

balance the good outweighed the bad, are we to follow in China's lead, or praise the endorsement of reaction as revolutionary internationalism?

The impulse to cover up for the compromises of the Chinese revolution is compelling for many reasons. They command our profound respect for their achievements and our sympathy for the obstacles they face. But their departures from principle bear a heavy political cost, and the damage is compounded when people around the world who are engaged in struggles in which the clarity of the revolutionary vision is their most precious resource, are called upon to follow after the lines of national policy as they zig-zag with the shifting exigencies of power.

It is a bit ironical that radicals of the New Left should find themselves drawn to the role of apologist. We can recall the easy contempt with which we viewed the desperate attempts of the old line Communists to keep pace with the wild veerings of the Russian party line. It now seems they weren't such complete morons after all. We never realized how plausible a rationale they followed: "Defense of the socialist fatherland." Russia after all stood three decades absolutely alone, subject to embargo, encirclement and intervention, the only existing base for revolutionary possibilities in the world. No one wanted to play into the hands of its enemies. But the results of the grinding hypocrisy, the whole subjection of the revolutionary interests of the entire world to those of a single nation, were a tragic disaster. And in the long run the "yes man" is not even the most devoted servant. The international Left had a responsibility to voice the criticisms which could have strengthened the arguments for socialist principles internally and at least called a halt to the worst excesses.

The cosmetic impulse toward the image of an established revolution is not the product of a merely altruistic concern. The need for a model of revolutionary purity goes deep, even for those who are aware that the reality doesn't measure up. An apologist is engaged in the continuous reconstruction of that lost illusion, until the necessary compromise of principle takes on the moral purity of principle itself. In literature, it is called the willing suspen-

sion of disbelief. But in politics it is double-think.

Adopting as one's own the policies of the Chinese revolution has a particular appeal with which no attitude of sympathetic understanding can compete. When one can internalize motivations of Chinese policy to the point of saying "*We found this necessary*," one can become a vicarious Chinese revolutionary. An act of will, an existential leap, transforms the most minute and ineffectual sect into an outpost of the revolutionary masses of the world. Internationalist consciousness elevates them from an insignificant minority of America to a vast majority of the world.

But it was Richard Nixon who was shaking hands last winter with Mao Tse-tung.

THE PROBLEM NOW IS NOT to turn from China and scan the continents for another revolutionary model, a purer one whose policies are deduced with greater rigor from more elevated principles. Nor should we turn our backs altogether on internationalism and isolate ourselves from the developing forces of revolution in the world. We can value and learn from China's revolutionary experience without setting it up as a model and defining our politics by its acceptance or rejection.

The real importance of the Chinese revolution to the American Left was not so much in those who consciously endorsed it, much less those who fancied to enlist, but in the widely held conviction that, whether you agreed with it or not, this revolution was really revolutionary. Now it is felt that it wasn't really that different after all. The revolutionary process was an arduous struggle towards a vision of society that was indefinably remote. We could take it seriously because the Chinese revolution showed it could be done; it gave us hope. We thought we could look back and see the revolution achieved. Now we have been abandoned by history.

The sense of disappointment is fundamentally misplaced. It was unfair in the first place to measure the achievements of Chinese society against a vision of the full scale of revolutionary possibilities. And it is unfair to measure the revolutionary vision by the

limits which that society has reached.

It is absurd to think that the liberating promise of socialism could be fulfilled on the basis of the hopeless misery, famine, disease, social disintegration which prevailed when revolution came to China. Should we be surprised that, in 20 years of economic embargo, diplomatic isolation, military aggression, they have not transcended the constraints of material necessity? Can we really measure the socialist ideal of internationalism against a society in which the welding of a national consciousness out of the social fragments of colonialism, warlord fiefdoms, decades of foreign and civil war, was a gigantic stride? And should we be surprised that an acutely vulnerable nation retaining the most minimal control over its external environment should be tempted to break out of a closing circle of threatened aggression?

