

The reluctant heretic

By Ronald Steel

THE ARROGANCE OF POWER. By J. William Fulbright. Random House. 265 pp. \$4.95. Vintage paperback, \$1.95.

SENATOR FULBRIGHT: Portrait of a Public Philosopher. By Tristram Coffin. Illustrated. Dutton. 378 pp. \$6.95.

"When the proper opposition defaults," Senator J. William Fulbright writes in explanation of his revolt against the foreign policy of the Johnson Administration, "it seems to me that it is better to have the function performed by members of the President's party than not to have it performed at all." These are not the words of a natural rebel, but of a distressed idealist who has turned to heresy because it is the only alternative to silence. To reflect upon these words is to understand the poignancy of Fulbright's position as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and thus ostensibly the Administration's chief Congressional lieutenant on questions of foreign affairs. It is also to understand the anguish, and the high political courage, that this act of open rebellion must have cost such an essentially loyal and moderate man as Fulbright.

A reflective man who shuns rather than seeks the public spotlight, a party loyalist who prefers to exert influence from within, a believer in the need for strong Presidential leadership, and a political conservative whose natural sympathies are for tradition and order rather than for iconoclasm and rebellion, he has found himself cast as the leader of the Opposition. Darling of the New Left, despair of the cold war liberals, scourge of the ideologues on both Right and Left, Fulbright is not particularly happy to be the Administration's most taunting heretic. But events have forced his hand, and the agony of Viet Nam has driven him to take arms against a President he once admired and served so well. "There are times," he writes in this credo of his dissent, "in public life as in private life when one must protest, not solely or even primarily because one's protest will be politic or materially productive, but because one's sense of decency is offended, because one is fed up with political craft and public images, or simply because something goes against the grain."

It is because so much has gone against the grain that Fulbright has rebelled against the leadership of his own party, against the man who once sought his counsel and believed he should be Secretary of State, against the customary role of the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, against the beliefs that motivate much of our foreign policy, against certain aspects of the American national character, and even against much of what he himself believed in only a few years ago.

There is a dramatic story in the conversion of Senator Fulbright from Administration loyalist, faithful supporter of NATO and the Atlantic Community, defender of foreign aid, and even floor manager of the Tonkin Gulf resolution which gave the President a blank check in Viet Nam—to the position of an Administration pariah, a grudging admirer of Charles de Gaulle, an enemy of the bilateral foreign aid program, and a vehement critic of the Viet Nam war. The story of that conversion could, if put in the proper perspective, tell a good deal not only about the personality of this complex and fascinating man, but also about the traumatic effect of the Viet Nam war upon the American conscience. The war, terrible as it is in itself, has become the catalyst for a radical assault upon a good many things that Americans have taken for granted—in our foreign policy and in our domestic life as well. It has called into question the very meaning of the Ameri-



can Dream. That Fulbright should have become a spokesman for those who feel the alienation that has suffused so much of American life, is a remarkable story that ought to be told.

Unfortunately, it is not to be found in the saccharine pages of Tristram Coffin's adoring biography. Filled with descriptions of the Senator as a "modern Prometheus," a "public philosopher," and "a prophet," it presents a portrait of a man who has virtually never been wrong, and who is fighting off the forces of evil and darkness (whether they be in the form of Senator McCarthy or Dean Rusk) all by himself. This is unfair to Fulbright, whose public career is admirable enough to stand up to a fair and critical appraisal, and it is certainly unfair to readers who expect something more than campaign biography in this first full-scale portrait of the Senator from Arkansas. Instead of loving descriptions of Fulbright's charming drawl, intelligent face, and noble instincts, it might be more useful to know something about his relations to his colleagues in the Senate, to explain a voting record that is often discouraging to many of his liberal admirers, to judge his effectiveness as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, to examine the role he has played as insider in the formation of foreign policy, to investigate his ambivalent attitude toward the responsibilities and exercise of power, and to reveal, if possible, why this conservative humanist has changed so many of his earlier judgments and adopted many of the attitudes of an alienated radical.

Senator Fulbright is suspicious of power and, as a good humanist, has been reluctant to exercise it himself. But if there is an "arrogance of power," such as he has described so eloquently, is there not also an obligation of power which is incumbent upon a public official to exercise? He has exercised his obligation admirably in his recent hearings on Viet Nam and China. But might we not have been spared some of the agony of the current involvements he criticizes so well if he had embraced, rather than fled from, Kennedy's efforts to make him Secretary of State? We can never really know the answer to that question, but any comprehensive biography of this complex man should at least raise it. Mr. Coffin's book does not, and although it succeeds as panegyric, it is sadly inadequate as an examination of the personality and the public record of its subject.

To understand J. William Fulbright, one must turn to his own thoughts as expressed in his book (gleaned and expanded from speeches in the Senate and a series of lectures at Johns Hopkins University) on the use and abuse of power. Etched by a biting skepticism that often seeps over into pessimism, *The Arrogance of Power* marks the passage of Senator Fulbright from a relatively orthodox supporter of the liberal line on foreign policy to a spokesman of the post-cold-war generation. It is a book which could not have been written two years ago, before the Dominican landings and the expansion of the war in Viet Nam, for it is a direct response to them. It is a cry of anguish and of anger over the destruction we have caused in the name of righteousness, and pained rejection of the "intolerant Puritanism" that leads us to see ourselves as "God's avenging angels, whose sacred duty it is to combat evil philosophies." This Puritanism, he argues, has caused us to transform every war into a crusade, to dehumanize our opponents to justify the terrible weapons of our technology, to view communism as an unmitigated evil regardless of where or how it is practiced, and "to see principles where there are only interests and conspiracy where there is only misfortune."

