THE
YALE REVIEW

VOL. LXVI · PUBLISHED IN DECEMBER 1976 · NO. 2

THE UNLEARNED LESSONS OF VIETNAM

BY JEFFREY RACE

IN early 1975 the newspapers reported President Ford's opposition to any postmortem investigations into the Vietnam War, because "the lessons of the past in Vietnam have already been learned—learned by Presidents, learned by Congress, learned by the American people. We should have our focus on the future." With the perspective permitted by the passage of more than a year we may be in a position to judge the correctness of this prescription. As one who has spent much of the past decade in contact with many levels of the American effort in Asia, I am struck that many of the lessons, in fact the most important ones, have not been learned. Furthermore too many hundreds of thousands are dead, maimed, or disfigured, too many lives have been shattered, too much innocent blood has been spilled, to pass over the last decade as though it were all a minor incident which we can forget in our responsible concern for the future.

Let us stand back for a moment, pretending we are celestial beings, and look at the world. We would be poor observers if we failed to describe our globe as the site of colossal exploitation and injustice. Taking just the dimension of income, the figures on distribution within and between countries (highly unequal) and secular trends between countries (increasingly unequal) show this unambiguously to all observers, regardless of political persuasion. What is one's attitude to this to be? What are one's preferences? Does one act to affirm injustice and inequality and exploitation, or the contrary?

Under the aspect of eternity, Communism is one response, the victim's response, to injustice, inequality, and exploitation. However repugnant to liberal values may be its means, it must be understood specifically in this way. It is a response which uses cruel means against a cruel world. If one is opposed to injustice, inequality, and exploitation, and yet also opposed to the cruel means of Communism, then one is obliged to choose better means to achieve the ends of justice, equality, and reciprocity. To do otherwise demeans one to the same level as one's opponent; and that is what happened in Vietnam.

American policy toward Southeast Asia in practice—and it is in practice that we must judge it—was a barbaric perversion of human aspirations to escape injustice and exploitation. Millennia ago, as man began to emerge from barbarism into civilization, he recorded the choice that one makes on abandoning barbarism. Surely Henry Kissinger must once have read the words of Deuteronomy: "For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? . . . the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. . . . I call heaven and earth this day to record against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." The sad fact is that American leaders consistently chose death and injustice in Southeast Asia, and that was a betrayal of what the American experiment meant to the founders of the Republic. In the name of good ends (and many people truly believed in them), hideous means were used, such that the Saigon regime came to have all the vices of its opponent in Hanoi, with none of the latter's virtues. And the evil wrought by the means—both in Asia and America—was so enormous that it betrayed the ends as well. This was not, to repeat Deuteronomy, some secret hidden from us, that we had to say, who shall go up to heaven and bring it down to us? It was very near to us, in fact right under our noses. Numerous official and unofficial observers pointed it out.

Another point that Mr. Ford was anxious to pass over has to do with simple honesty. We must depend ultimately on the integrity of the people in an organization, otherwise it will go awry regardless of the institutional safeguards supposedly built in to protect it from its members. In the case of Vietnam, policy was founded on and protected by deception and outrageous lies, hidden from the public and even from Congress by barriers of official secrecy. Dishonesty was so pervasive that different parts of the Executive branch even lied to one another. A policy conceived in lies and executed by dishonest men was bound to end in catastrophe since, to be practical about it, feedback mechanisms necessary for the success of large complex organizations work only if they pass accurate messages. Of this we hear no word. Those American leaders of whom we have reason to expect the most appear impervious to it, since many of the liars are still at their desks.

Let me recount some incidents from my own experience which illustrate the dishonesty which pervaded America's efforts in Southeast Asia—and which was not identified by Mr. Ford as one of the crucial problems of this period of American history.