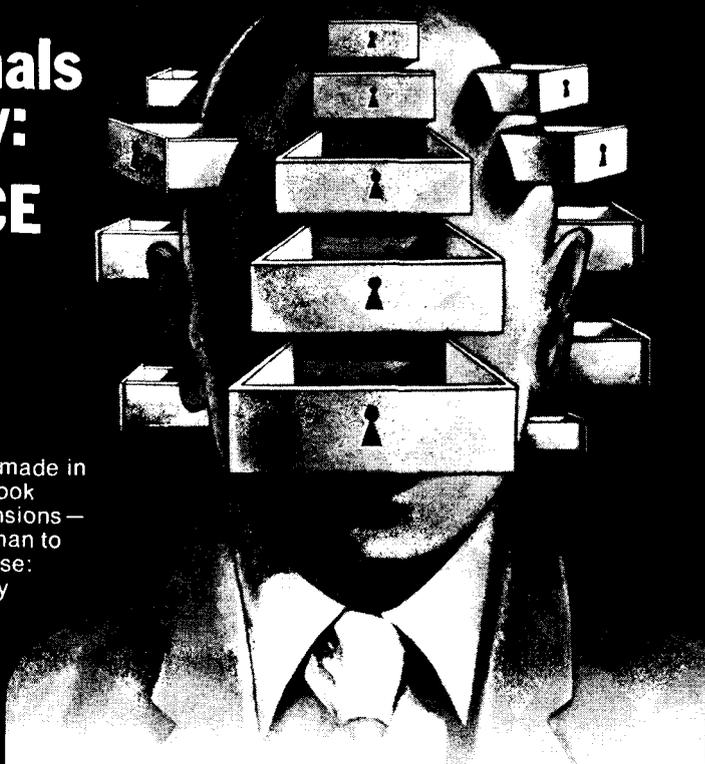
It is, after all, our failure to make our own revolution which has imposed the encumbering burdens of imperialism on theirs. China is not the test of the socialism that will come only when a revolution can be built up on a highly advanced economic and technological base and liberate society from the coercive distribution of scarcity. There has been no such test. That is why our efforts to borrow our revolutionary vision from China or any other existing society is bound to fail. We are forced to create a vision of our own. In that sense our revolution will be the first.

But if the Chinese revolution cannot serve as a model to guide our way, we can still look to it as an extraordinarily vital source of political inspiration. The transformation of Chinese society in the last 20 years remains an unparalleled vindication of the revolutionary process, of the power of a liberating idea, of unity and action, of the creative energy released as people discover in themselves the determination and the capacity to make their own history. To look at the Chinese revolution, so rich in adversity and meager in sustenance, to consider its achievements and then to realize that in our society we have the mastery of material abundance within our grasp, reveals to us the dimensions of the revolutionary opportunity that lies ahead. ■

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“Many seem discouraged at the failure of their efforts to end the war. Perhaps they do not appreciate the immense significance of their achievement in imposing at least some constraints on the violence of the state. We can be quite sure that as the dilemma of the U.S. government assumes new forms in the coming phase of the war, the domestic response will remain a factor of critical importance in determining the fate of the people of Indochina.”

THE MOST STRIKING FEATURE of the American war in Indochina is undoubtedly its savagery, but no less remarkable is the continuity of policy and the persistence of basic assumptions over a quarter century. We now have, thanks to the Pentagon Papers, a revealing record of how Washington perceived the war—not to be confused with a record of the facts.

A State Department Policy Statement of September 1948 found “our greatest difficulty in talking with the French” to be “our inability to suggest any practicable solution of the Indochina problem.” The problem was clear. The long-term objective of the U.S. was twofold: in the first place, to eliminate Communist influence in Indochina and prevent Chinese influence, “so that the peoples of Indochina will not be hampered in their natural developments by the pressure of an alien people and alien interests”; and in the second place, “to see installed a self-governing nationalist state which will be friendly to the U.S. and which . . . will be patterned upon our conception of a democratic state” and oriented towards the West, contributing to “a better balanced world economy.” (French and American influence and interests are, naturally, not “alien” to the people of Indochina.)

