

# Correspondence

## KISSINGER'S MORAL STANCE

To the Editors: Debunking Kissinger has become something of an academic sport. Usually he is granted his brilliance, wit, charm, and intensity, but he is also considered ruthless, ambitious, egoistic, and more or less unprincipled. I do not share in this judgment, at least not the last part of it. (See "Kissinger and Moral Judgment," *World-view*, May.)

Kissinger's moral position rests on two grounds, as I understand him: the ends to which policy is ultimately committed—its *purpose*, as he usually puts it; and the complicated relation between choices and necessities. Morality is a relevant category of judgment, Kissinger argues with Aristotle, only when there is choice; it makes no sense to make moral judgments about necessities. But in most foreign policy cases there is little actual choice about purposes. Our purpose is defined by our character as a nation, by our "objective needs" (necessities), and by the international/geopolitical environment in which we find ourselves. Most meaningful debates are about strategies or tactics, and even then the problem for any statesman is "to rescue an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance." If choice is the *sine qua non*, morality in foreign policy is highly constrained by necessity in Kissinger's view; driven by "objective conditions," different actors with different moral stances would make similar decisions, at least in the American context.

Of all the policy arenas in which he acted—China, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, Chile, Cuba, India, Pakistan, Iran, Europe—surely the crucible in which his conception and his morality were most seemingly tested, and in which his reputation will be most fundamentally forged, is Indochina. It was here that choice and necessity, ends and strategies had to be confronted in the concrete and not just the abstract.

As the coordinator of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee in Chicago, I was active in the opposition to Kissinger's policy. I was convinced that our policy was wrong, not so much morally as strategically. I am no longer so certain on either count. In part this is because the results in Indochina have been so horrifying (if there has not

been exactly the sort of bloodbath the "hawks" predicted, there has nevertheless been a bloodbath and a blood typology seems hardly the salient issue), but also in part because Kissinger presents some convincing arguments buttressed by convincing data in support of his policy. Some of these arguments rest on pragmatic or strategic considerations, some on ideological or moral ones.

Why, Kissinger asks rhetorically, shouldn't a Republican administration have ended the war in 1969, repaired the "fissures in our society," and reaped the political harvest? What were the reasons for continuing? In Kissinger's mind the reasons were many, but they fall, broadly speaking, into three categories: moral, strategic, and tactical.

*Morally*, "the security and progress of free peoples had depended on their confidence in America" (page 227) and on its security and stability. The sacrifice of thousands of lives and billions of dollars would have been meaningless unless the South Vietnamese were given a decent chance to survive as a free people (1014); our own honor, our responsibility, and ultimately our security depended on it (228).

Precipitate withdrawal would destroy South Vietnam, leave deep scars on our national conscience, deepen our crisis of authority, and leave us a few years down the road in ignominy and self-recrimination (1038). It would "consign millions of South Vietnamese who had relied upon us to a Communist dictatorship that the overwhelming majority of them rejected and feared" (1199). It would be "inhumane, ignoble and destructive of larger interests elsewhere" (1307). Such betrayal of South Vietnam "would amount to a renunciation of our morality, an abdication of our leadership...and an invitation for the mighty to prey upon the weak" (1167).

Tactically, the North would not release our POWs without a settlement, a settlement that required not merely withdrawal but the overthrow of the "Thieu puppet regime." For our part we required "a fair settlement, compatible with our values, our international responsibilities and the convictions of the majority of the American people" (311).

*Strategically*, moreover, the stability of the international system depended on our getting out with some dignity, as de Gaulle did in Algeria—as a matter of will and policy, not exhaustion, col-

lapse, and route (228, 298, 1349). If we surrendered in Vietnam, Kissinger argues, our entire foreign policy—our incipient agreements with the Soviets, Chinese, Arabs, Israelis—might collapse ("who would believe us?" [1098]).

In sum, "for a great power to abandon a small country to tyranny simply to obtain a respite from our own travail [was] profoundly immoral and destructive of our efforts to obtain a new and ultimately more peaceful pattern of international relations" (228).

In Kissinger's view necessity and choice converged in Vietnam; the *mé-lange* of strategic, tactical, and *moral* reasons for our policy coalesced around two basic principles: The alternative was morally wrong and politically shortsighted. Several reviewers have castigated Kissinger for pursuing in the Vietnam negotiations a "solution" simply to save face, as though it were all cosmetic, a mere vanity. Perhaps they are right, but if so, they must have access to documents not yet public. Kissinger argues at great length—five hundred pages—that the negotiations awaited primarily, if not exclusively, on the willingness of Hanoi to abandon its demand that on our way out we overthrow the Thieu regime.

Kissinger refused. Refusing to depose a government, particularly an allied government, is not mere cosmetics. Our moral convictions, he writes, as well as our long-term strategic interests required that we give a free people and its government a "decent chance at survival." One might argue with his assessment of the South Vietnamese and their government, but the Nixon administration was prepared to see itself isolated rather than to sacrifice its "moral position" (1016)—surely the easier, less costly, politically popular alternative. The protestors were wrong, says Kissinger: "sympathy for their anguish could not obscure my obligation to my country as I saw it" (510); "we could not give up our convictions" (292).

