

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.: The Politics of Hope and The Bitter Heritage

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2007, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to:
permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

Remarks on United States Foreign Policy

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

March 8, 1967

The situation in Vietnam presents us with our most urgent problem today in the field of foreign affairs. But the Vietnam problem is only the most vivid expression of a deeper crisis in American foreign policy. The roots of this deeper crisis lie not in the malevolence of men but in the obsolescence of ideas.

For we live in a time when the velocity of history is greater than ever before. The world has changed more in the last hundred years than it did in the thousand years preceding. The transformations wrought by science and technology have acquired a cumulative momentum and an exponential effect. One consequence is that perceptions of reality become obsolete with new and disconcerting rapidity. This would be all right, if the way we perceive reality changed as reality itself changes. But, as we all know, it doesn't. Our perceptions of reality are crystallized in a collection of stereotypes; and people become so fond of the stereotypes, so much at home with them, that they stop looking at actuality. In this way they protect themselves from the most painful of human necessities, which is, of course, the taking of thought.

The rapidity with which reality outstrips our perceptions of reality is an underlying source of our troubles with foreign policy. I do not suggest that, if our perceptions were kept up to date, this would solve all our problems, because many of the great problems of the world are in their nature insoluble. But I am sure that we cannot make much sense at all in the world as long

as we continue to base policy on anachronism. We must be forever vigilant to prevent transient strategies from turning into cherished and permanent verities.

Thus the ideas which dominate our foreign policy today were largely shaped by a very different world—a world threatened by massive, unitary, centralized movements of military aggression and social fanaticism: Adolf Hitler and Nazism in the thirties, Josef Stalin and Communism in the forties and early fifties. These ideas were admirably suited for this world and admirably achieved their objectives. They reflected a great and challenging time in world history, and the men who grew up in that time and acquired those ideas quite naturally find it hard to relinquish them. Yet the world itself has changed drastically—and this fact surely demands the review, if not the revision, of the presuppositions of our policy.

The most drastic change of all has taken place, as this essay points out, within the Communist empire itself. Twenty years ago Communism was still relatively monolithic in ideology and in discipline. Communist parties and governments everywhere took their orders from Moscow. A new Communist state meant the automatic extension of Russian national power; and, given the character of Soviet purpose, this in turn meant an increased threat to the security and freedom of the democracies. Communism, in short, was a unified and expanding international movement capable of the gravest possible challenge to the democratic world.

But that was 1947. It was true through the years of the Korean War. But it is now 1967, and Communism today is in a very different situation. For the quarrel between Moscow and Peking means the irrevocable end of the unity of Communist discipline and ideology.

It means the disappearance of any sole and single center of authority in the Communist empire. It has consequently set all Communist states free to respond to national interests and to pursue national policies. It has thereby transformed the character of the Communist problem. In this new polycentrist world, divergent nationalist forces are producing a wide diversity of behavior among the Communist states. Communism is no longer a unified, coordinated, centralized world conspiracy. This is the new reality which wise policy must surely begin to take into account.

The administration has partly recognized this evolution of affairs so far as Eastern Europe is concerned. President Johnson's emphasis on "bridge-building," as in his excellent speech last October, expresses a shrewd understanding of the advantages to the United States in encouraging diversity within the European Communist bloc and in enlarging the ties between the Eastern European states and the West. But we have not yet begun to apply this understanding to the problems of Western Europe. For in Western Europe we still seem committed to policies which were superbly brave and right in the world of twenty years ago but are much less germane to the world today.

So long as we insist on regarding NATO, for example, as first of all a means of deterring a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, we doom it to irrelevance. Thus the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said only the other day, "The threat is, if anything, greater than it was in the day [our troops] were put there." If this assertion represents the administration's perception of European reality, one can only admire so stern and determined a fidelity to the truths of yesteryear. For, whatever the danger twenty years ago when Western Europe was politically demoralized and economically

prostrate, the notion that an invasion of Western Europe ranks very high on Moscow's list of priorities today obviously requires an extraordinary *tour de force* of the imagination.