The time is 1971. I have returned to Harvard from several years of research in Vietnam and Thailand and am in the process of publishing a book (*War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*, University of California Press, 1972) on the nature of the war in Vietnam and the ways in which scholars and bureaucrats have failed to understand what was at stake there. In August Dr. X calls me from Washington to ask me to participate in a seminar on "lessons learned in pacification" organized by him for the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA). The Defense Department is paying $400,000 to "search for major lessons of pacification in Vietnam that may have applicability in some other area at some future time" (Dr. X's subsequent letter). I explain to Dr. X the conclusions of my research: that it is impossible for the Defense Department to learn the lessons; that to the extent the Institute can learn from Vietnam, its findings will be ignored by its client.

Dr. X agrees that the bureaucracy has experienced learning

difficulties in the past, but he is optimistic in this case and urges my attendance. I agree, but with two conditions; first, that two items be circulated in advance to other participants (from the Department of State, Agency for International Development, the Army, and the Central Intelligence Agency): a chapter from my forthcoming book titled "Lessons" and a paper I had recently presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, explaining why one psychological theory predicts impediments to institutional learning and what can be done about it (published May 1976 in *Armed Forces and Society*); second, IDA pay my usual consulting fee of $100 per day plus expenses. (Numerous studies show that advice is weighed in proportion to its cost. The implication for gratuitous advice is plain.) Dr. X agrees to both conditions. A short time later the agenda arrives which states, among other things, that "seminar members are encouraged to bring up any additional points which they consider important."

On my arrival in Washington General Y, assisting Dr. X in the project, informs me that, after reading the two papers, he and Dr. X have decided not to circulate them since this would divert the meeting from the points they want to cover.

The first day's discussion is conducted within what I will call the "conventional wisdom" of American policy and practice in Vietnam up to that time. At several points during the day I introduce evidence from my research indicating that each specific program under discussion must be evaluated differently if events in Vietnam are viewed as part of a process of social revolution rather than as banditry or external invasion. No such suggestion on my part is pursued by the other participants: the usual response is to continue the dialogue as if I had not spoken, or to shift to a different topic.

The second day's discussion begins with the subject of corruption and what Americans can do about it, e.g., having American advisers threaten a low "pacification rating" if their counterparts continue corrupt practices. I suggest that this problem has to be viewed in sociopolitical terms: that corruption occurs because of a certain distribution of political power, and if Americans are

concerned about corruption, they must be concerned with political reform. I further suggest that the approach to corruption heretofore used has been (in technical jargon) a "suboptimization," and that this has characterized the entire seminar and has wide ramifications for all the subjects discussed. In short, the distributive issues of political justice cannot be avoided; the fact that the Saigon government which the United States is supporting is corrupt and perpetuates an oppressive social order is not an inconvenient handicap but the heart of the problem.

Finally, I suggest that the most important lesson of "pacification" in Vietnam is to learn to recognize an impossible situation (overdetermined, if you prefer). If, as some seminar participants said to me privately, certain important variables cannot be manipulated by the United States, and yet manipulating these variables is essential to avoiding military catastrophe, then intervention makes no sense, there is no point in discussing specific programs, and honesty compels us to tell that to the Department of Defense in order to save lives in the future interventions which that Department is apparently contemplating.

These proposals to enlarge the agenda to consider new perspectives and new scientific variables in evaluating existing programs draw an immediate and heated response from Dr. X. His points are three: (1) IDA's "charter" from the Department of Defense does not (for reasons unspecified) permit the consideration of the "lessons" I urge be considered—despite the explicit request in the letter of invitation to raise important relevant points; (2) their sole concern is with more effective implementation of existing programs, even though these are part of an ill-conceived strategy and a disastrous policy; (3) he will not permit the meeting to be diverted by "theoretical" considerations; the programs are only to be evaluated "pragmatically." Dr. X concludes with a vehement statement that the meeting will return at that very moment to a "pragmatic" evaluation of programs, not permitting me to speak further on these subjects.

At this point General Y briefly interjects that he can summarize in two pages all the errors of American strategy and policy in Vietnam, but the Defense Department will not pay to be

told such a thing, so they cannot permit such subjects to be discussed.