To be sure, all of this depends on Kissinger's (post hoc) version of the events. But if we want to ask about Kissinger's conception of morality, surely his own version is not irrelevant. Protestations, to be believable, must be consistent with actions, and there is always the possibility that Kissinger may be lying or deceiving himself. But

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## THE SAYINGS OF JESUS

by T.W. Manson

(Eerdmans, 346 pp., \$7.95 paper)

First published in 1937, this New Testament study has proved a classic. Its reappearance in paperback is most welcome. Manson's understanding of Jesus is highly ethical and opposed to the themes of "crisis theology" that were becoming dominant in the 1930s. He contends that Jesus did not propose a mere "interim ethic" for a sect of frantic exchatological hope, but a universal, albeit not legislatable, direction for human life both individually and in community.

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given Kissinger's sense of history and given the enormous effort to write so detailed a book, a defense based on lies could at best buy time while it compounded the indictment history would inevitably bring down. Perhaps when all the records are open, that will be the verdict.

To say that Kissinger was guided at least to some extent by moral principles is not to require concurrence with his particular moral judgments. In fact it is not at all clear to me how well the distinction between necessity and choice holds up. Exactly how necessary is necessity? Surely the degree differs from case to case, and surely practical considerations color the evaluation. Was the "necessity" of Vietnam worth the thousands of lives, the billions of dollars? I do not ask that question rhetorically; the "necessity" of pursuing a particular policy in Vietnam may have come at too high a price. And the price we should be willing to pay for one "necessity" (say, defending our borders against invasion) is not necessarily the same as that for some other "necessity" (defending South Vietnam).

But if there is room for moral debate, it cannot come about by denying one side of the debate any moral principles at all. As an active partisan in the Vietnam debate, I have been unable for ten years to look again at Vietnam. *The White House Years* and the recent volume by Guenter Lewy are the first I have been able to consider. The continuing assessments of Vietnam will occupy all of us for years to come, but they will be with my generation for its

entire life, just as the Depression and the Second World War were with the previous generation. Together with the Civil Rights movement, the antiwar movement defined our political consciousness. But we will not expiate the shadow of Vietnam by casting doubt on the morality of those with whom, perhaps wrongly, we disagreed.

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### THE POPE AT DROGHEDA

To the Editors. Your magazine should be commended for being, to my knowledge, the only American publication to make reference to the pope's speech at Drogheda, in Ireland, before he came to this country (Paul F. Power, "The Pope and Northern Ireland," January-February).

In my view, the Drogheda speech was the pope's most significant of his entire trip. It was a fervent attack on terrorism. Coming on the heels of John Paul's visit to Auschwitz, the site of crimes by Christians against the Jewish people, it was obvious that his remarks were not only intended for the ears of Irish terrorists but also for the PLO and other Arab terrorist groups intent on destroying the Jewish state of Israel, which the Christian world helped establish as an atonement for the crimes at Auschwitz....

The most significant part of the speech was the pope's announcement that he would use the same appeal in his address to the United Nations! This is what he said on that subject: "I hope to address the United Nations Organization on these same problems of peace and war, justice and human rights. These questions I shall be discussing before United Nations Assembly in a few days." However he did not. He mentioned nothing about terrorism and violence in his speech before the U.N.

The question therefore arises. What went wrong? Why did the pope change his mind and delete the attack on terrorism in his U.N. address?

Friends of mine who are close to the Vatican have intimated that he was talked out of it by people close to the secretary general and by forces that today go under the heading of "the Third World," certainly under Com-

munist and Arab pressure.

An opportunity of great historic and moral dimensions was thus lost. The Drogheda speech, however, reminds us that the pope indeed had in mind that Christian states should have nothing to do with terrorist organizations of the PLO variety. Had the pope said so publicly, the current lamentable trend toward making the PLO "respectable" might have been reversed. Still, the Drogheda speech will serve as a reminder of where the pope really stands on the issue.

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### FORGIVE AND FORGET?

To the Editors. With regard to "The Vietnam War. Is It Time to Forgive and Forget?—Three Views" (*Worldview*, January-February), permit the undersigned yet a fourth view.

If one forgets, then, alas, there is no lesson derived therefrom; that would be immoral. Forgiving, however, requires mutuality of obligation; it cannot be a unilateral act. Hence, it appears that if Robert McNamara sought forgiveness for his political participation in the Vietnam war, an oblique contribution as executive of the World Bank would scarcely qualify him for pardon.

There are breaches of duty. One consists of acts of commission, while another entails acts of omission. As to the former, perhaps Robert McNamara is not culpable. His commitment to the Vietnam war and policies might very well have been undertaken in total good faith. On that score, judging him is difficult. But, respecting the latter (acts of omission), Mr. McNamara stands guilty.

After leaving office why couldn't he provide us with the benefit of his experience and insights and furnish us with guidance relative to the continuation of the war under Nixon and Kissinger? What course of extrication?

Misplaced loyalty, personal pride, and prestige accounted for his silence. A bolstered image, for him, was decisive. Thus, Robert McNamara merits our scorn and is deemed unworthy of the award.

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