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THE LESSONS OF VIETNAM

Part II

Observe the frame-up staged against America's military power.

One of the methods used by statist to destroy capitalism, consists in establishing controls that tie a given industry hand and foot, making it unable to solve its problems, then declaring that freedom has failed and stronger controls are necessary. A similar frame-up is now being perpetrated against America's military power. It is claimed that the U.S. forces were defeated - in a war they had never been allowed to fight. They were defeated, it is claimed - two years after their withdrawal from Vietnam. The ignominious collapse of the South Vietnamese, when left on their own, is being acclaimed as an American military failure.

There is no doubt that America's entire involvement in Vietnam is a failure unworthy of a great power. It is a moral failure, a diplomatic failure, a political failure, a philosophical failure - the failure of American politicians and of their intellectual advisers. But to regard it as a military failure is worse than outrageous, when you consider the heroic performance of Americans in a war they should never have had to fight. If there are men or groups with a vested interest in creating an impression of America's military weakness, use your own judgment as to their nature and goals.

Now observe the moral bankruptcy of the "humanitarians." After decades of ever louder protestations of compassionate concern with every possible form of suffering - the suffering of the poor, the young, the old, the female, the black, the brown, the Indian, the sick, the weak, the illiterate, the retarded, the criminal, the psychotic - after such a barrage of pleas and threats, of saccharine and blood, that one could be tempted, in protest, to hate babies and kittens, the altruists have suddenly shut up before an unprecedented atrocity of historic scale: the murder of a city, the evacuation of Phnom Penh.

A horde of savages that would make Attila look civilized by comparison, has given the world a perfect concretization of three abstractions, which civilized men have taken with too foggy a tolerance: collectivism, which regards individual lives as of no value - the rule of force, which implements the whims of the subhuman - ecology as a social principle, which condemns cities, culture, industry, technology, the intellect, and advocates men's return to "nature," to the state of grunting subanimals digging the soil with their bare hands.

Since the Khmer Rouge are peasants who feel hatred for cities, the inhabitants of Phnom Penh - its entire population without exceptions - were ordered to march out of the city and to go on marching until they reached uninhabited countryside, where

they were to start farming on their own, without knowledge, tools or seed. This order applied to everyone: young and old, rich and poor, men, women and children, the well and the ill, even the crippled and, according to a news report, even the hospital patients who had just had their legs amputated. Everyone was ordered to walk. They walked.

This is all we know. There have been no further reports on the fate of that evacuation. After a few shocked remarks, there were no protests from our media or from those liberal altruists who cry over the victims of "relative poverty" in America. The liberals had been minimizing or ridiculing the conservatives' fear that a "blood bath" would follow a communist victory. If human suffering concerned them at all, one would expect the altruists to scream their heads off against an atrocity which is worse than a blood bath: a mass execution by long-drawn-out torture. But the altruists have shut their traps. So have the altruists of Europe. There has been no significant protest from the hundreds of world organizations devoted to the relief of suffering, including that contemptible citadel of global hypocrisy, the U.N.

The best commentary on Phnom Penh, of those I have read, was "Get Out of Town" by William Safire, a conservative (The New York Times, May 12, 1975). "In all human history nothing has taken place quite like the emptying of Phnom Penh. Sennacherib destroyed Babylon, the Romans sacked Carthage, and Hitler's bombers leveled Guernica, but in every case the attacker was destroying a particular city, not the idea of a city itself....A city is civilization; civilization is diversity and creativity, which needs personal freedom; Communism is by its nature anti-city, anti-civilization, anti-freedom. The Khmer Rouge understand this; too many Americans do not."

To go from the horrendous to the grotesque, consider the Mayaguez incident. I hasten to say that were it not for the proper and highly moral action taken by President Ford, the consequences of that incident could have been more horrendous than Phnom Penh. That a small band of those same Cambodian savages dared seize an unarmed American ship, was such an affront to America (and to civilization) that the collapse of international law would have followed, if President Ford had not acted as he did. To borrow Senator Goldwater's very appropriate phrase, every "half-assed nation" would have felt free to attack the U.S. - which would have meant world rule by terrorist gangs.

We shall never know whether the seizure of the Mayaguez was a deliberate provocation to test what the global communist scum could get away with - or the spontaneous feat of a local gang drunk with power and acting more royalist than their kings. But this does not concern us: in either case, when a foreign country initiates the use of armed force against us, it is our moral obligation to answer by force - as promptly and unequivocally as is necessary to make it clear that the matter is non-negotiable.

Believe it or not, some American intellectuals (and some politicians) objected to President Ford's action. Mr. Anthony Lewis went so far as to declare it was America that was "a bully among nations, acting without consultation, without concern for facts or principle." (The Times, May 19, 1975.) His principle (and filthy accusations) rests on the fact that "we allowed less than a day and a half for a response from the untried and isolated government of a shattered country." After which, he struggles to prove that part of the U.S. bombing of a Cambodian airport "could only have been punitive in purpose." (I hope so.)

This is international altruism gone wild. It demands that the U.S. give up self-defense in order to make allowances for an "untried government." (This means, I suppose, that we should wait until that government has gained experience in attacking us.) If those Cambodian brutes were so ignorant as to permit themselves an attack on a U.S. ship, the more reason to use force in answer, in order to teach them caution in the future; force is the only language that totalitarian brutes understand.