What is going on here? George Orwell had a name for this kind of behavior: "crimestop." "Crimestop means the faculty of stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought. It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest arguments . . . and of being bored and repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction. Crimestop, in short, means protective stupidity."

I would be less generous than Orwell. I would call failing to transmit the whole relevant truth criminal negligence. Literally the lives of thousands, perhaps millions, have depended in the past and might depend in the future on the words and actions of men such as these. Dr. X was formerly a CIA official, and General Y had been a division commander before his retirement. Apparently earlier patterns of deception, half-truths, and telling the boss what he wanted to hear carried over into their consulting work. But how is it possible to have a sensible policy (any sensible policy), a realistic policy, a safe policy, if government planners consistently deceive each other as Dr. X and General Y said they must?

Another example. A few years back I was interviewed for a position with the United States Foreign Service. Everything progressed well. One final point, the interviewers mentioned, going down their checklist. To qualify to be a Foreign Service officer I must agree to lie when requested by my superiors. Did I have any scruples about this? (The colleagues to whom I have recited this story are incredulous, but I affirm that this actually happened.) I pointed out that, as in Vietnam, lying to the public and to the Congress inevitably leads to lying to one's superiors as well. Is this what they want? There is an escape clause, they inform me: the Foreign Service officer who has scruples on this matter is permitted to resign his commission rather than execute a deception. Very reassuring. But, I ask, must it be a qualification for office under the United States of America to agree to lie to the public?

Officials who insist on conducting public business in this way fail to understand the ideas on which the American Republic is based. One such idea is that of the importance and inviolability of truth, regardless of its consequences and regardless of the claims of power. This is an idea so fundamental that it goes back centuries in our culture, preceding the political controversies of our time, in fact originating in the religious controversies of the seventeenth century. Truth was a way to God, and no man had a right to interfere with the truth, not even a king. And truth, as a means to God, was stronger than falsehood. What Milton said three hundred years ago stands as a testimonial to the belief which underlies our Republic: "Let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?"

The truth should come out, and it will come out, and high American officials, in thinking and acting otherwise, have recently betrayed how little they comprehended the principles of the government they had been chosen to lead.

The history of the Pentagon Papers illustrates this clearly. The public tends to think now that it was only because of Dan Ellsberg's release of the papers in 1971 that we have them. In fact, as I think back, we knew of them some time before then, and someone else would have pressed for their release in due course. The existence of the study was first discussed openly, as far as I know, in September of 1970, at the meeting of the American Political Science Association mentioned earlier. At this meeting a series of papers was given on Vietnam, and afterward we paper-givers had a dinner; among the participants were Ray Tanter, Dan Ellsberg, Allan Whiting, Sam Huntington, and Roger Hilsman. During the course of the dinner I suggested that some prestigious and important organization, like this Association, should sponsor a study of decision-making on the Vietnam War, since there was obviously much to be learned. Someone, I believe Sam Huntington, said this was a good idea, but it would be hard to get official cooperation. Then Dan Ellsberg spoke up and said, "But the study has already been done. It's in a safe in Washington. All you have to do is get it." We

spoke about it a bit more, and I suspect that shortly some group of scholars would have pursued it, had Dan not moved on his own six months later.

The point of this story is that high government officials still have not learned the important lesson involved, for what Dan Ellsberg did still remains an extremely sore point in officialdom. One risks ostracism even trying to explain that what Dan and the press did is firmly in the American tradition, and precisely what a good American is obliged to do: expose injustice and lying by the government. The two examples I have given above show that many officials believe lying to be a routine and proper means of conducting public affairs. The Pentagon Papers incident reveals that many more believe that dishonesty deserves the same protection of law as does legitimate government business.

