

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JEF-20

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Choosing Life: Part One

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

A while back the newspapers reported President Ford's opposition to any post-mortem investigations into the Vietnam War, because "the lessons of the past in Vietnam have already been learned -- learned by Presidents, learned by Congress, learned by the American people. We should have our focus on the future." As I tried to point out in a small way in JEF-19, many lessons have not been learned, in fact the most important ones. Furthermore too many hundreds of thousands are dead, maimed or disfigured, too many lives have been shattered, too much innocent blood has been spilled, to pass over the last decade as though it were all a minor incident, which we can forget in our responsible concern for the future. We must also consider the justice of seeing men who sent hundreds of thousands to die as they did, retire honorably to write their memoirs in peace, continuing to embroider on the myths they have spun up to now. To urge that "the lessons have been learned" and that we should turn our backs on the past is fatuous and self-serving at the least; for some individuals, it is hypocrisy on a world-historical scale.

Let me try to suggest in the coming pages just how poorly some of the lessons of the Vietnam War have been learned. I have spent much of the past decade in Asia, and have at various times had contact at many levels with the American effort in this part of the world. Thus I may be qualified to offer a few constructive thoughts. Why do I do this? I believe in the notion of individual responsibility: there is no other way in complex organizations than to know who signs certain pieces of paper, and to hold them responsible for the consequences of their signatures. Beyond this, each of us is committed to certain values, and certain means of seeing those values achieved in the future. Thus each of us follows a certain path: diplomats quietly negotiate and trust in civilized persuasion; businessmen pursue economic rationality in their own enterprises and trust in the invisible hand; military men sharpen their professional skills and trust in the political wisdom of their leaders. For a scholar like myself, the means, and one of the ends, are truth. My calling -- and I believe it is a calling, not a "job" -- starts and ends with the belief that enhancing communications between people will lead to a better world. Communication of truth, I should add, not falsehoods. Perhaps the results issue more slowly than from the diplomat's treaty, or the soldier's bayonet, but they come just as surely, and, I believe, more securely in the long run. Thus the values to which I am committed oblige me to record what I have learned from the last decade, and to share it with others, even if some find it embarrassing, or indiscreet, to speak.

It seems to me there are three areas in which we have urgent lessons to learn: in the values which guide American policy, in the honesty with which the government communicates with itself and the people it serves; and in the means used to implement the values chosen. Let me talk first about values, since logically (at least

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in something called a "rational comprehensive" decision process) the values govern the ends of action and the means as well.

A qualification here. Some urge that scholars speak but to means and leave discussion and choice of ends to others. This is a false and dangerous counsel, the belief in which by too many has contributed to the tragedy we have seen unfolding in Southeast Asia. What separates man from the beast in the field is his capacity to listen to the voice inside. And what makes us as individuals truly human beings is actually listening to that voice which we have been endowed with the capacity to hear. As a scholar I can dispassionately consider the appropriateness of means to ends. As a human being I insist on saying something about the ends as well.

What are the values which are relevant here? Some believe that the US is a conservative nation, that the preservation of economic and political power is what really counts, and that the talk of rights and justice is all a smokescreen to confuse the unsophisticated. Partisans of this view might point, for example, to Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution, as proof that the US meant to preserve economic power and the status quo from the very beginning of the Republic.

I believe this view is wrong, or at least so seriously incomplete as to be misleading. Some times, many times, the values which Americans have proclaimed in their founding documents -- freedom of the press, freedom of thought, equality before the law -- have served the interests of power and wealth. Many times, equally, they have not. This seems to me the best possible evidence that they are valued independently, that many Americans have a genuine commitment to justice for "all men," to quote the Declaration of Independence, regardless of their station in life. That the institutions of government, or its leaders, may sometimes turn these protections from their original purpose does not invalidate the argument. And to speak to Beard, subsequent research has shown that many of his hypotheses about the alleged economic purposes of the Founding Fathers are not confirmed by the evidence.

So I think it is fair to say that the founders of the American Republic were very serious when they proclaimed the goal of justice for all men; they firmly believed that we must give each man his due, as a being created in the image of God. And they clearly believed that this was a commandment of universal validity: not that "all Americans" are owed their due, but that all men are owed this. This commandment has been honored often enough in the history of the Republic that I believe we can truly say it is one of America's consistent principles.

Yet justice is simply not what is happening on the face of the earth today, and it seems plainly not to have been one of the values governing American policy in Southeast Asia. While American policies there were usually wrapped in a sanctimonious shroud of hypocrisy, occasionally someone speaks plainly, and this Henry Kissinger did recently, if he was reported correctly in the press. He was quoted as saying that the Vietnam War would have been lost anyway, but it would have been better for the US had it gone on for several more years. Yet we need not have the Secretary of State's public testimony in this matter: that this was policy was obvious from US actions in Vietnam and Cambodia over the last several years.

