VOLUME 13, NO. 6 JUNE 1970

WORLDVIEW is published monthly [except for a combined July-August issue] by the Council on Religion and International Affairs. Subscription $4.00 for one year; $7.00 for two years; $9.00 for three years.

Address: 170 East 64th Street, New York, New York 10021. TE 8-4120

CONTENTS

Readers are reminded that worldview welcomes correspondence. Letters may be specific comments on articles in recent issues of general discussion, but readers are requested to limit their letters to 500 words.

TURN AMERICA AROUND

America needs a profound change in the way it views its role in the world. Much can be learned from Vietnam, from the mistaken judgments that led us into the war, from the destruction wrought upon a nation that we intended to help, and from the way in which we seem a captive of the momentum of our misdirected power. This learning from Vietnam is only a start. There needs to be a reversal of our assumptions as a nation.

First, the time has come to free ourselves from the combination of residual national messianism and anti-Communist crusading. The old enthusiastic messianism of the era of the Spanish-American war died some time ago. Our present sense of destiny is not characterized by happiness or enthusiasm. If there was any before the Vietnam war it has now disappeared. But there has been a *negative* sense of America's destiny as the world's guardian against communism, and that still dominates the minds of many of us—especially those close to military policy. It is what worries all who say of the use of military power in Vietnam that we should stop the Communists there or else we shall have to stop them some other place nearer home. Our more thoughtful leaders know that this whole picture of an international Communist movement that threatens the "free world" from many sides is out of date; but previous leaders taught this to the American people and it takes time for ideas to be refuted by realities.

What about communism? We should abandon the idea that there is a world-wide communism that constitutes a unified threat and is, by definition, the greatest evil that can befall any country regardless of the alternatives. Who are we to say that communism may not be better for some nations than generations of stagnation in poverty, than decades of civil war, than a rightist tyranny that cares nothing about the welfare of the people? It would be a rational policy to allow various kinds of communism to find their own level, checked by nationalism, by conflicts between Communist nations, by the slowing down of the momentum of Communist faith and ideological conviction, and by the development of constructive alternatives to Communist programs. I have written, even here, in almost wholly negative terms about communism, but I suspect that is an American habit, a concession to a deep American bias, and that ten or twenty years from now it will be easy to say in this country that communism in X country has proved to be a constructive way forward which, while costly, as all revolutions are costly, has avoided some of the irrational and self-defeating aspects of our own society.

Closely related to this anachronistic anti-Communist orientation is something more pervasive: our counter-revolutionary stance in both Asia and Latin America. We have become bent on preserving the status quo, on opposing left-wing movements

which are primarily nationalist in inspiration but which may be influenced by one or another form of communism. In order to suppress liberation movements we commit our nation to the tactics of counterinsurgency. We support oppressive governments in Brazil, Greece, Taiwan, South Vietnam and many other places. America was once the hope of the oppressed but now it is the ally of the oppressors. Fear of communism may be a major factor here, but there is a deeper fear of change, a fear that other nations will not be safe for American investments, that somehow events will get out of our control. The whole American stance in relation to Castro's Cuba is a kind of paradigm of a policy that above all seeks to prop up a familiar type of order with which we feel more secure. The first duty of our country now is to get off the backs of other nations, to allow them to have their own forms of liberation from us and from their own oligarchies. There will be many mistakes, some of them tragic, as nations seek to find new ways. Romantic revolutionaries may be as mistaken as many who try to freeze the existing order. But when the United States intervenes, with its C.I.A. conspirators, with its training of counterinsurgency forces, with its more overt uses of military force, there are also tragic mistakes: The freedom of people to find their own way is tragically denied. Today it is Southeast Asia where our errors have brought upon us a terrible judgment. Tomorrow it is likely to be Latin America. We shall never learn this until we renounce the implicit claim that we always know what is best for such nations.

•

This worldview is far from what is often called a new isolationism. Support of multilateral institutions, especially the U.N., would become more important. Policies of government and ways of life of nations that are designed to reduce the gap between rich and poor nations would be a major concern. Real solidarity with the peoples who have so far been neglected or oppressed would belong to our national outlook. American power would continue to be a factor of enormous importance, and there would be baffling and complicated decisions as to how our national power should be used so that it would do more good than harm. Without effective multilateral institutions this power would at times have to be used in situations in which our own government would have to make the final decision. The difference would come from having those who make the decisions start from new premises instead of from the old ideological assumptions that control them now and against which this editorial is directed. There would be no sure and safe road ahead for anyone, but at least those who control policy would be striking out in a different direction—and in that there would be hope. With America turned around, our great power would not threaten the Soviet Union and China and Cuba. We may also hope that the USSR as the other great nuclear power and the other great interventionist power would also be turned around.

John C. Bennett

BACK TO BASICS...

That democratic government is founded on public consensus, openly and freely arrived at, has been basic to democratic political theory since the ancient Greeks. History also shows that whenever democratic systems break down, one of the first symptoms manifested is an inability for political and social factions to arrive at consensus and effect compromise. Whether or not the American democracy is in as severe a state of crisis as commonly believed, it is not hard to discern that the compromise-making machinery is functioning very badly all across the political spectrum. The Administration seems as unaware of the need for consensus-based action in conducting its Vietnam policy as the left-liberal opposition seems scornful of any hint of compromise. Yet it should seem clear to all but the most doctrinaire that neither side has the political means to make its will prevail intact. Whether the American body politic can, despite all trends to the contrary, work out a national consensus *and* compromise on Vietnam may determine the future of the U.S., and inevitably, then, the course of world history.

Guy G. Davis

John C. Bennett, who has just retired as President of Union Theological Seminary, heads the *Christianity & Crisis* editorial board and is a member of the CRIA Board of Trustees.

Guy G. Davis is Assistant to the President of CRIA.