Justice Black showed a truer understanding of our system, I believe, in his opinion in the Pentagon Papers case:

> In the First Amendment the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors. . . . And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell. In my view, far from deserving condemnation for their courageous reporting, the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* and other newspapers should be congratulated for serving the purpose that the Founding Fathers saw so clearly. In revealing the workings of the government that led to the Vietnam war, the newspapers nobly did precisely that which the Founders hoped and trusted they would do.

As I traveled through the United States on a recent trip, I saw little appreciation of how out of phase, or simply out of touch, is the United States with the world today. Many certainly felt that something was wrong, but the universal tendency was to externalize it: changes in the world weather patterns, fanatical politicians in the Middle East, "autonomous" imperatives of technology impelling us further into a pointless arms race. And, in relation to Vietnam, I detected among the government officials I spoke with hardly any sense that we have been through some-

thing so catastrophic that any other nation undergoing such a strain would have suffered bankruptcy, or revolution, or both. No one collared me in the halls of the Pentagon or the State Department and forced me to listen to a monologue on how this catastrophe should lead us to examine our public institutions with the most searching scrutiny. Some people tended to blame individuals, but it is not the failings of individual leaders *per se* that concern us, since the problems we have had have continued despite changes in administrations. Nevertheless individuals cannot escape responsibility, since institutions only work through individuals.

Let us return to the issue of Vietnam for a poignant illustration. At the beginning of 1975 President Ford requested $300 million in military aid for Saigon, asserting that these funds "could very likely be a key for the preservation of [South Vietnam's] freedom." He added that Ambassador Graham Martin had assured him that if adequate funds were subsequently forthcoming, "within two or three years the South Vietnamese would be over the hump militarily as well as economically."

That, with the information available in January 1975, the first citizen in the land could make statements so preposterous on so many counts indicates a loss of contact with reality suggestive of dementia. Men have certainly been committed for departing into a less distant dream world than these statements suggest. But that the American people and their representatives took so long to wake up to their preposterousness illustrates that it was not dementia (how can one lock up a whole people?) but something far more serious. Whatever the causes, the situation is of the utmost gravity.

Consider the factual question involved. Would $300 million of military aid have been sufficient to retrieve a situation where $150 billion worth of effort had failed? The question is answered in the posing.

Dickens answered our question a century ago, speaking of the failure to understand of those who had been swept away by the French Revolution. The elegance and imaginative power of the novelist have persuasive power beyond any recitation of

facts that the lowly social scientist can bring to bear. "It was too much the way of Monseigneur under his reverses as a refugee, and it was too much the way of native British orthodoxy, to talk of this terrible Revolution as if it were the only harvest ever known under the skies that had not been sown—as if nothing had ever been done, or omitted to be done, that had led to it—as if observers of the wretched millions in France, and of the misused and perverted resources that should have made them prosperous, had not seen it all inevitably coming, years before, and had not in plain words recorded what they saw."

As Dickens wrote of France, so it is true that what has come to pass in Vietnam was predictable, and predicted. For decades observers have seen these events coming, and they indeed recorded in plain words what they saw. The catalogue—and I provide here just the highpoints—is a dismal reminder of our folly.

1. Already in the 1930's French economists were warning that the means that had been used to clear and settle the Mekong Delta, creating as they had a large tenant class, threatened an ultimate social explosion.

2. In 1946 Ho Chi Minh, attempting to stave off a French reconquest of Vietnam, warned Jean Sainteny, "If we must fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of our men, but we will kill one of yours. And in the end it is you who will tire." Words of an arrogant nationalist, one might say—except they proved correct in 1954—were disregarded—and proved correct again in 1975.

3. On December 19, 1946, John Carter Vincent, Director of the State Department's Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, wrote in a memo to Undersecretary Dean Acheson: ". . . with inadequate forces, with public opinion sharply at odds, with a government rendered largely ineffective through internal division, the French have tried to accomplish in Indochina what a strong and united Britain has found it unwise to attempt in Burma. Given the present elements of the situation, guerrilla warfare may continue indefinitely." (We have the publication of the Pentagon Papers to thank for access to this memo.)

