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How to Lose the World

IN THE aftermath of the gas episode in Vietnam, one fact at least may be worth pondering. The decision to use gas was made without the knowledge of either the President or the State Department. It is to President Johnson's credit that he did not feel obligated to close ranks and endorse an action that, whatever the military argument, was wicked, incompetent, and prejudicial to the vital interests of the United States. The action was news to him and he said so.

Inevitably and forcibly, hard questions flow out of these events. How much scope now exists for important decision-making outside the top councils of government? Was the decision to use gas in Vietnam a wild and isolated abuse of authority in the field? Or has a pattern slowly been emerging that is only now partially visible? It has just been revealed that undercover agents of the U.S. Government several years ago secretly adulterated a large shipment of sugar en route to the Soviet Union. President Kennedy learned of this sabotage and was able to intercept the cargo and undo the damage. Even more ominous is the charge made by Frederick E. Nolting, Jr., former U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, that the United States was directly involved in the subversion and overthrow of the South Vietnam government in 1963 that resulted in the murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem. The fact that this charge has not been publicly examined or investigated is no less disturbing than the charge itself. If the

charge is true, was it a field decision? Did the President know of it only after the event?

What about the degree of involvement by the United States in the attempt to overthrow the constitutionally elected Laotian government of Souvanna Phouma in 1960? This action precipitated a civil war, with the United States in the astounding position of underwriting both armies. What is the responsibility of American citizens for the deaths of thousands of human beings in Laos during that phase of the war? Had the President been consulted? Either way, when and how did it become the business of men acting for the United States to engage in sabotage and subversion?

IS it felt that the only way to cope with totalitarian and revolutionary world forces is to maintain undercover operations of our own, with power to unhinge governments or otherwise engage in secret mischief, or to turn over to the military substantial autonomy of decision in matters affecting the position of the United States in the world? If so, we badly misread history. It is impossible to find men wise enough to be entrusted with that kind of power. Such power engulfs men and makes decisions of its own.

What is most ironic is that the United States Government was itself designed by thinkers who knew that men and raw power don't go together. This to them was the most important lesson in history.

The Philadelphia Constitutional Convention was an exercise in the control and distribution of power. More than any collective undertaking in history, that convention tried to create a structure of government in which even the best men would be kept separated from power that could be used capriciously or wilfully and therefore dangerously. The best way to protect citizens against abuses of power by men in government was to circumscribe the power, define it, refine it, subordinate it to law and due process. This design was good enough to create a system of government that has been in continuous operation longer than any other in the world.

THE notion that we can best cope with threats to our security or to world security by setting up vast cloak-and-dagger operations, or by creating authority outside the framework of the constitutional government, is itself a threat to the freedom of the American people. We cannot engage in subversion abroad without subverting the history and institutions of the United States.

There is something far more menacing to the United States than any lack of undercover power or restrictions on the policy-making powers of our agencies, military or otherwise. What is most menacing of all is the lack of respect for the moral principles that affect our station in the world. What the world's peoples think about the United States is in the end the most important factor affecting our world leadership capabilities and our security. Why should it have been necessary for Michael Stewart, British Foreign Secretary, to remind the United States that "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind" should have precluded the use of chemical weapons in Vietnam? How is it possible that government officials, if the *New York Times's* report is correct, were "surprised" by the world outrage which followed the disclosure that the United States was using gas, however "routine" or "benevolent," as the official description had it? The kind of detachment from reality represented by this insensitivity is itself a clear and present danger. Has Communist propaganda against the United States done anything to hurt us as much as the harm we do to ourselves, as in the use of gas in Vietnam?

These things have not happened overnight. They have come into being piece by piece over a period of years. It is a denial of their own responsibility for the American people to expect that a President, upon coming into office, can deal with these problems by a single speech or stroke of the pen. The kind of power he is now called upon to tame requires all the help he can get. This means public opinion. This is the way America works, if we want it to work. —N.C.