of the above formula. Whatever else the mandate of 1972 may have been, it was certainly a mandate for conservative policies at home *and* abroad.

The intuition on which the mandate was based is not invalidated by the subsequent Watergate revelations. It was a very sound intuition. One might say that the country was right in feeling that it needed a Richard Nixon. Once again, the historic disappointment is the fact that the country got *this* Richard Nixon. Once again, it hurts to imagine what might have been the effect on the national spirit of many policies of the present Administration, from disengagement in Indochina to a guaranteed annual income, if these policies had been carried forward by a morally viable White House leadership.

Whatever may be the eventual verdict on Nixon's personal participation in the moral swamp uncovered by the Watergate affair, he cannot disclaim responsibility for the transformation of the most visible symbol of the American polity, the Presidency, into an image of cheap and revolting corruption. But his historic responsibility is deeper. He cannot be faulted for transgressing against the moral sensitivities and the political judgments of the editorial writers of the *New York Times*. Rather, he must be faulted for betraying the trust of millions who voted for him because they believed in the continuing viability of American social and political institutions. It is not liberals (let alone leftists) but conservatives who have the most bitter quarrel with Richard Nixon—or should have, if they remain faithful to their basic intuitions. Watergate, at its most tragic, constitutes a missed opportunity of revitalizing the American polity under the auspices of a conservative administration free of the ideological follies of crusading liberalism.

To understand the Berrigan-Nixon connection is to perceive the dismal condition of *all* the existing camps on the American political scene. Habitation in glass houses has become general—right, left or center, nobody is left with much credibility in the throwing of moral rocks. The failure of each is reinforced by the failings of the others. Berrigan has been duly impeached by at least a sector of his constituency; Nixon (if he resigns) may yet obtain amnesty, and perhaps there is some hope in the fact that most people have very short memories: Human values and political symbols are capable of surviving all kinds of shocks.

But if there is one practical lesson to be drawn from the intellectual and moral bankruptcies of the recent past it is that America needs platforms and agendas that cut right across the existing ideological dividing lines. It would be heartening if such platforms and agendas were animated by a new spirit, which would incorporate *both* the original impulse of compassion of the peace movement (*sans* Berrigan) *and* the soundly conservative instincts of the great majority of the American people (*sans* Nixon). Such a synthesis would require unusually perceptive political leadership. One searches the horizon in vain for even halfway plausible candidates.

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