4. Paul Mus, eminent French sociologist, likewise warned against the attempt to reimpose white domination on Vietnam by military conquest.

5. A Foreign Service officer named Ogburn, who had served in Vietnam, wrote a prescient memorandum in the mid-1950's warning of the dangers of a United States policy of supporting a repressive government such as Diem's.

6. The United States Government contracted with Michigan State University for a study team to work in Vietnam, which they did during the mid and late '50's. Among its many conclusions were that serious troubles lay ahead unless the regressive nature of the taxation system were turned around; the upland tribal peoples were favorably integrated into the political system; serious land reform were undertaken; the existing extreme centralization of power were overcome; and a decentralized, local constabulary were set up, rather than (as planned) a centralized, mechanized regular army.

Not one of these recommendations was followed. The injustices of the tax system were ignored; discrimination against the uplanders continued (leading to a revolt in 1964); the United States Mission, as Roy Prosterman has written, "obligingly failed to have present in Vietnam even one full-time official dealing with the land-reform problem"; the *political* problems of overcentralization were submerged by the overwhelming desire to stay on good terms with Diem and his successors and to provide them *military* assistance; and the United States went on to create explicitly a large conventional army which predictably collapsed in the face of a threat with which it was not designed to cope. (For its troubles, that Michigan State University team was eased out of Vietnam in 1962.)

7. Even General Maxwell Taylor, in his 1961 report to President Kennedy, warned that "there is no limit to our possible commitment." (Again we have the Pentagon Papers to thank for this retrospective information.)

8. George Ball, on July 1, 1965, warned President Johnson: "The South Vietnamese are losing the war to the Viet Cong. No one can assure you that we can beat the Viet Cong or even force

them to the conference table on our terms, no matter how many hundred thousand white, foreign [United States] troops we deploy. . . . The decision you face now, therefore, is crucial. Once large numbers of U.S. troops are committed to direct combat . . . [and] once we suffer large casualties, we will have started a well-nigh irreversible process. Our involvement will be so great that we cannot—without national humiliation—stop short of achieving our complete objectives. Of the two possibilities I think humiliation would be more likely than the achievement of our objectives—even after we have paid terrible costs." (This remarkable statement again secret until the publication of the Pentagon Papers.)

But, the man of power will say, the warnings of danger ahead were not certain, not one hundred percent. Disaster was not absolutely guaranteed. Why should we let ourselves be deterred by nervous Nellies? The answer simply is, what standard does one apply in handling the public's business? The Department of Defense is not Procter and Gamble, launching a new product—if the product is a failure, we just chalk it up to profit and loss. People's *lives* were at stake in Vietnam; one does not apply the same standard as in selling toothpaste or automobiles.

Asking a simple question would have revealed the dangerous limitations of our policy-makers. Many people warned them of disaster ahead. They were not persuaded. They should have been asked—indeed they had an obligation to ask themselves, but we have no information any ever did—"If this evidence does not persuade you of disaster ahead, what evidence would?" My hunch, and it can only be a hunch now, since disaster has already struck, is that there would have been no answer, because they had never thought about that simple, most basic, and most obligatory of all questions. As a result these imprudent men treated as trifles—like toothpaste—our lives, our fortunes, and our now battered honor.

An incident a few years back may serve to illustrate this attitude by example. While I was preparing my book for publication I produced a short article summarizing my findings, so as

to make them available quickly to other people working in the field. It was published in the August 1970 issue of *Asian Survey,* was titled "How They Won," and it explained why the Saigon government's organs had collapsed in Long An province in the early part of the decade and why the United States response was irrelevant to the factors involved.

The senior American officer in Long An at the time I was doing the study was Colonel (now Brigadier General, ret.) James Herbert, who later headed the refugee relocation program. I think I shall go a long time before I meet a more reflective, conscientious, and thoughtful officer. Whenever I was in Long An I stayed in his apartment, and we would be up late into the evening discussing political and military developments. I have tape-recorded hours of interviews which he generously consented to give me out of his overbusy schedule.

