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THE LESSONS OF VIETNAM

The televised scenes of South Vietnam's sudden collapse at Da Nang seemed oddly familiar to me; they had a faded, distant quality of déjà vu. The scenes of people in hopeless flight, the panic, the despair, the frantic struggle for a foothold on the last plane or ship leaving a doomed land, with everything left behind and nothing ahead - people running into a void outside history, as if squeezed off the face of the earth - I had seen it all before. It took me a moment and a shock of sadness to realize where I had seen it: this was the Russian population fleeing before the advance of the Red Army in the civil war of 1918-21.

The newscaster's voice said that fleeing South Vietnamese soldiers had seized control of an American rescue ship and had proceeded to rob, rape and murder refugees, their own countrymen. I felt indignation, disgust, disappointment - and, again, a faint touch of familiarity. The shock was more painful, this time, when I realized that this was an example of the ignominious amorality of the so-called political right.

Let me hasten to say that individual brutes exist in any army and cannot be taken as representative of an entire people; that the atrocities committed by those particular South Vietnamese would not even be reported if and when committed by the North Vietnamese, since such atrocities represent the official, ideological policy of North Vietnam; that South Vietnam does not represent the political right nor the political anything. Granting all this, it is still true that if a group of soldiers attack their own countrymen, in the midst of a national disaster, it means that attackers and victims have no values in common, not even the solidarity of primitive tribalism, that they have nothing to uphold or defend militarily, that they do not know what they are fighting for. And, in today's world, there is no one to tell them.

I was in my early teens during the Russian civil war. I lived in a small town that changed hands many times. (See We the Living; that part of the story is autobiographical.) When it was occupied by the White Army, I almost longed for the return of the Red Army, and vice versa. There was not much difference between them in practice, but there was in theory. The Red Army stood for totalitarian dictatorship and rule by terror. The White Army stood for nothing; repeat: nothing. In answer to the monstrous evil they were fighting, the Whites found nothing better to proclaim than the dustiest, smelliest bromides of the time: we must fight, they said, for Holy Mother Russia, for faith and tradition.

I wondered, even in those years, which is morally worse: evil - or the appeasement of evil, the cowardly evasion that leaves an evil unnamed, unanswered

and unchallenged. I was inclined to think that the second is worse, because it makes the first possible. I am certain of it today. But in the years of my adolescence, I did not know how rare a virtue intellectual integrity (i.e., the non-evasion of reality) actually is. So I kept waiting for some person or group among the Whites to come out with a real political manifesto that would explain and proclaim why one must fight against communism and what one must fight for. I knew even then that the "what" was freedom, individual freedom, and (a concept alien to Russia) individual rights.

I knew that man is not a slave of the state; I knew that man's right to his own life (and, therefore, to freedom) has to be upheld with as great and proud a sense of moral righteousness, as any idea could ever deserve; I knew that nothing less would do - and that without such a stand the anti-Reds were doomed. But I thought that this was self-evident, that the whole civilized world knew it, and that there surely existed some minds able to communicate this knowledge to Russia, which was perishing for lack of it. I waited through the years of the civil war. Nothing resembling that manifesto was ever uttered by anyone.

In a passive, indifferent way, the majority of the Russian people were behind the White Army: they were not for the Whites, but merely against the Reds; they feared the Reds' atrocities. I knew that the Reds' deepest atrocity was intellectual, that the thing which had to be fought - and defeated - was their ideas. But no one answered them. The country's passivity turned to hopeless lethargy, as people gave up. The Reds had an incentive, the promise of nationwide looting; they had the leadership and the semidiscipline of a criminal gang; they had an allegedly intellectual program and an allegedly moral justification. The Whites had icons. The Reds won.

I learned a great deal in the years since. I learned that the concept of individual rights is far, far from self-evident, that most of the world does not grasp it, that the United States grasped it only for a brief historical moment and is now in the process of losing the memory. I learned that the civilized world is being destroyed by its dominant schools of philosophy - by irrationalism, altruism, collectivism - and, specifically, that altruism is the tear gas that defeats resistance, by reducing men to crying and vomiting.

