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The Third Figure In the Asian Tour

By Marquis Childs

WITH PRESIDENT JOHNSON — Of the No. 1 in this troupe there can be no question. The President of the United States on tour, whether in Hawaii or New Zealand, is on stage 24 hours a day.

Nor of the No. 2 can there be much doubt. Mrs. Johnson with her unfailing warmth, her graciousness and her reputation for conversation and the advancement of beauty in the environment is an unfailing counterpoise to the ceaseless movement of her husband.

These are the principals in the public view. A No. 3 at the level just below might well be Walt Whitman Rostow, the President's adviser on security affairs. While he is never seen, it is hardly stretching a point to say that he is frequently heard.

Insofar as this journey around the Pacific has a serious content other than the promotion of good will, it is supplied by Rostow. He is a brilliant theoretician with an extensive grounding in China and Asian policy in general. His principal work in economics has had to do with the underdeveloped countries and the takeoff point when with sufficient infusion of outside aid they begin to increase production at a rate hitherto considered impossible.

BUT, as important as Rostow's intellectual contribution is his temperament, which in a striking way complements that of the President. Rostow is a practicing optimist. His unfailing, and many would say uncritical, conviction that America is following the right course in Asia reinforces the President's own zeal. As he sits out of the line of view listening to the President deliver a speech, Rostow's face has the look of the happy collaborator who has found a commitment to action which, as a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he surely could never have dreamed of.

It would be an oversimplification to say that what the President proposes as he moves from country to country is a Marshall Plan for Asia. But that is what many Asians draw from the words of hope and cheer that he spreads with his unflagging and, it would often seem, unquenchable and unrestrained energy. The speech that he delivered at the East-West Center in Honolulu had the unmistakable stamp of Rostow. The President talked about the International Education Act, which he said he would sign in the course of his Pacific journey. He announced that he was directing Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare John Gardner to begin work immediately to establish in his department a new center for educational cooperation which is to advance the aims of the act. And, on top of this, the President proposed a world conference on education to be held in 1967.

All this is splendid and in the melting pot—the true melting pot of Asian peoples—in Hawaii it seems relevant. Hawaii, the 50th state, is enjoying a phenomenal boom that owes a lot to the Vietnam war as troops, ships, all the complex material of modern war move in and out of Honolulu's great installations. Up to perhaps half of the state's economy derives from the Federal treasury in one way or another.

BUT WHETHER these high aims have any relevance to the great impoverished masses of Asia is questionable. This is where equating Europe and the postwar American effort that renewed that continent with the vastly different circumstances of Asia seems a distortion of history. As critics of American policy in Vietnam have said, it is also a distortion to apply the terms "Munich" and "appeaser" to those who say that the United States is dangerously overcommitted in a part of the world where poverty, disease and incipient revolution are endemic.

It is here that Rostow's brilliance and the broad sweep of his concepts fit history to contemporary events with damage often to history and events. A passage in the President's speech at the East-West Center is a good illustration: "The West entered the industrial revolution earlier than the East. By this accident of history, the West commanded the tools of modern science and technology sooner than the East. Through colonialism and by other means the West intruded its then superior power into the East. And there was a reaction."

As a summary of the record of the last two centuries that is hardly recognizable history. It is good will, the friendly rhetoric that Johnson by temperament spreads so freely at home and abroad. It may produce the desired effect. It may raise hopes and aspirations that in some appreciable measure can be fulfilled. But it may rise wholly false expectations that in the light of the rapidly escalating cost of the Vietnam war cannot possibly be met. That is one of the perils of this remarkable journey.

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