During 1971 I had lunch with him in Washington, where he was then serving at the Pentagon, and he related that Robert Komer, formerly head of the pacification program in Vietnam, had run into him in a Pentagon corridor just recently, and said he had just read an article in *Asian Survey* by one Jeff Race. Had Herbert ever heard of Jeff Race, and had Race ever visited Long An? Jim Herbert and I both had a good laugh about this, but the serious point is that Komer, "with the personal rank of ambassador," as he was always described, and reading all the secret intelligence reports from the field, could not imagine how anyone who had ever visited Long An province could write the analysis that I wrote—so different was his map of reality and the issues he considered important. But I was not the first to make the points covered in "How They Won." So I conclude that messages such as I was trying to communicate simply couldn't get through to Komer, even if he read them. With his cognitive map, Vietnam was a technical problem, not a human one, and technological means were the way to solve it. Technological solutions to human problems: the same syndrome that afflicted Dr. X and General Y.

In order for public officials to begin applying different standards to the conduct of the public's business, I think the public

must begin applying different standards to the behavior of public officials. Some of my colleagues shrug off President Ford's remarks in requesting the $300 million by saying it was hyperbole, political rhetoric, which Ford didn't believe even as he uttered it. But again, lives—not profits—depend on the words of the President of the United States. We should and must come to apply *at least* as high a standard to public officials as we do to General Motors when we buy a car or to Pfizer when we buy a drug. If someone sells death but calls it life, and knew or had adequate reason to know it was death, then he is a swindler and should be identified as such. That we can no longer bring ourselves to use such words, even when they are deserved, is a depressing example of how the vocabulary of American political discourse has come to lose its meaning.

There are, I fear, no institutional cures for the troubles we are suffering, since the causes lie in our attitudes. And among these, our attitudes toward time must occupy a central place: attitudes toward the past, toward the present, toward the fuure.

My impression is that the officials who planned and executed our Vietnam policy those many years had little sense of belonging to a religious or ethical tradition, or a cultural tradition, or to a civilization which had been slowly and painfully built up over thousands of years. The overriding operative cognition was instead total obedience to one's bureaucratic superior. This strikes me as spiritual impoverishment, not to say defective understanding of the world we live in.

As a student of the evolution of human society, I am struck by the religious, cultural, and technical achievements of the last ten thousand years. One need not be religious in a strict sense to appreciate the magnificence of man as a physical creature, even as an engineering triumph. One must be similarly impressed by the civilizations he has created: not only books, literature, and art, but the slow ascent from physical barbarism too. Stone, iron, copper, bronze; fire; the wheel; domestication of plants: all these steps, developing slowly, depending one upon the one before, taking millennia to accomplish. As occupants of these splendid bodies, and custodians of the legacy of thousands of years of tortuous upward movement, we have a special responsibility to

ward the past. Men who stood in awe of this legacy, and of our own physical selves, could not so lightly have opted for a return to barbarism. But for Vietnam-policymakers, instead, the present was everything, of supreme importance.

Yet Americans have long been known as an ahistorical people, a people who left the past behind in the Old World when they began to create the New. Perhaps then we can understand (even if we cannot excuse) a failing in our leaders which only reflects a blindness in ourselves.

No such extenuation, however, applies to the equal disregard of the future which these officials so plainly manifested. While we do not know the prices on the Stock Exchange for next week, we do know that certain broad trends are inevitably taking place. The prudent man adjusts his behavior accordingly. Two centuries ago American leaders were well attuned to this movement of history, and we rightly prided ourselves on being in the vanguard of this movement to a better world.

In Vietnam we have revealed ourselves to be pulling in the opposite direction. Massive and well-understood changes have been taking place in Southeast Asia—as throughout the Third World—on which the United States has tripped and stumbled. What are these changes? Nothing more than demands for greater political and economic equality, resulting by inevitable and scientifically validated relationships from increasing urbanization, literacy, communications, and wealth. Shortsighted French attempts to suppress such demands in Vietnam succeeded only in bringing the Communists to dominance in Vietnamese politics, and French leaders were humbled in 1954 like the Bourbons in 1789.