But the Communists under Ho Chi Minh, who “is the strongest and perhaps the ablest figure in Indochina,” have “captur[ed] control of the nationalist movement.” Hence, a dilemma.

Twenty years later, the Pentagon historian concluded his analysis of the “advisory build-up” through 1967 by wondering whether the U.S. can “overcome the apparent fact that the Viet Cong have ‘captured’ the Vietnamese nationalist movement while the GVN has become the refuge of Vietnamese who were allied with the French in the battle against the independence of their nation.” But we go on, to save Vietnam from Communism and from the Viet Cong, who, he adds perceptively, seem to be the agents of China.¹

This comparison brings out the fundamental elements in the war: the U.S. has never wavered from its commitment to a non-Communist regime, and the nationalist movement, Communist-led, has unbelievable resilience and obstinacy. Noting further that there are few constraints on the use of violence by the foreign invader, we can deduce, with little difficulty, the strategy of annihilation employed by the U.S. Command. The means were available to demolish the society in which the nationalist movement is rooted, and these means were employed, out of “military necessity.” The

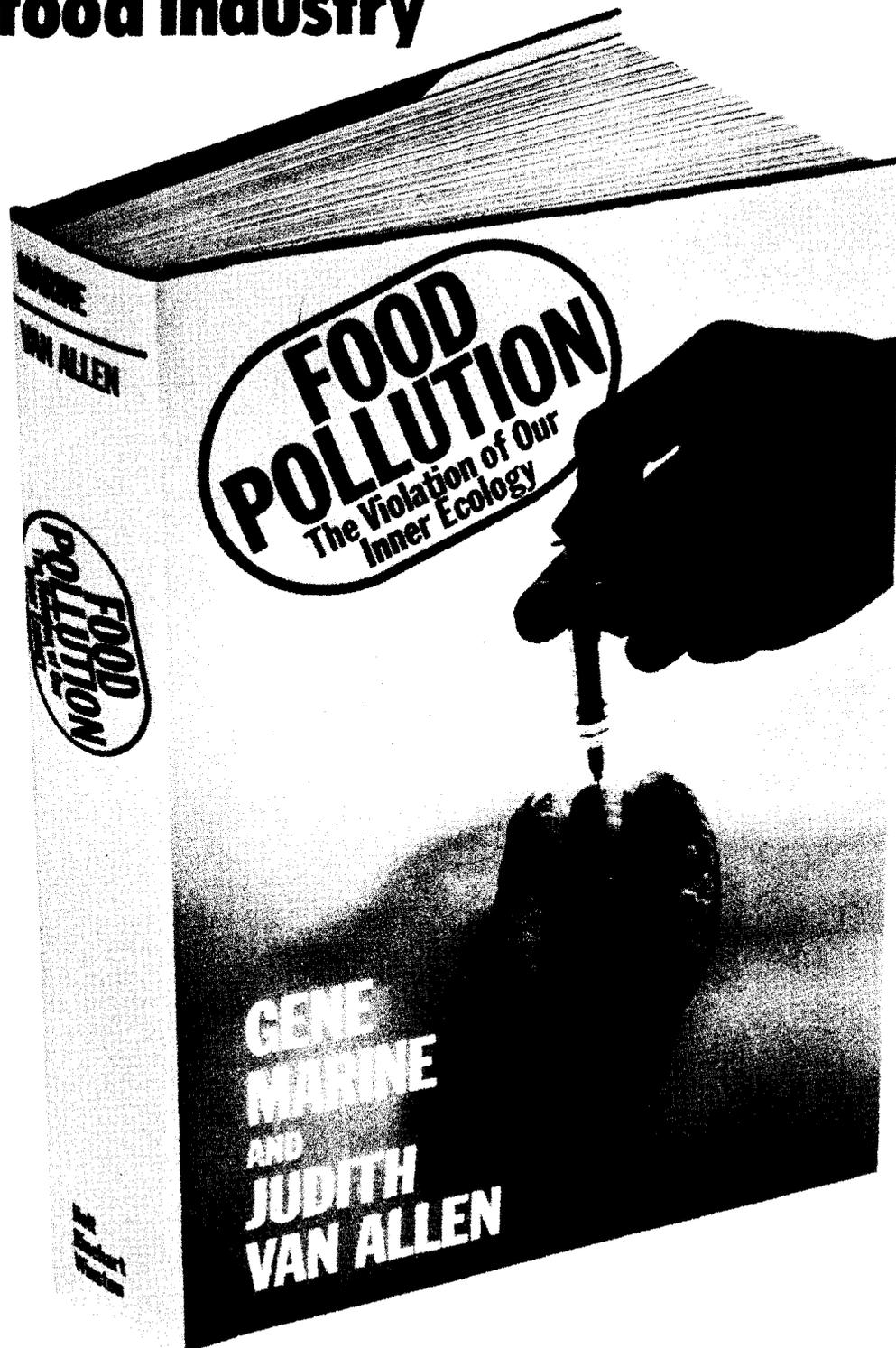
savagery of the war does not reflect some peculiar streak of barbarism in the U.S. Command. Rather, there was no other way to solve the problem presented to it by the civilian leadership, the problem of destroying the nationalist movement that the Communists had “captured”—illegitimately, Washington being the judge of what is legitimate in Vietnam.

