

Contradictions

by Carl Oglesby

THE IDEA OF Vietnam optimism was lately reintroduced in a liberal newsmagazine, but now the light at the end of the tunnel can no longer be told from a tunnel at the end of the light, figure and ground are reversing and interbleeding so ambiguously in current American consciousness.

The reappearance of antithetical hope within a general thesis of non-conventional strategic defeat is perhaps to teach us that there are surrenders and surrenders. Some of these succeed at defeat, if not in it. Others fail, or succeed only in spreading it. And maybe some surrenders avoid defeat altogether.

Whatever the case, any serious use of the national powers of surrender, which surely count among a people's most intimate possessions, will always awaken a good citizen's curiosity. Those of us whose feelings about surviving are still functional are puzzled and worried. We wonder what this most limited man Nixon really has it up in his mind to do.

Note to begin with how little he deserves this policy. If we attribute to inexperience his crazy, apparently casual assumption that Japan will work something out for herself within her now implausible alliance with New York City, his policy objectives amount to two aspects of innocence—peace in Vietnam and coexistence with China on what appear to me to be crystallizing as essentially Chinese terms. These objectives suddenly make Nixon look like a big Eastern multinational-corporation-style liberal, a left Yankee instead of a right Cowboy. Yet he has no more been the advocate than the philosopher of this terrifically delicate surrender, for which he continues to offer only Sunday-school level explanations.

More people than William Buckley are entitled to apprehension. What indeed became of the (fraudulent) con-

servatism which his administration was supposed to install? What became of his political responsibilities to the southwestern crowd, the independent oilers and generals and wheat farmers and their constantly gyrating schools of peddlers, bagmen, hustlers, dealers, and other big-time pigfish? They raise the question themselves. L. A.-Taipei traffic must be impressive these days.

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IF HE DOES NOT DESERVE the policy, the policy does not deserve him, either. He falls too short too many ways, does not begin to command the domestic and international trust (perhaps affection, too) which any American president would need, besides possessing top-of-the-line grace, self-assurance, wit, energy, gaiety and ebullience, just in order not to be crushed (recall Wilson) by the portentous reversals of policy which Nixon definitely wants to seem to be mobilizing. I am sorry for the paranoid reverberations of that, but we are discussing, after all, the one and only Nixon.

Even as he admonishes us to recall our green pastures, he gives us the image, it is himself, of our bad historical luck. We may humbly acknowledge the peril with which our joint fortune rides on *that* shoeshine, *that* handshake, *that* smile. Just reflect, it is Nixon *alone* who must decide how firm to make it for Mao, or how much shorter and limper for Lin, or how self-recognizing to make his own first coy glances (over-bold? too flinching?) into the world-historical eyes of Chou.

Tomorrow I may want to write an apologetic retraction on the theme, "What newly emerging world reality was Nixon the first world leader to see and comprehend?" But until I see that light, I won't believe it. Think of some of the more immediate *major costs* of the apparent Nixon line.

Start with the Washington, D.C. Dream Machine, easily this culture's most justly celebrated gadget. Belly to belly against the facts of an extraordinarily violent war, it produced usable if fatal national illusions for years. These days, like a Weatherman's

old abandoned paintbomb, it mainly fizzles and dribbles and will not talk sense. There will be touching reminders of yesterday's doomed panache, as with Rogers' attempt to explain why China should now want a red telephone of her own, and there will be much proving that we did finally achieve some important national objectives, *after all*, objectives which without this bum trip to Nam might never even have been noticed, and prizes will be awarded by the Friends of the State, Inc., to those who will affirm such a proposition with some skill and/or volunteer private testimony as to what these objectives must have been.*

*This discussion will be subtle enough for any taste. Just to show: There must be currently developing, among military philosophers and their associates, a lively if not secretly murderous debate around the question, somehow posed.

"Would our forces have farted any louder against the outwardly stronger Russians or Chinese? Or does this commonplace formula *stronger* only mean *conventional* in this case? And might so dubious a *conventional* not carry too the extra taint of *orthodox*? Then are we encountering again, only now in ourselves, and in the presence of a fully self-presenting, often impenetrable, world that famous and always fatal refusal to welcome the future and its changes which we discover at the center of the collapse of every imperial system up to now? Up to ours? Repeatedly and against no expressed disbelief, we inform one another that each victorious military wants to fight its new wars in its old battles, the battles being those in which it imagines its skill to be unequalled (barring for us now maybe the Russians, whom our staff appear to find familiar, honorable, and basically sane peers); but the *new wars* are of course those in which the foe is no longer steaming flat out down onto Midway with his do-or-die fleet capability laid forthrightly on the line for any clown to ambush. We know we must plan some day for another *kind* of contest. But has an epochal transition actually been turned already? And is the true meaning of the

YET WE ALREADY KNOW these mirages are dissolving as fast as they can be pumped. Emerging through them, an amazing Bosch/Tolstoy landscape, across whose smoldering stones the world's last industrial army floats by night and melts into the tyger-tyger forest by day. (A new sticker for me: "Bring our junkies home.") And the more Nixon must try to deny the moral disintegration of the U.S. forces on the ground, the more he compromises his tactical intelligence. The more he tries to accept and alienate it (in other words, to define troop morale as a *narcotics problem*), the more out of pocket he goes within his own private brother-bond of Floridian fools and Californian Cutthroats: for what is a Commander-in-Chief worth whose most reliable coercive force is rapidly becoming that of the municipal police?