And, in the Far East, the administration seems determined to perceive Communism as it was a generation ago. It evidently regards East Asian Communism as a homogeneous and disciplined movement of international aggression, posing a threat to the United States comparable to that posed by Hitler in the thirties or Stalin in the forties. "The contest in Vietnam," the President has said, "is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes." The Secretary of State's constant reliance on the Munich analogy makes it clear that he sees the United States as challenged, not by ragged bands of guerrillas in black pajamas without heavy artillery or air power, but by a heavily armed, highly wound-up, overwhelmingly strong military power committed to the course of instant expansion.

For the evidence fails to sustain the thesis that the war in Vietnam is Mao's war or that the Viet Cong are only the spearhead of a Chinese program of aggression. Indeed, most of the evidence suggests that Asian Communism is as fragmented as—perhaps even more fragmented than—European Communism. The proposition that we are fighting in Asia to restrain Chinese aggression—that we must fight in Vietnam today or else we will be fighting in Hawaii tomorrow—is a product not of contemporary evidence but of mechanical historical analogy. It represents the triumph of stereotype over reality. For the evidence strongly suggests that we confront in Vietnam, not a fateful test of wills with China, but a nasty local war, mounted by Communists who want to take over Vietnam, not for Peking but for themselves—and who, if they suc-

ceeded, might be no more enslaved by Peking than North Korea is today.

This is, of course, a very different situation from the one described to us by the administration. It is a more manageable situation—and also a situation calling far less for the sacrifice of American lives. And, if this is the real situation, the argument for bringing the war to an end and stopping the killing seems very strong indeed. Hence the great present concern with the problem of negotiation.

One can have no question about the genuineness of President Johnson's wish for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. But the administration has made it clear, I would judge, that, while negotiation remains its ultimate objective, it does not consider negotiation advantageous at this time (April 1967). Why else, unless it thought this, would Washington have hardened the American terms at the very time that Hanoi apparently allowed Moscow to soften the North Vietnamese terms?

In April 1965 Hanoi laid down its Four Points as a basis for negotiation. These points were not very helpful. They included such hopeless stipulations as the withdrawal of United States forces from South Vietnam (though it was not always clear whether this meant withdrawal in advance of negotiations) and the final settlement of the internal affairs of South Vietnam "in accordance with the program" of the Viet Cong. These points, especially if the first implied prior withdrawal, were clearly and rightly unacceptable to the United States.

The American position as it evolved in response was that the United States was prepared to suspend the bombing of North Vietnam for "nothing more," as *Time* magazine has put it, "than an agreement to begin

negotiations.” Thus the Secretary of State said on February 16, 1966, “Some governments said Hanoi would talk if we would stop bombing North Vietnam. We tried that twice . . . but it made no difference. Hanoi would not come to the conference table.” On March 13, 1966, the Vice President said that, if Hanoi had shown any interest in negotiation during the recent bombing pause, this “obviously would have kept the bombing pause going.”

Now, a year later, both Kosygin and U Thant said that North Vietnam was prepared to meet these terms. If the United States unconditionally stopped the bombing of North Vietnam, these authorities claimed, negotiation could begin. There was no mention of the Four Points. In other words, as Mr. Lippmann has put it, they “brought us the assurance that our 1966 terms—suspension for an unconditional parley—would now be accepted by Hanoi.” One cannot be sure, of course, that Moscow could have delivered Hanoi to the conference table on these terms. Ho Chi Minh’s passion for negotiation is, to put it mildly, reserved and equivocal; and his tone is abominable. But this is no argument against making the attempt. The whole Soviet initiative was unprecedented, and, if it had been taken up, the responsibility for producing Hanoi would have fallen on Moscow. If we really wanted negotiation, we had a good chance of having it in 1967 on the same terms that we sought it in 1966.

But these terms were evidently now unacceptable to us. For Washington has considerably stiffened its position and now demands from Hanoi things it did not demand a year ago. Publicly we have only asked for the prior assurance of some unspecified act of reciprocal de-escalation—“just almost any step,” the President said—in return for the cessation of the bombing.

But privately President Johnson in his letter of February 2 to Ho Chi Minh was far more specific and drastic. He then said he would stop the bombing of North Vietnam only “as soon as I am assured that infiltration into South Vietnam by land and by sea has been stopped.” This meant, in the view of Mr. Reston of *The New York Times*, “that the North Vietnamese [had to] act *first* to stop the infiltration . . . before the United States stops the bombing.” It meant that Ho Chi Minh could no longer supply his forces in South Vietnam while the United States retained the right to supply American forces. President Johnson’s offer to desist at the same time from “further augmentation of United States forces in South Vietnam” could hardly have been deeply moving to those in Hanoi who reflected that there were already 420,000 American troops in South Vietnam as against 50,000 Vietnamese regulars and that, under the President’s terms, the American troops would be free, in the words of Mr. Reston, “to hunt and destroy an enemy cut off from his supplies in the North.” Could anyone have honestly supposed that such a proposition would be faintly interesting to Hanoi?