I will make no attempt to predict the final outcome of this struggle. There are a number of critical factors that I do not know how to assess. How long can the Vietnamese resistance continue to withstand the terroristic assault of the world’s most advanced technology? What is the strength of the resistance in the urban concentrations created by a policy that was succinctly described by an American general: “No villages, no guerrillas, simple”? Will the people of the United States be willing to stand by, in relative passivity, while the government continues its grim work? A Harris poll of October 1971 showed that 57 percent of the population was opposed to air and helicopter support for the Saigon army, and that 65 percent regard the American involvement as immoral (up from 47 percent in January). Will these feelings be translated into action, or will they simply be expressed to pollsters, and thus remain virtually irrelevant to policy-formation? These factors are decisive, and unpredictable, though we must bear in mind that one of them—the stand of the American people—is subject to our influence.

I want to consider here a different question, namely, what the Nixon Administration plans. Since the public clearly wants peace, the rhetoric of the Administration naturally will promise peace and American withdrawal. Some choose to believe it, while to other close observers “it now appears that President Nixon wants to end the war by winning it.”²

The Nixon “peace plan” of January 1972 signals clearly the intention to pursue the war to victory, if this proves possible.³ To impose a non-Communist regime in South Vietnam, it is necessary to separate the areas of population concentration from the main force guerrilla units and the NVA forces, while preventing any

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organized social life in the areas ceded to the resistance. The technology of terror is assigned these tasks. At the same time, it is necessary to control the concentrated population and to "root out the infrastructure" of the enemy by the Phoenix program and other measures of repression. If the political structure of the opposition can be destroyed and the rule of the military and police forces successfully imposed, then the population can be granted a "free choice" under the Constitution (which outlaws Communism). As the "nation builders" have always insisted, a "free choice" between the government and the Viet Cong will only be possible when the latter have been destroyed.⁴

A look at the Phoenix program gives some indication of what is required to prepare the ground for democracy in South Vietnam. More than 70,000 people have been "neutralized" since 1968. The number killed is unknown, but a rare statistic for April 1971 reveals that, in that month, of the 2000 "neutralized," more than 40 percent were assassinated.⁵ A U.S. intelligence officer attached to the Phoenix program in the Mekong Delta states that when he arrived in his district, he was given a list of 200 names of people who had to be killed, and when he left six months later, 260 had been killed, but none of those on his list.⁶ From such reports, we can learn something of the scale and character of this program, which has become a major component of U.S. strategy since March 1968 when the Pentagon recommended that "Operation Phoenix which is targetted against the Viet Cong must be pursued more vigorously in closer liaison with the U.S."⁷ In March 1971 a greatly expanded "pacification program" went into operation with its "top priority" being neutralization of the political apparatus of the Viet Cong, at a reported cost of considerably more than \$1 billion to the U.S. and an undisclosed amount to the Saigon regime (hence indirectly, the U.S.).⁸ Perhaps the figures cited above for April 1971 are the first product of this accelerated program of government terror.

