

# A VIEW OF THE WORLD

Abraham Martin Murray

**ON VIETNAM, REFUGEES, HUMAN RIGHTS, JOAN BAEZ, ETC.** No amount of debate or name-calling should obscure the main point: The people undergoing the horrors of Indochina today need and deserve help. The international community should provide that help.

It is more important to rescue the boat people, for example, than to assign responsibility for their plight. And there are a number of encouraging signs that, in terms of the refugees, the international climate is improving: The U.S. and other countries are accepting increasing numbers of refugees; President Carter has ordered the Seventh Fleet to locate and rescue refugees on the seas; and Y.K. Pao, the chairman of the International Association of Independent Tanker Owners, has encouraged merchant ships to do the same. In his statement to fellow ship owners Mr. Pao said:

Ship owners not only have a legal but a very human responsibility to request masters of their ships to rescue lives in danger at sea, especially in view of the fact that good intentions and human sympathy appear in less danger of being stifled by international apathy.

Responses such as these are particularly welcome as the debate over the refugees continues.

And the debate *will* continue. For although assigning responsibility for the serious violation of human rights is secondary to repairing those violations, it is not itself unimportant. At this point the actions of the Vietnamese Government in generating hundreds of thousands of refugees is so reprehensible that only the staunchest ideological defenders of Vietnam remain uncritical. Yet even here, those sympathetic to Vietnam try to shift the responsibility. For example, in a letter to *The Nation* Don Luce wrote: "The boat people's situation was created in part by the United States refusal to normalize relations with Vietnam. The U.S. failure to recognize Vietnam has strengthened the hard-line faction in the current power struggle within Vietnam, pushed Vietnam into greater dependency on the Soviet Union and increased the likelihood of additional conflict with the Chinese. The 'boat people,' then, are also the victims of our vindictive policy and we should make clear our willingness to accept them."

Nothing in that tortured line of argument suggests why the Vietnamese are making so many people, especially ethnic Chinese, pay for the privilege of risking their lives in frail boats on dangerous seas. Nor is it self-evident that U.S. recognition of Vietnam would alter these present irrational policies. The United States does have particular responsibilities because of the war it inflicted on the Vietnamese, but it can hardly shoulder the blame for poli-

cies devised by a regime whose control it attempted to limit. Jean Lacouture, so often quoted by antiwar protestors during the Sixties, recently wrote:

Indeed, those who emphasize French and American responsibilities in the past must recognize the responsibilities of the Hanoi leaders now—not only for the Hoa refugees but also the heavy responsibility of having turned the "liberation" of the South into a brutal occupation, of having transformed the Southern society shaped by the French and the Americans into a population of the guilty, while tending to classify those who were "bourgeois" as irredeemable, and thus as people condemned to despair and flight.

**ON VIETNAM...ETC.** Which brings us to the brouhaha stirred up by the full-page advertisement signed by Joan Baez and eighty other antiwar protestors. Headed "Open Letter to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam," it charged Vietnam with harsh violations of human rights, offered testimony for that charge, and appealed to the government of Vietnam "to allow an international team of neutral observers to inspect your prisons and re-education centers." Now Joan Baez is no novice at finger pointing. She has used her prominence to call attention to abuses in Chile, South Africa, Uganda, and other countries. She has usually received a respectful and even warm hearing. But on Vietnam today? No, ma'am! She and her co-signers were accused of launching a vicious attack on Vietnam, of relying upon unreliable reports, of diverting attention from U.S. failings and unfulfilled responsibilities, of taking the wrong side in an ideological contest. The ad signed by Joan Baez was, admittedly, not perfect. (That perfect statement has yet to be written.) But it did call attention to abuses that deserve impartial investigation. And it is simply not true to say that there is no evidence to support charges. For example, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation published a report as long ago as December, 1977, that gave evidence about torture in Vietnam and has since followed up on that report. And the reeducation camps, as they are euphemistically termed, are known to everyone. It is not outrageous to call for an international team of neutral observers to inspect both these centers and the prisons. We have supported calls for similar investigations in Chile and Argentina, and we support this call. To return to our opening comment: The principal task is not to win a political argument but to help people in need.

