

*The Roots of Our Trouble*

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HOW HAVE WE MANAGED to imprison ourselves in this series of dilemmas? One reason is a resurgence of old illusions — the illusion of American omnipotence and the illusion of American omniscience.

Our rejection of the views of our friends and allies — our conviction, as Paul H. Smith has put it, "that we alone are qualified to be judge, jury and executioner" — ignores Madison's solemn warning in the 63rd Federalist:

An attention to the judgment of other nations is important to every government for two reasons: the one is that independently of the merits of any particular plan or measure, it is desirable, on various accounts, that it should appear to other nations as the offspring of a wise and honorable policy; the second is that in doubtful cases, particularly where the national councils may be warped by some strong passion or momentary interest, the presumed or known opinion of the impartial world may be the best guide that can be followed. What has not America lost by her want of character with foreign nations; and how many errors and follies would she not have avoided, if the justice and propriety of her measures had, in every instance, been previously tried by the light in which they would probably appear to be the unbiased part of mankind.

Or, as President Kennedy said many years later: "We must face the fact that the United States is neither omnip-

otent nor omniscient — that we are only six per cent of the world's population — that we cannot impose our will on the other ninety-four per cent of mankind — that we cannot right every wrong or reverse each adversity — and that therefore there cannot be an American solution to every world problem."

We have not only lost a sense of the limitations on our power but also our understanding of the uses of power. Understanding of power implies above all precision in its application. We have moved away from the subtle strategy of 'flexible response' under which the level of American force was graduated to meet the level of enemy threat. The triumph of this discriminate employment of power was, of course, the Cuban missile crisis (where the Joint Chiefs, as usual, urged an air assault on the missile bases). But President Johnson, for all his formidable abilities, has shown no knack for discrimination in his use of power. His technique is to try and overwhelm his adversary — as in the Dominican Republic and Vietnam — by piling on all forms of power without regard to the nature of the threat. His greatest weakness is his susceptibility to overkill.

Given this weakness, it is easy to see why the application of force in Vietnam has been surrendered to the workings of what an acute observer of the Johnson foreign policy, Philip Geyelin, calls "the escalation machine." This machine is, in effect, the momentum in the decision-making system which keeps on enlarging the war "for reasons only marginally related to military need."

The very size of the American military presence thus