Not only did President Johnson thus harden the American position beyond anything disclosed to the American people (his letter to Ho Chi Minh was released by Hanoi); but he described the North Vietnamese proposal as one requiring that we cease “‘unconditionally’ and *permanently* [emphasis added] our bombing operations against your country.” The repeated American insistence that Hanoi demands a “permanent” cessation of bombing reinforces the impression of our reluctance to negotiate at this time. For neither Kosygin nor Podgorny said anything about “permanent” cessation. Ho Chi Minh’s reply to Presi-

dent Johnson said that “if the U.S. Government really wants these talks, it must first of all stop unconditionally its bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.” He did not use the word *permanent*. The very idea that one state could expect another to pledge never, never, never, in whatever contingency and in all perpetuity, to refrain from bombing another state is self-evidently absurd. It would represent a derogation of sovereignty that no nation would ever accept. No doubt the word “permanent” sounded at some point in the medley of voices out of Hanoi. But a resourceful diplomacy, thus faced with conflicting proposals, would surely have done as we did when confronted by two contradictory proposals from Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis: it would have responded to the one that suited our interests best. Had we followed in October 1962 the practice of ignoring the acceptable and fastening on the unacceptable proposal, we might well have stumbled into the Third World War.

If we had really wanted negotiation in February 1967, we would have ended the bombing as the Russians suggested and let the burden of delivering Hanoi to the conference table fall to Moscow. On the other hand, if we could not figure out how negotiation at this point could yield satisfactory results, we would do exactly as we did—ignore the Soviet initiative, claim that we knew Hanoi’s mind better than Kosygin and Podgorny did, acknowledge only the most extreme and extravagant proposals from North Vietnam and put forward proposals of our own that we could be absolutely certain Hanoi would not accept. The actions of the administration lead irresistibly to the conclusion that it does not consider this a favorable time to negotiate, and that it cannot summon up the energy

or imagination to seek a solution in unfavorable circumstances.

One regrets that high officials have seen fit to accompany this by rather far-fetched misrepresentations of other people's ideas. Thus the Secretary of State said, "Proposals substantially similar to those put forward by Senator Kennedy were explored prior, during, and since the Tet truce—all without result." Yet the Secretary of State, who is an intelligent man, must surely know that the administration proposal, insisting as it did on prior action by Hanoi, was very different from Senator Kennedy's proposal. How could he possibly describe two proposals—one for the conditional and the other for the unconditional cessation of bombing—as "substantially similar"? And how for that matter could the President of the United States imply that the cessation of the bombing of the north would leave our soldiers defenseless in the south? "If they are going to lob their mortar shells into the backs of our soldiers," he said, "... you must, if you are at all fair to those who are defending you there, permit them to respond." I know of no proposals that American troops should stop defending themselves or even any for the cessation of bombing in the south. Such misstatements advance neither the clarity of the debate nor the credibility of the administration.

Still, I do not suggest that the administration's evident desire to postpone negotiations is without rational justification. The reasoning behind it, I imagine, runs something like this. The administration apparently regards the recent signals from Hanoi as a response to the bombing of the north and, in consequence, a vindication of the bombing policy. At the same time, it evidently does not see how, given the present military balance, a negotiation can lead to a

desirable outcome. It looks forward, moreover, to the stabilization of the political situation in South Vietnam through the formation of a civilian government (though, if Marshal Ky should end up as head of this government, it seems doubtful how much more stable the situation would be). Therefore, it reasons, if we bomb a few months more, Hanoi will be even more anxious to end the war than it is today; Saigon will be in better shape; and at that point we can negotiate under much more advantageous conditions.