**LOOSE TALK.** The World Council of Churches held a big meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts, recently at which theologians and scientists exam-

ined jointly some big questions that nuclear power presents to this world. An admirable undertaking, and we are, admittedly, drifting into the sidepaths when we quote William F. Buckley's reaction to a draft resolution provided by the conference, a resolution which read: "Sharp changes by superpowers towards a counterforce strategy are so destabilizing that sober scientists estimate a nuclear holocaust is probable before the end of the century."

Buckley's comment: "Sober scientists shouldn't use the word 'probable' so loosely. The notion that to strengthen your counterforce capability—military lingo for what you have left to fire at them if they fire at you—is destabilizing is perversely mistaken."

Our comment: Sober Buckley's shouldn't use military lingo so loosely; shouldn't, that is, confuse terms like "counterforce *strategy*"—which means a strategy of engaging an enemy's military forces as opposed to destroying his cities and civilian population—with second-strike *capability*—which means the ability to respond after absorbing the first strike of an enemy.

**ANTI-SEMITISM.** The American branch of the Bulgarian Eastern Orthodox Church has formally denounced anti-Semitism. So that's news? Well, yes, we think so, even if the full title of the organization will remind some people of other political groups that have split off from the parent body. Speaking as head of the New York diocese of the Church, which has seven million members throughout the world, Metropolitan Joseph stated: "We declare that anti-Semitism and the Holocaust are sinful, anti-Christian and contrary to the will of our God and Father who loves us all."

The metropolitan recalled that during World War II no Bulgarian-born Jew was deported or killed and that the Bulgarian Church had led the struggle to save the lives of threatened Jews. Not a bad thing to recall as we also try to plumb the depths of the Holocaust.

**THE DALAI LAMA.** There are some things on which East and West can meet. Consider, for example, this quotation from His Holiness:

It is an absurd assumption that religion and morality have no place in politics and that a man of religion and a believer in morality should seclude himself as a hermit....Strong moral ethics are as concomitantly crucial to a man of politics as they are to a man of religion, for there are dangerous consequences when our politicians and those who rule forget their principles and convictions. Irrespective of whether we are believer or agnostic, whether we believe in God or Karma, moral ethics is a code which everyone is able to pursue.

This quotation from the Dalai Lama has a familiar ring to Western ears. One could find similar expressions from Western religious leaders quite easily. But what truly brings East and West together, à

propos this statement, is that it is also debated and challenged, both theoretically and practically, on both sides of the globe. With dire consequences. Which means, at a minimum, that the subject is of maximum importance.

**LIGHT FROM LITERATI.** At least something to lighten the day. Within a week, two of America's best-known writers, whom we have long admired, both expatriates now delivering their missives from France, brought into our life amusement wry and unexpected. Also unintended.

First, it was James Baldwin. Commanding prominent space on the Op-Ed page of the *New York Times*, Mr. Baldwin addressed himself with the fierce seriousness of which he is capable to the question, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" In the course of instructing us about words that have come, in his account, from Black English into general usage, he rises to heights which for most people would be grand indeed. Not only is the reader practically carried away but so is Mr. Baldwin. He writes: "Now, no one can eat his cake and have it, too, and it is late in the day to attempt to penalize black people for having created a language that permits the nation its only glimpse of reality, a language without which the nation would be even more *whipped* than it is."

We will not presume to tell Mr. Baldwin that Black English isn't a language, but we have no hesitancy in telling him that it does not provide the *only* glimpse our nation has of reality.

We would, in fact, say that a glimpse into reality was provided for many years by our other expatriate, Mary McCarthy, no expert on or public proponent of Black English. Admitting that her prolonged absence from the States has put her "utterly out of touch" with "how young Americans talk," she said that her new novel starts in America and quickly moves to Europe. The idea for her new novel, she said, came many years ago when a group of terrorists snatched a Vermeer painting, "Young Lady With a Guitar." Threatening to destroy the painting unless their demands were met, they cut off strips from the canvas and sent them to a newspaper. Miss McCarthy's inspired reaction: "People were absolutely gripped by this. It seemed even more alarming than the Getty boy's ear or Patty Hearst because the picture was irreplaceable."

Well, we're not sure about the Getty boy's ear being replaceable—medical technology is remarkable—but Patty Hearst? That's another story, as they say in the newsrooms. Maybe Miss McCarthy is up on cloning; or maybe she's into an updated version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; or maybe it's the heady intellectual air of Paris; or—oh, hell, we don't know.

*Abraham Martin Murray is the collective name of those who contribute to "A View of the World." The opinions expressed sometimes coincide with those of the editors.*