What kinds of values are these? A value means a preference for one thing over another, and Mr. Kissinger's statement translates into a preference for the misery and death of countless tens or hundreds of thousands, over the least em-

barrassment to or diminishment in the power of the US, or in another interpretation, of its leading officials. It is a preference for the protection of privilege and injustice, by the use of the most horrible means. It is a preference for death over life. Is this what America stands for? It seems to me completely inconsistent with what humane Americans, or humane people anywhere, believe.

American policy toward Southeast Asia has in practice -- and it is in practice that we must judge it -- been a barbaric perversion of human aspirations. Millenia ago, as man began to emerge from barbarism into civilization, he recorded the choice that one makes on abandoning barbarism. Surely Henry Kissinger must once have read the words of Deuteronomy: "For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it onto us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it . . . I call heaven and earth this day to record against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." The sad fact is that American leaders have consistently chosen death and injustice in Southeast Asia, and that has been a betrayal of what the American experiment meant to the founders of the Republic.

And this seems true not just in Southeast Asia. Martin Luther King said in 1967 something which was plausible then and undeniably true several years later: "America is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today -- violence overwhelmingly on the side of oppression against necessary revolutionary change in the Third World." King was too general: we must recognize (or else we are lost) that what some men in power do, even a long succession of men, is not a final and binding commitment. Many Americans hold other values, and this is a choice we must consider in making public policy. This is plainly a lesson which has escaped President Ford, Mr. Kissinger, and others in their circle. It is a choice of which they themselves, isolated as they are, may not even be aware. It is a choice of which they apparently never even think, so seemingly reflexive and urgent are their cravings for death.

King's words are dramatic, but they do not capture the full subtlety of the problem of life over death. As I have tried to point out in some of my earlier letters (JEF-4, 6-9, and most recently 18), the means by which injustice is perpetuated are sophisticated, silent, and relentless in their operation. Violence is seldom necessary, a point some social critics on the left fail to understand in their apocalyptic descriptions and prescriptions. And, if violence is seldom necessary to perpetuate injustice, it is only plausible to believe that violence may be unnecessary to overcome it as well.

Let us stand back for a moment and look at the world, pretending we are celestial beings. There is no other way to describe our globe than as the site of colossal exploitation and injustice. Taking just the dimension of income, the figures on distribution (highly unequal) and secular trends (increasingly unequal) show this unambiguously to all observers, regardless of political persuasion. What is one's attitude to this to be? What are one's preferences? Does one act to affirm injustice and inequality and exploitation, or the contrary?

Under the aspect of eternity, communism is one response, the victim's response,

to injustice, inequality, and exploitation. However repugnant its means may be to liberal values, it must be understood specifically in this way. It is a response which uses cruel means against a cruel world. If one is opposed to injustice, inequality and exploitation, and yet also opposed to the cruel means of communism, then one is obliged to choose better means to achieve the ends of justice, equality and reciprocity. To do otherwise demeans one to the same level as one's opponent; and this is what has happened in Southeast Asia. In the name of good ends (and many people truly believed in them) hideous means were used, such that the Saigon regime came to have all of the vices of its opponent in Hanoi, with none of the latter's virtues. And, the evil wrought by the means -- both in Asia and America -- was so enormous that it betrayed the ends as well. This was not, to repeat Deuteronomy, some secret hidden from us, that we had to say, who shall go up to heaven and bring it to us. It was very near to us, in fact right under our noses; numerous official and unofficial observers pointed it out, as I shall discuss shortly.

A second lesson which Mr. Ford is so anxious to pass over has to do with simple honesty. We must ultimately depend on the integrity of the people in an organization, otherwise it will go awry regardless of the institutional safeguards supposedly built in to protect it from its members. In the case of Vietnam, policy was founded on and protected by deception and outrageous lies, hidden from the public and even Congress by barriers of official secrecy. Dishonesty was so pervasive that different parts of the Executive Branch even lied to each other. A policy conceived in lies and executed by dishonest men was bound to end in catastrophe since, to be practical about it, feedback mechanisms necessary for complex organizations (as I wrote in JEF-18) only work if they pass accurate messages. Of this second lesson we hear no word. Those American leaders of whom we have reason to expect the most appear impervious to it, since many of the liars are still at their desks.