This analysis is not illogical, and it may well be right. But it is not so self-evidently right as to be immune to question. For one thing, its basic assumption is that the peace signals are as a response to bombing. Yet it is entirely possible—I should say, even probable—that the signals from Hanoi are a response, not to our air war in the north, but to our ground war in the south. Hanoi and the Viet Cong may well have come to the conclusion that they can hope neither for a military victory in the south nor an American withdrawal, and that they therefore must begin to shift from the idea of a short-run military victory to that of a long-run political victory. Furthermore, the turmoil in China has doubtless conferred a greater freedom of action on Hanoi. These reasons are quite sufficient to explain Hanoi's renewed interest in negotiations, without supposing that it is all a result of bombing.

Moreover, the theory that we can obtain more favorable terms by intensifying the war is based on an old fallacy—that, while we escalate, the other side will sit still, and that escalation will consequently bring us a clear margin of superiority. This has been the reasoning behind every previous step of escalation; and it has always proved wrong. The other side, instead of sitting still, had escalated too. Instead of achieving a margin

of superiority, all we have done is to raise the stalemate to a more bloody and more explosive level. The Russians, for example, cannot be expected to do nothing while we widen the war in North Vietnam. They are already increasing their shipments of anti-aircraft missiles and guns and other arms and supplies. Our bombing will further harden the resolve of the North Vietnamese themselves. If past experience has any relevance, the consequence in six months of this new exercise in escalation will be, not at all the victory the generals keep promising us, but a new and even more perilous stalemate.

The problem is that there is never a right time for negotiation. In the past some in Hanoi have no doubt construed our own calls for negotiation as a sign of weakness and have, in consequence, argued for stiffening their own position. So some in Washington today construe Hanoi's signals as a sign of weakness, contend that the enemy is on the run and call for an intensification of military pressure. By this logic we cannot negotiate when we are behind because we are weak; and we can't negotiate either when we are ahead because, if we keep on doing what we have been doing, we will be even farther ahead at some later point.

The time has surely come to break the hopeless logic which can never find the right moment for negotiation. Too much is imperiled by the continuation of the war: the lives of American soldiers, as well as of the Vietnamese; the confidence and support of our allies; our position in Europe and Latin America; our relationship with the Soviet Union; not to mention the vast needs of our national society—our cities, our schools, our poor, our minorities, our old and our young.

The urgent need is to explore every opportunity to slow down the war. The bombing of North Vietnam

has failed to halt the infiltration or to break the will of the people of North Vietnam or to bring Hanoi to the conference table. Moreover, if we bombed North Vietnam back to the stone age tomorrow, the war would continue in South Vietnam. The cruel fact is that we can never win a guerrilla war in South Vietnam by the aerial obliteration of North Vietnam. Instead, therefore, of seeking excuses to avoid negotiation, instead of upping our ante and insisting on the worst possible interpretations of our adversaries' position, it would be interesting for us to appear for a moment before the world as the champion, not of bombing and destruction, but of vision and peace.

There is a deeper question involved here—and that has to do with the character of America's role in the world. There is abroad in the land the notion that foreign policy is not, as we have traditionally supposed, about the accommodation of conflicting national entities, but about questions of right and wrong. This, oddly enough, is a view of foreign policy shared by the Secretary of State and the New Left. And one detects in some of our official pronouncements the implication that the United States, as a result of its inherent moral superiority, is the world's judge, jury and executioner; and that, where things are wrong, it is the American mission to set them right. This seems a distorted, even dangerous, view of the American role in the world. For, while the men who founded this republic did believe that America had a mission to mankind, they conceived this mission as one to be spread by example and persuasion, not by force. John Quincy Adams well stated the classical American creed when he noted that the United States would always view with sympathy any foreign group struggling for independence: "But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.

She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own."

I fear a current tendency to go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. Yet this enterprise ignores the limitations on our own knowledge and on our own power. President Kennedy put the matter well some years ago: "We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnipotent nor omniscient—that we are only 6 per cent of the world's population—that we cannot impose our will on the other 94 per cent of mankind—that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversary—and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem."

The world is filled with contradiction and evil and will continue to be so for a long time. We cannot hope to resolve every contradiction and overcome all the evils and produce an American solution to every problem—especially if we try to do so on the basis of stereotypes which express the reality of another generation. It is bad enough to be a messiah; it is even worse to be a messiah spouting clichés. And, if we insist on casting ourselves as the world's savior, the effect on ourselves will be as fatal as on the rest of mankind. For no one can play God with impunity. "He who would act the angel," said Pascal, "acts the brute"—a warning alike to men and nations.