These changes are the same ones which began to rock the West three centuries ago, which crushed or decisively altered the most powerful European kingdoms of the day, and out of which America's own revolution grew. Our traditions dictated that we should honor, not resist, these same changes in Asia. Only pride and a culpable disregard of the inevitable future permitted our leaders to think that they could resist what had humbled the potentates of earlier eras. But resist we did, and American leaders succeeded in radicalizing the opposition in South Vietnam

and also in Laos and Cambodia. They too have been predictably humbled for their failure to understand and adjust to the flow of events.

Ironically, decades back American patriots engraved an epitaph for the British soldiers killed at Lexington and Concord. Near the bridge by which was fired "the shot heard round the world," this monument now reads: "They came three thousand miles to keep the past upon its throne." It is tragic to think that, two centuries later, American leaders have taken it upon themselves to go thrice the distance on the same fool's errand.

One may not, I grant, agree with the shape of the future, though I scarcely see how greater equality insults American traditions. But the prudent man must take it into account in his calculations, especially when he contrives not just his own fate, but that of the public he is sworn to serve. When Henry Kissinger asks, "What kind of a country is this that would let an ally be overrun?" we can only respond, "What kind of leader are you who would commit America's prestige and resources to perpetuating an unjust and oppressive social order in Asia, and lie about it in the bargain? If you have nothing constructive to lend to a process already underway, at least stand back and do not increase violence by interfering."

I claim no credit for this wisdom; it is elementary. Many individual bureaucrats understand that there is an irreversible tide in world events, and that current American policy is only plowing the ocean. The problem is that there are high personal costs attached to arguing this proposition vigorously in the councils of government. How, then, can we make men of power more open to this view? Openness is a trait of individuals; and this is consistent with the view I expressed earlier, that the answers lie in changing our attitudes and perspectives.

In the army there is a saying, "Ride to the sound of the guns." Can we not adopt a motto, and live by it, that we should "ride to the sound of dissent"? This would be frankly difficult, but it is urgently necessary. The sociologists tell us that value "dissensus" tends to reduce communications: that we unconsciously tend to blot out communications which do not confirm our views. It is

this which we must overcome; some disciplines successfully do. In science, for example, one learns *only* from disconfirmation. To put it in a more homely way, truth comes only from disagreement.

What we must do, then, is obvious, at least at the intellectual level. We must change the character of the receivers so that it is not only wealthy or courageous men who may dare to tell the truth. The genius of the Founding Fathers was creating a system that could be run by ordinary men, not philosopher kings. We must bring this same insight to bear today. How can we make it possible for ordinary men to communicate candidly with one another in the service of the community? Only, I believe, by changing the attitudes of the receivers, so that they have the same outlook as men of science: we learn only from disagreement. And there are ways to do this, if we have the wisdom to see the need for it. The cost of failing to do so will be heavy as future generations look back on us: we will appear not just cruel, though we sometimes are cruel, and not just foolish, though we sometimes are foolish. In the scheme of world history, we will appear ridiculous.

Perhaps some of my readers believe I am a pessimist. This is not true. I believe that the world is a genuinely better place, both physically and spiritually, than it was fifty, or a hundred, or a thousand years ago. The question is, which way will our leaders be tugging in this contest between civilization and barbarism? Answering the question presumes posing it. It is the posing that I urge, and in precisely these terms.

Some of my friends complain that the ideas implicit in this view—trusting our opponents a bit more, being more open, sharing a bit of our good fortune—are unrealistic, that we have to continue our conservative, secretive, untrusting posture. Honoring the values I have proposed requires some sacrifice, it is true. And so, in response, I must pose another question. If not the United States, the richest country in the world, then who? If not now, when we are already by far the most powerful and most secure, then when?