Let me recount some incidents from my own experience which illustrate the dishonesty which pervaded America's effort in Southeast Asia -- and which still has not apparently been identified by Mr. Ford as one of the crucial problems of this period in American history.

The time is 1971. I have returned to Harvard from several years of research in Vietnam and Thailand and am in the process of publishing a book* on the nature of the war in Vietnam and the ways in which scholars and bureaucrats have failed to understand what was at stake there. In August Dr. X calls me from Washington to ask me to participate in a seminar on "lessons learned in pacification" organized by him for the Institute for Defense Analyses. The Defense Department is paying \$400,000 to "search for major lessons of pacification in Vietnam that may have applicability in some other area at some future time" (Dr. X's subsequent letter). I explain to Dr. X the conclusions of my research: that it is impossible for the Defense Department to learn the lessons; that to the extent the seminar can learn from Vietnam, its findings will be ignored by its employer.

Dr. X agrees that the bureaucracy has experienced learning difficulties in the past, but he is optimistic in this case and urges my attendance. I agree with two conditions: first, that two items be circulated in advance to other

**War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province*, University of California Press, 1972

participants (from the Department of State, AID, the Army, and the CIA): a chapter from my forthcoming book titled "Lessons" and a paper I had just presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, explaining why psychological theory predicts impediments to institutional learning and what can be done about it*; second, IDA pay my usual consulting fee of \$100 per day plus expenses. (Numerous studies show that advice is weighed in proportion to its cost. The implication for gratuitous advice is plain.) Dr. X agrees to both conditions. A short time later the agenda arrives which states, among other things, that "seminar members are encouraged to bring up any additional points which they consider important."

On my arrival in Washington General Y, assisting Dr. X in the project, informs me that after reading the two papers, he and Dr. X have decided not to circulate them since this would divert the meeting from the points they want to cover.

The first day's discussion is conducted within what I will call the "conventional wisdom" of American policy and practice in Vietnam up to that time. At several points during the day I introduce evidence from my research indicating that each specific program under discussion must be evaluated differently if events in Vietnam are viewed as part of a process of social revolution rather than as banditry or external invasion. No such suggestion on my part is pursued by the other participants: the usual response is to continue the dialogue as if I had not spoken, or to shift to a different topic.

The second day's discussion begins with the subject of corruption and what Americans can do about it, e.g., having American advisors threaten a low "pacification rating" if their counterparts continue corrupt practices. I suggest that this problem has to be viewed in sociopolitical terms: that corruption occurs because of a certain distribution of political power, and if Americans are concerned about corruption, they must be concerned with political reform. I further suggest that the approach to corruption heretofore used has been (in technical jargon) a "suboptimization" and that this has characterized the entire seminar and has wide ramifications for all the subjects discussed. In short, the distributive issues of political justice cannot be avoided; the fact that the Saigon government which the US is supporting is corrupt and perpetuates an oppressive social order is not an inconvenient handicap but the heart of the problem.

Finally, I suggest that the most important lesson of "pacification" in Vietnam is to learn to recognize an impossible situation (overdetermined, if you prefer). If, as some seminar participants expressed to me privately, certain important variables cannot be manipulated by the United States, and yet manipulating these variables is essential to avoiding military catastrophe, then intervention makes no sense, there is no point in discussing specific programs, and honesty compels us to tell the Department of Defense that in order to save lives in the future interventions which DOD is apparently contemplating.

These proposals to enlarge the agenda to consider new perspectives and new scientific variables in evaluating existing programs draw an immediate and heated

*"American Intervention Abroad: Systematic Distortions in the Policy-Making Process"; I can have a copy sent to anyone who is interested.

response from Dr. X. His points are three:

1. IDA's "charter" from the Department of Defense does not (for reasons unspecified) permit the consideration of the "lessons" I urge be considered -- despite the explicit request in the letter of invitation to raise important relevant points;

2. their sole concern is with more effective implementation of existing programs, even though these are part of an ill-conceived strategy and a disastrous policy;

3. he will not permit the meeting to be diverted by "theoretical" considerations; the programs are only to be evaluated "pragmatically." Dr. X concludes with a vehement statement that the meeting will return at that moment to a "pragmatic" evaluation of programs, not permitting me to speak further on these subjects.

At this point General Y briefly interjects that he can summarize in two pages all the errors of American strategy and policy in Vietnam, but the Defense Department will not pay to be told such a thing, so they cannot permit such subjects to be discussed.

What is going on here? George Orwell had a name for this kind of behavior: "crimestop." "Crimestop means the faculty of stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought. It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest arguments . . . , and of being bored and repelled by any train of thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction. Crimestop, in short, means protective stupidity."