Behind the dreams, there is a fatefully real context. In part, it consists of (a) the on-going, in-being, and not-now-reversible U.S. evacuation of Southeast Asia, (b) the waxing of the U.S.S.R. as a fully mature primary supernova with a firm power base in the

war concealed from us within the fact that we do not or cannot understand what happened to us there? Can we shake ourselves awake and start to act on *what we already know to be true*? But then, what could that be? Is it the truth that we must fight no more strategic wars with tactical methods, or vice versa?"

And so on. It is fascinating to consider the positions that could be developed in such a Vietnam post-mortem dialog as it unfurls among the historian-philosopher political (court) intellectuals and their princes (a) of the Pentagon with all its rings, (b) of the service rivalries with all their academies, and (c) of the various theatre and service commands with all their miasmal politicking, an expensive habit which the Indochina war only financed. For a teasing but useful introduction to this complicated, intrigue-ridden international world of the military power freaks, check out Retired (read fired) Marine Colonel James A. Donovan's too-sensationally-titled *Militarism, U.S.A.* published by Scribners in paper, 1970.

navel of the world, the Mediterranean,* (c) the quiet but now more quickly forthcoming European settlement of European questions—and so on and so on. *In which context, the Nixon trip to China can only appear to ceremonialize a basic American retreat from Asia.*

Moreover, Nixon's combined Vietnam-China policy compels Japan to make basic decisions about China and the U.S. which will not be reversible for a long time. Thus, the Nixon moves themselves constitute a seemingly irreversible repudiation of ancient national wisdom about the necessary Pacific interests of the leading Western Power in history, and in particular about the right balance of Europeanism and Orientalism in the American philosophy of state. We now do not know if our government regards Japan as a mislocated Westerner or a misdeveloped Easterner; or whether Japan is still to be reached most comfortably through the Suez, or is it now the Yangtze or the Sea of Japan or the coastal cities of Southern California, or the Trans-Siberian Railroad after all?

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IN OTHER WORDS, if this thing is what it seems to be, then Headquarters (San Clemente) of the Free World Empire must be struggling at this moment to draft an instrument somehow suitable to this task: "How shall we manage the separation of what has been traditionally viewed by American statesmen as a vital element of the American world system, namely, a position of unassailable authority and power in the Pacific?"

The event appears to have these indubitable meanings:

1. The cold war in the Pacific is now burning only on its ashes and is essentially over. The general organization of the from-now-on rapidly forming Pacific economy will—con-

*Firm but embattled. The July coup-counter coup in the Sudan, for example, resembles in its main features the comedy in which the leftwing "coup" is carried out by the right, which thus presents itself with the classical advantages of conquest by liberation. The Russians must have felt that one.

clusively—be managed by an increasingly cosmopolitan China, a remarkably sophisticated Vietnam and a self-reorientalizing Japan, industrial island paradise to the blossoming continent. Japan, in other words, will not make the mistake of regarding China with Napoleon's eyes.

2. Within a decade of the last serious military spasm in Southeast Asia (is it already behind us? was Laos Dienbienphu turned inside out?), the natural productive cycles and patterns of the economic gearchain constituted by the continent, the subcontinent, and the island will be running at a tempo now unimaginable.

3. Hanoi will soon emerge (if she has not already) as a leading capital of this century's world culture, joining if not supplanting Paris, and will interpret Western civilization with an authority not less subtle than that with which Paris herself once gave world experience its "final" interpretations.

I receive the following curious message from Japan.

"The suspense—can one say it dissolved, as though it had been more than a shadow? We sense the presence now, however mixed our explanations, of a momentous transformation of the quality and direction of human experience. Suddenly, you Americans have found that you are not history's current subjectivity, the soul-center of current world-historical consciousness. A new power configuration takes form mysteriously before us all, a Titanic and an iceberg are about to get acquainted. *Can you not feel this in the earth?* . . .

"The champion Occidental power has been outflanked on her hot western slope, classically the vulnerable flank of occidental-style civilizations, by a currently less developed but more advanced version of her own mass-industrial society. . . . Creature of all the struggles against all the imposter cultures whose brutalities she endured throughout the protracted blood-pas-sion of her revolutionary birth, China startled us all by this sudden explosive emergence as the Reigning Western Power of the future. The main event

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