The hardest thing to learn (the most difficult one to believe) was the fact that the so-called political rightists in this country - the alleged defenders of freedom (i.e., of capitalism) - were as vague, as empty and as futile as the leaders of the White Army (more shamefully so, since they had a much, much greater knowledge to evade). For years, the intellectual posture of America's political leaders has been a long, pleading, appeasing, self-abasing whine of apology for this country's greatness - an apology addressed to every advocate or perpetrator of collectivism's horrors and failures anywhere on earth.

But even American politicians had some sort of stature when compared to their intellectual mentors, those (to me, still incredible) bipeds who - unable to find a moral justification for man's life and happiness - attempted to defend freedom on the grounds of altruism (of the "public good"), or on the grounds of faith in the supernatural, or on the grounds of brushing the issue aside and proclaiming that morality is irrelevant to economics (i.e., to man's life and livelihood).

(At a certain point, in recent years, I realized with astonishment that the kind of voice and manifesto I had been waiting for, was my own. No, this

is not a boast; it is an admission of a sort I don't like to make: a complaint. [I don't like self-pity.] I did not want, intend or expect to be the only philosophical defender of man's rights, in the country of man's rights. But if I am, I am. And, dear reader, if I am giving you the kind of intellectual ammunition [and inspiration] I had so desperately waited to hear in my youth, I'm glad. I can say that I know how you feel.)

No country could stand for long on the kind of moral erosion that the altruists and amoralists of the right had done their best to aid and abet. The war in Vietnam was the result and dramatization of that erosion. The military collapse of South Vietnam was preceded by the philosophical collapse of the United States some decades earlier.

It was a shameful war - not for the reasons which leftists and sundry friends of North Vietnam are proclaiming, but for the exactly opposite reasons: shameful, because it was a war which the U.S. had no selfish reason to fight, because it served no national interest, because we had nothing to gain from it, because the lives and the heroism of thousands of American soldiers (and the billions of American wealth) were sacrificed in pure compliance with the ethics of altruism, i.e., selflessly and senselessly.

In compliance with epistemological irrationalism, it was a war and a non-war at the same time. It was a modern monstrosity called a "no win" war, in which the American forces were not permitted to act, but only to react: they were to "contain" the enemy, but not to beat him.

In compliance with modern politics, the war was allegedly intended to save South Vietnam from communism, but the proclaimed purpose of the war was not to protect freedom or individual rights, it was not to establish capitalism or any particular social system - it was to uphold the South Vietnamese right to "national self-determination," i.e., the right to vote themselves into any sort of system (including communism, as American propagandists kept proclaiming).

The right to vote is a consequence, not a primary cause, of a free social system - and its value depends on the constitutional structure implementing and strictly delimiting the voters' power; unlimited majority rule is an instance of the principle of tyranny. Outside the context of a free society, who would want to die for the right to vote? Yet that is what the American soldiers were asked to die for - not even for their own vote, but to secure that privilege for the South Vietnamese, who had no other rights and no knowledge of rights or freedom.

Picking up the liberals' discarded old slogan of World War I days - "the self-determination of nations" - the American conservatives were trying to hide the American system, capitalism, under some sort of collectivistic cover. And it is not capitalism that most of them were (and are) advocating, it was a mixed economy. Who would want to die for a mixed economy?

In compliance with a Hegelian sort of "A is non-A" metaphysics, both sides kept contradicting their professed beliefs. Soviet Russia, who regards men as the property and fodder of the state, did not send soldiers to North Vietnam (she could not trust them to fight, so she sent only military supplies). The United States, whose foundation is the supremacy of man's right to life, sent soldiers to die in South Vietnam. Soviet Russia, the philosophical apostle of materialism, won the war in Vietnam by spiritual, i.e., moral-intellectual, means: the

North Vietnamese and the Vietcong were thoroughly indoctrinated with the notion of the righteousness of their cause. The United States - whose modern leadership scorns materialism and professes to be moved by purely spiritual beliefs (mystical-religious on the right, tribalist and anti-industrial on the left) - abstained from proclaiming any moral principles or any principles whatever, and relied on an abundance of material supplies to fight the war, an abundance of planes, bombs and guns in the hands of men who had no idea of why they should use them.

The savagely primitive farmers of North Vietnam had an incentive, the promise of looting the richer, industrialized South; they had the leadership and the semidiscipline of a criminal gang; they had an allegedly intellectual program, Marxism, and an allegedly moral justification: altruism, the sacrifice of all to some "higher" cause. The South Vietnamese had nothing but some mixed-economy echoes of the same altruism. The North Vietnamese won.