An interesting appraisal of the Mayaguez incident was given by C.L. Sulzberger, a liberal, who hailed President Ford's action in a column entitled "Just What The Doctor Ordered." (The Times, May 17, 1975.) Since Mr. Sulzberger's columns deal mainly with the reactions of other countries to U.S. foreign policy, his enthusiasm in this instance is significant, revealing, and almost pathetic: it shows the extent of the dismal, gray hopelessness previously conveyed by our international diplomacy. "Small as the incident may later seem in history, a polluting stain is being erased from the previous American image of lassitude, uncertainty and pessimism. This is a matter of world ideological concern as well as strategic balances because too many democracies are sick....Now a new vibrancy creeps into the picture."

Mr. Sulzberger explains: "The internationally renowned 'American tempo' and productivity still lag and the work ethic with its emphasis on speed and efficiency - whether prompted by puritanism or by the capitalistic profit motive - has certainly undergone visible and withering change. In this uncertain age American flabbiness is...harmful to the United States." In the absence of American leadership, Mr. Sulzberger concludes, many Western countries were left adrift. "Now Gerald Ford seems to have put an end to that sad phase. Abruptly he has shown Americans and the world that he knows how to get where he wishes to go. Hopefully, he also possesses a good sense of direction."

Nobody respects an altruist, neither in private life nor in international affairs. An altruist is a person who keeps sacrificing himself and his values, which means: sacrificing his friends to his enemies, his allies to his antagonists, his interests to any cry for help, his strength to anyone's weakness, his convictions to anyone's wishes, the truth to any lie, the good to any evil. How would you tell an altruist's treacherously unpredictable policy from that of a cowardly milquetoast? And what difference would it make to his victims? A man practicing such a policy would be mistrusted and despised by everyone, including the profiteers on his "generosity" - yet this is the policy which the U.S. has come as close to practicing as any nation ever could. And if foreign countries are now cheering the sight of a giant, the U.S., standing up to a flea, Cambodia, it is the (momentary) defeat of altruism that they are cheering unknowingly, it is America's liberation from altruism's flabbiness, it is America's declaration to all the fleas of the world that the world is not to perish as a meal for fleas.

The American people's reaction to the Mayaguez incident was a great - and tragic - demonstration of America's sense of life. Great, because when the news broke out, the letters and wires received at the White House ran - ten to one - in support of President Ford's intention to use military force against Cambodia. The American people - battered by disillusionment over a senseless war and by vicious pro-enemy, anti-war propaganda - could have had an excuse to fear and oppose the potential risk of another war in the same geographical area. But they did not. They understood the principle involved; they were willing to fight, but not to accept an affront. (Which, incidentally, is the only way to avoid a war, but not many leaders said so.) This grasp of principles, when the chips are down, this proudly rebellious independence in the face of lies and threats, is what defeats the calculations of the manipulators, foreign or domestic, who attempt to con the American people.

The tragedy lies in the fact that these American characteristics can come into play only when the chips are down. A sense of life cannot foresee or prevent a catastrophe; it cannot save people from moving toward a disaster by single, gradual steps. Foresight and prevention are the task of conscious thought and knowledge, i.e., of political philosophy. In regard to a nation, they are the task of the intellectuals.

Just as Russia collapsed through the philosophical bankruptcy of its anticommunists, so did China - so did every rebellion against communist rule, in Hungary, in Czechoslovakia, in Poland - so did, does and will every attempt to hold out a mixed

economy (and/or socialism!) as an alternative to communism worth fighting and dying for. The greatest intellectual crime today is that of the alleged "rightists" in this country: with reason, reality and (potentially) an overwhelming majority of the American people on their side, they are afraid to assume the responsibility of a moral crusade for America's values - i.e., for capitalism (with everything this necessitates). Observe the extent to which the tear gas of altruism is making them squirm. But unless men are brave enough to ventilate this country's moral atmosphere, they have no chance. For a nation, as for a man, a Declaration of Independence implies a declaration of self-esteem. Neither can stand without the other.

Much as I admire President Ford's conduct in the Mayaguez incident, there are many aspects of his policies with which I do not agree. The relevant one here is his appeal to leave Vietnam behind us and to avoid "recriminations" over that war. The lessons of Vietnam, he claims, have been learned. Have they?

What - and who - got us into that war? Why? For what reason and purpose? How did a war advocated and begun by the liberals (mainly by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson) become the conservatives' war? Isn't a moral obscenity such as a "no win" war unconstitutional - as a violation of the soldiers' right to life - since it turns soldiers into cannon fodder?

These are just a few of the questions to which the country has no clear answers. The Vietnam war is one of the most disastrous foreign-policy failures in U.S. history. We spent two years investigating everything connected with seven burglars sent by a bunch of politicians to bug the headquarters of another bunch of politicians. What was that compared to the enormity of Vietnam? We kept hearing, and are still hearing, that Watergate represented a threat to our rights, our freedom, our social system, and our Constitution. What was Vietnam?

Shouldn't there be an investigation of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, wider, deeper and more thorough than the investigation of Watergate - with nationally televised Congressional hearings, with dozens of famous witnesses, with daily headlines, editorials, debates, etc.? The purpose? To discover the causes in order to avoid the recurrence (or the continuation) of the policies that led to Vietnam.

Such an investigation would not be likely to uncover any crimes other than intellectual ones - but try to imagine the magnitude of those! Intellectual crimes cannot - and need not - be punished by law: the only punishment required is exposure. But who would conduct such an inquiry? Who would be able to ask the right questions, and integrate the answers, and point out the contradictions, and hammer at the evasions, and bring out the fundamental issues? Obviously, this is not a task for politicians, it is a task for theoretical thinkers, for intellectuals, for philosophers. But today they are the men who were responsible for the kind of thinking that was responsible for our involvement in Vietnam...

This is the reason why no such investigation can or will be held today. And this is the all-inclusive lesson to be learned from Vietnam.

Ayn Rand

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