It is not irrational for the planners in Washington to regard their objectives as perhaps attainable, despite

years of failure. The costs of the war, of course, are borne by the Vietnamese: their land and bodies and villages are destroyed, while the U.S. merely suffers polarization or inflation or a balance of payments problem. It is, furthermore, unclear whether a revolutionary movement that achieved its success because its programs were meaningful for the overwhelmingly rural society of Vietnam can also organize successfully among the slum-dwellers of Saigon, for whom no domestically based program may be meaningful. No Vietnamese can be unaware of the awesome destructive power of American terror. Peasants in Phuyen Province who fought with the Viet Minh against the French, winning "independence of half of our country," in their accurate phrase, report that a new generation of guerrillas is having a much worse war" because of the "American firepower, tremendous firepower—such as we never dreamed of in those days." One peasant, who had abandoned the life of resistance, said: "There is one thing I have—my patriotism—and all those Government officials can never be as proud of this as I am."⁹ But the U.S. will cheerfully concede patriotic sentiments to the remnants of the original nationalist movement, as long as it can demolish this movement while imposing the rule of the local associates of Western imperialism. If the result can be achieved by a "democratic election," once the conditions for a "free choice" are established, so much the better.

In some more general terms, it would be accurate to describe the Vietnam war as a struggle between human will and advanced technology. Human will, however, has its limits, although they are far beyond what one could have imagined, as the Vietnamese revolutionaries have shown. The technology of destruction and repression can continue slowly to progress without practical limit. Anti-personnel weapons can be improved, from pellets, to metal flechettes that cannot be extracted without grave injury, to plastic fragments that cannot even be detected by X-ray, and who knows what tomorrow. The accuracy of bombing can be continually improved, so that 30,000 tons of bombs next

month is the equivalent of considerably more than that today. It is not irrational to suppose that if the war goes on indefinitely, technology will ultimately prove victorious.

An additional factor that U.S. planners no doubt find encouraging is that the annihilation strategy in South Vietnam, directed against what they always knew to be an indigenous resistance movement based on the peasantry, had the consequence of drawing North Vietnamese forces into the war. General Westmoreland, in a briefing for McNamara in Saigon (July 1967), explained that the enemy had "been denied recruits in the numbers required from the populated areas along the coast, thereby forcing him to supply manpower from North Vietnam."¹⁰ By destroying much of the rural society and concentrating the population into urban slums and in the Saigon army, U.S. strategy had the consequence (and, assuming minimal intelligence, the intended consequence) of creating the basis for a North-South conflict of the sort that American propaganda, with the cooperation of the mass media, had always claimed to exist. The U.S. did not originate the strategy of exacerbating ethnic, religious and regional rivalries, but merely adopted it, as a matter of course, from its imperial predecessors. The analogy to Korea is suggestive, though not exact. It took several years for American forces to eradicate the indigenous social and political structures that were functioning when they landed in September 1945, and it was not until the Korean war (initiated and fought under circumstances much more ambiguous than the official ideology proclaims) that the internal civil struggle in the South was converted into a regional conflict more tolerable to the imperial power.

Assuming that the objectives outlined above can be achieved, and that the revolutionary forces in Vietnam can be prevented from operating effectively amidst the ruins of Vietnamese society, the "nation builders" face the next task: to create some sort of viable social structure out of the wreckage. How do they hope to accomplish this task? From the public record and some secret reports that

(Continued on Page 61)