As a rule, there is an ugly period of gloating among the winners and of bitter buck-passing among the losers, following a war. But I do not know of a historical precedent for the spectacle displayed by American intellectuals: an explosion of gloating over America's "defeat," of proclaiming America's "weakness," of denouncing America's "guilt," of glorifying and glamorizing the enemy, of pelting America with insults, accusations, humiliations - like an orgy of spitting at their own country's face.

When a national catastrophe, such as the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, has no generally known reason and no clearly perceivable cause, one may find leads to some contributory causes by observing who profits from the catastrophe. The intellectuals are the profiteers on the Vietnam war. They are of so miserably small a stature that it would be impossible to suspect them of causing the disaster. They are not lions, but jackals. (The lion who avenged himself for too long a neglect, was philosophy, which left the U.S. vulnerable to the jackals.) What are the suspicious paw-prints of a scavenger pack?

Observe the double-standard switch of the anti-concept of "isolationism." The same intellectual groups (and even some of the same aging individuals) who coined that anti-concept in World War II - and used it to denounce any patriotic opponent of America's self-immolation - the same groups who screamed that it was our duty to save the world (when the enemy was Germany or Italy or fascism), are now rabid isolationists who denounce any U.S. concern with countries fighting for freedom, when the enemy is communism and Soviet Russia.

The catch phrase of these new isolationists is a shabby little equivocation to the effect that "other countries are not ours to lose" - e.g., we did not lose South Vietnam (or China, or Hungary, or Czechoslovakia), because it was not ours to lose - i.e., the fate of other countries is none of our business. This means: other countries are not ours to judge, to deal with, to trade with, or to help. (Unless it is help with no strings attached, i.e., help without moral judgment, political appraisal, or even humanitarian concern about the results - as demanded by Laos, when it threw out a U.S. aid agency, but wanted the U.S. money turned over to the Laotian government.)

The purpose of this new isolationism is to play on the American people's legitimate weariness, confusion and anger over Vietnam, in the hope of making the U.S. government afraid to become involved in another foreign war of any kind. This would paralyze the U.S. in the conduct of any foreign policy not agreeable

to Soviet Russia. The first intended victim of the new isolationism will probably be Israel - if the "anti-war" efforts of the new isolationists succeed. (Israel and Taiwan are the two countries that need and deserve U.S. help - not in the name of international altruism, but by reason of actual U.S. national interests in the Mediterranean and the Pacific.)

To oppose the spread of communism, is a worthy goal. But one cannot oppose it in jungle villages while surrendering civilized countries - and one cannot oppose it by hiding from the world the nature and the moral meaning of communism's only opposite and enemy: capitalism. To use America's phony involvement in Vietnam as a scarecrow to keep us away from the real, the essential centers of the fight against communism - this is the current gimmick or policy of the neo-isolationists.

(To be continued.)

Ayn Rand

P.S. This Letter was written in May 1975.

This is to announce that The Ayn Rand Letter will shortly be changed from a fortnightly to a monthly publication.

Miss Rand has found that it is impossible for her to complete a philosophical article every two weeks. Any time-requiring event in her life, professional or personal, has proved to be incompatible with that type of deadline.

The new schedule will begin after Miss Rand finishes the third full year of the Letter, i.e., Volume III, Number 26. Beginning with Volume IV, the Letter will be issued twelve times a year, on a monthly basis.

The note which you will find enclosed, will tell you about the effect of this change on your present subscription, and about our new rates.

Thank you for your interest in this publication.

Leonard Peikoff

OBJECTIVIST CALENDAR

The following starting dates have been scheduled for the taped lectures of Allan Blumenthal's course, Music: Theory, History and Performance. Richardson, Texas,

mid-June (contact Katherine Kroeger, 214-235-8938, 6-10 P.M.); Los Angeles, July 8 (Michael Berliner, 213-474-0173, after 5 P.M., from June 12 on).

We have been asked to announce that reproductions of paintings and drawings by Joan Mitchell Blumenthal, José Manuel Capuletti, Frank O'Connor and Ilona Royce Smithkin, are still available from Sures Art Enterprises, Ltd. For descriptive brochures and current prices, write to SAE, Ltd., P.O. Box 207, Silver Spring, Maryland 20907.

B.W.