

EDITORIAL

Fortune and American "Idealism"

Since the days of Woodrow Wilson, American foreign policy has been conducted with a smug and self-righteous hypocrisy perhaps unmatched by any nation in the history of mankind. But recently there have been signs that this may be changing, and that, at least in some areas, a brutal candour may increasingly come to reveal the naked reality beneath the glossy surface. While this will serve the cause of truth, the new frankness is not an unmixed blessing; for it may well mean that our rulers consider us so softened and deadened by decades of propaganda that we will accept any of the naked truth, however harsh, without a murmur of protest or indignation. And the rulers appear to be right.

The first step in the New Frankness was a striking innovation in the theory and practice of war propaganda. Until now, atrocity stories, whether true or manufactured, were always directed against the designated Enemy. But now the United States has pushed atrocities to a more advanced stage; it now publicizes and matter-of-factly releases to the world the news of atrocities for which it is responsible! These are, for example, the numerous pictures, spread around the world, of systematic torture of prisoners by our puppet troops in South Vietnam. As these edifying documents are released and published, no one in America seems to be interested, let alone protest. The acts of torture are accepted as facts of nature, or acts of God, like tornadoes or earthquakes. It was Graham Greene who first pointed out what this flood of pictures implies about the present moral insensitivity of the American people, or of the estimate of that insensitivity by the American rulers.

The latest step in the truth treatment has been the beginning of the acknowledgment, by the American

Establishment, that the United States is now indeed an imperial nation. A country steeped in anti-colonial traditions, indeed born in a revolution that was the first successful war of national liberation in the history of the world, America has always denied that it could ever become an imperialist power. That could not happen here. But now the Establishment apparently believes that the American people are ready to face the harsh reality that the United States has become the imperial power in the world today.

First it was Henry Fairlie, an astute British observer coming from a country long experienced in Empire, who, in the great organ of the Establishment, the New York Times, gently chided the American people for not waking up to the fact of American imperialism. The Americans, he said in effect, should recognize the reality of imperialism, plan it systematically and openly, and. . . enjoy it. And now Fortune magazine in its August, 1965 issue, endorses the Fairlie article and carries the analysis even further.

The great fuel that powered the United States into its present world Empire, notes the Fortune editorial, was not so much profit or self-interest as "idealism." It was "idealism" that led the United States to enter World War II against Germany and Japan; and it was "idealism" that changed the American course from support of national liberation movements against imperialism to their suppression. Belying its tradition and history of support of national revolutions, the United States, in Fortune's quaint language, "fell heir to the onerous task of policing these shattered colonies." In short, the United States fell heir to West European imperialism.

Yes, writes Fortune in its wisdom, this assumption of world Empire may be at bottom irrational, but Woodrow Wilson and then every president from FDR to LBJ has been propelled by this same "idealism" to assert America's hegemony over the rest of the world. Or, as Fortune revealingly puts it, "the U. S. is the engine of mankind and the rest of the world is the train"--or, rather, the engine of the "free world", since the Communist world has been so ungrateful as to resist the blandishments of American "hauling power." Here it is instructive to note that Harry

Truman, in his day thoroughly hated by the American Right, is lauded by this organ of the Right-wing of the Establishment for his crucial role in generating American imperialism in the early post-war years. Truman's "place in history grows larger as our perspective lengthens."

Surveying America's world empire from its lofty perch, Fortune considers each world area in turn, looking forward with enthusiasm to many decades of America's "deep involvement in the fate of many nations." In Asia, America must gird its loins for "some fantastic ordeal"; America is "again at war" there, and Fortune makes crystal-clear that it regards our real opponent as China, and believes that a full-scale war with China might happily be in the offing. Vietnam and perhaps China are the "testing ground" of American will and American "idealism". In Europe, notes Fortune, we face an equally prolonged test, one that is "more subtle and sophisticated." Here the "test" is that after America idealistically rebuilt Western Europe, the Europeans have been ungrateful enough to use their new prosperity to repel American business. This is especially true of Gaullist France. But we note with relief that the United States will not have to go to war with France; here U. S. businessmen should stop offending French sensibilities and "adjust their tactics" to mollify these petulant people.

Turning its buzzing searchlight to the south, Fortune reaches the height of its exercise in unconscious buffoonery. Here, the desideratum is how to prevent all further Cubas, but the wise strategists of the American Empire have apparently not yet come up with the requisite wholly-rounded strategy. We "are still groping for a strategy and a style." The rushing of the Marines to Santo Domingo was useful, of course, but America needs moral force in Latin America to offset Communist propaganda. And the Marines in Santo Domingo, "however useful in the urgent circumstances", somehow do not provide the sufficient moral force needed "in building the kind of just and humane order to the south that our idealism conceives." For that kind of just, humane, and idealistic order, the Marines must be supplemented by. . . for example, the Peace Corps, which provides the

necessary veneer of altruism to American actions. No better confirmation could be found for the Communist charge that the Peace Corps and similar institutions are the sugar-coating for the bitter reality of American world rule.

Fortune concludes its revealing editorial by reminding the naive that all this mess of ideals and justice and humanity can only be imposed by force, and that the American people must pledge their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, forever and ever to this task; and thus meet the "unending test of American idealism."

In a sense, Fortune is right about the role of "idealism". For the State and its rulers could never get away with their depredations were it not for "idealistic" apologia spun by their favored intellectuals. The rhetoric of idealism provides the sophisticated cover for the plunder underneath; and it also spurs the intellectuals themselves to greater heights of despotism. In recent years, an increasing number of writers have begun to dissect the mischievous role played by what Harry Elmer Barnes has aptly termed the "totalitarian liberals" in the promotion of American expansionism and imperialism. These acute analysts include the historian William Appleman Williams and such of his students as James Weinstein, Ronald Radosh and Martin Sklar, and, on the Vietnam war by John McDermott, editor of Viet-Report. Totalitarian liberals have a great urge to "do good to" other people, preferably all over the globe, to plan their lives for them, and, therefore inevitably, to tell them sternly what they must do and force them to do it. All this may be summed up in Isabel Paterson's pungent phrase, "The Humanitarian with the Guillotine." As Mrs. Paterson puts it:

The humanitarian wishes to be a prime mover in the lives of others. He cannot admit either the divine or the natural order, by which men have the power to help themselves. The humanitarian puts himself in the place of God.

But he is confronted by two awkward facts; first, that the competent do not need his assistance; and second, that the majority of people, if unperverted, positively do not want to be 'done good' by the

humanitarian. . . Of course, what the humanitarian actually proposes is that he shall do what he thinks is good for everybody. It is at this point that the humanitarian sets up the guillotine.¹

The innocent people of Vietnam are, day after day, feeling the effects of the deadly "guillotine" blessed by the serried ranks of American "idealism."

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1. Isabel Paterson, The God of the Machine (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1943), p. 241.