I would be less generous than Orwell. I would call it criminal negligence in failing to transmit the whole relevant truth. Literally the lives of thousands, perhaps millions, depended in the past and might depend in the future on the words and actions of such men as these. Dr. X was formerly a CIA official, and General Y was a division commander before his retirement. Apparently earlier patterns of deception, half-truths, and telling the boss what he wants to hear carried over into their consulting work. But how is it possible to have a sensible policy (any sensible policy), a realistic policy, a safe policy, if government planners consistently deceive each other as Dr. X and General Y said they must?

Another example. A few years back I was interviewed for a position with the US Foreign Service. Everything progressed well. One final point, the interviewers mentioned, going down their checklist. To qualify to be a Foreign Service Officer I must agree to lie when requested by my superiors. Do I have any scruples about this? (The colleagues to whom I have recited this story are incredulous, but I affirm that this actually happened.) I point out that, as in Vietnam, lying to the public and to the Congress inevitably leads to lying to one's superiors as well. Is this what they want? There is an escape clause, they inform me: the Foreign Service Officer who has scruples on this matter is permitted to resign his commission rather than execute a deception. Very reassuring. But I ask, must it be a qualification for office under the United States of America to agree to lie to the public?

Officials who insist on conducting public business in this way fail to understand the ideas on which the American Republic is based. One such idea is

that of the importance and inviolability of truth, regardless of its consequences and regardless of the claims of power. This is an idea so fundamental that it goes back centuries in our culture, preceding the political controversies of our time, in fact originating in the religious controversies of the seventeenth century. Truth was a way to God, and no man had a right to interfere with the truth, not even a king. And truth, as a means to God, was stronger than falsehood. What Milton said 300 years ago stands as a testimonial to the belief which underlies our Republic: "Let her and falsehood grapple; who ever knew truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?"

The truth should come out, and it will come out, and recent high American officials, in thinking and acting otherwise, betray how little they comprehend the principles of the government they have been chosen to lead.

The history of the Pentagon Papers illustrates this clearly. The public tends to think now that it was only because of Dan Ellsberg's release of the papers in 1971 that we have them. In fact, as I think back, we knew of them some time before then, and someone else would have pressed for their release in due course. The existence of the study was first discussed openly, as far as I know, in September of 1970, at the meeting of the American Political Science Association mentioned earlier. At this meeting a series of papers was given on Vietnam, and afterwards we paper-givers had a dinner; among the participants were Ray Tanter, Dan Ellsberg, Allan Whiting, Sam Huntington and Roger Hilsman. During the course of the dinner I suggested that some prestigious and important organization, like the APSA, should sponsor a study of decision-making on the Vietnam War, since there was obviously much to be learned. Someone, I believe Sam Huntington, said this was a good idea, but it would be hard to get official cooperation. Then Dan Ellsberg spoke up and said, "But the study has already been done. It's in a safe in Washington, all you have to do is get it." We spoke about it a bit more, and I suspect that shortly some group of scholars would have pursued it, had Dan not moved on his own six months later.

The point of this story is that high government officials still have not learned the important lesson involved, for what Dan did still remains an extremely sore point in officialdom. One risks ostracism even trying to explain that what Dan and the press did is firmly in the American tradition, and precisely what a good American is obliged to do: expose injustice and lying by the government. The two examples I have given above show that many officials believe lying to be a routine and proper means of conducting public affairs. The Pentagon Papers incident reveals that many more believe that dishonesty deserves the same protection of law as does legitimate government business.

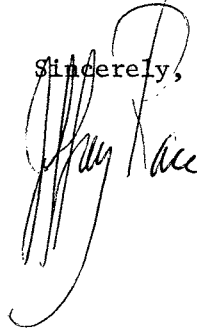
Justice Black, I believe, showed a truer understanding of our system in his opinion in the Pentagon Papers case:

In the First Amendment the Founding Fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our democracy. The press was to serve the governed, not the governors And paramount among the responsibilities of a free press is the duty to prevent any part of the government from deceiving the people and sending them off to distant lands to die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell. In my view, far from deserving condemnation for their courageous reporting, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and other newspapers should be congratulated for serving the purpose that the Founding Fathers saw so clearly. In revealing the workings of the government that led to the

Viet Nam War, the newspapers nobly did precisely that which the Founders hoped and trusted they would do.

I have by no means finished with this subject, but for the unpersuaded, or the outraged, this may be enough to digest at one sitting. Thus I shall halt here, and carry on next month.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "J. Edgar Hoover". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the word "Sincerely,".

Received in New York on August 18, 1975