In chastising the Administration for what it has done, and is doing, in Southeast Asia and Latin America, Fulbright is also calling us to task as a nation for what we are: a people continually obliged to assert authority to prove that we are great because we seem to doubt it ourselves. This is what he calls our "arrogance of power," and compares it to the fatal flaw that led the Athenians to attack Syracuse and Napoleon to invade Russia. Thus his book goes beyond a critique of foreign policy just as, on a different level, Hannah Arendt's study of Eichmann goes beyond the crimes committed by a single man to examine the sources of depersonalization and irresponsibility that affect whole societies and thus make evil actions possible.

Senator Fulbright does not view his fellow Americans as evil, but rather as (Continued on page 15)

Ronald Steel is the author of *The End of Alliance (Viking)* and a study of interventionism, *Pax Americana*, to be published by Viking this spring.

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people caught in the grip of a deep insecurity and intoxicated by the passions of a distorted messianism. Indeed, in his mind, there are two Americas: "One is the America of Lincoln and Adlai Stevenson; the other is the America of Teddy Roosevelt and the modern superpatriots . . . one is judicious and the other arrogant in the use of power." This arrogance comes out in times of crisis and overcomes the fundamentally decent instincts of Americans, causing us to see our extraordinary strength as a sign of superior virtue and leading us to impose our will on other societies. Fulbright sees arrogance in the behavior of Americans abroad, in our interventions in support of various client regimes, in our assumption that other societies have only to follow our example to be wise and prosperous, in our refusal to let others have their own revolutions, in our attempt to create a global Great Society on the American model. This is the kind of arrogance, he warns, that induces "those fatal temp-

tations of power which have ruined other great nations."

In a real sense, this is a work of alienation, one that expresses the corrosive distrust so many Americans feel toward their own government. Reaching across to the angry young radicals, Fulbright defends their dissent by declaring that "criticism is an act of patriotism," recognizes their disenchantment with the values of their society, and questions "whether the sacrifices imposed on the present generation of young Americans are justified by the war" in Viet Nam. He raises problems that are more comfortably left unsaid, offers explanations that do not flatter our national ego, and poses alternatives that challenge the cold war mentality.

Some of the ground is familiar: the blistering attack upon the Dominican intervention as an exercise in duplicity, designed "for the primary if not the sole purpose of defeating the revolution," an appeal for sympathy with popular revolutions even where Communists are involved, a warning against the "welfare imperialism" of our bilateral foreign aid program, and an appeal to turn away from an excessive preoccupation with foreign wars and foreign crises toward the demands of our own neglected society. The great demands of the Viet Nam war are particularly troubling to him because they have taken energies away from the Great Society programs at home and appear to be inducing a "war fever" in certain segments of the population. The latter is an arguable proposition, just as is his assumption that Viet Nam has imperiled our accommodation with the Soviet Union. One of the most remarkable facets of the war is the agility with which the Administration has been able to keep its lines open to Moscow even while bombing its Asian ally. If the wielders of power are arrogant, they have yet shown no signs of folly in trying to imperil the detente—and indeed President Johnson's policy toward Europe has been exceedingly enlightened.

The Arrogance of Power may be a fitting description of our attitude toward much of the world, but it does not really explain the terrible sacrifices we have undertaken on behalf of our clients, nor the relative benevolence and restraint with which America has exercised her enormous power. The reality is more complex, more puzzling, and perhaps more elusive than that. Fulbright has done a service by forcing

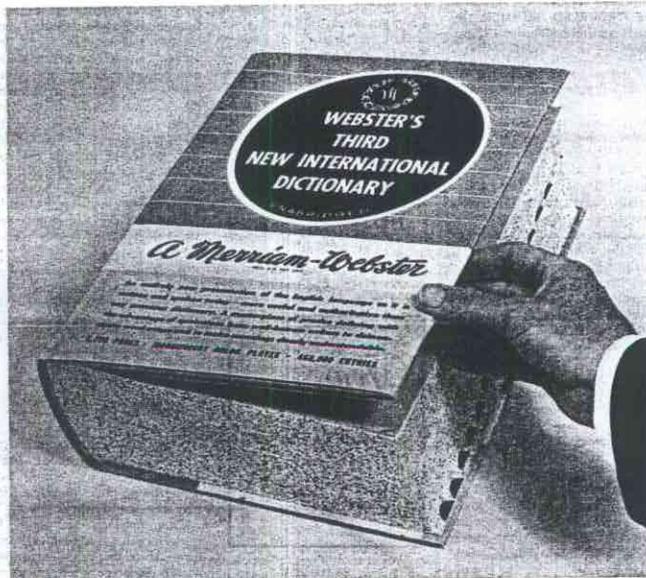
us to re-examine our assumptions.

Foreign policy in a free society is not only, as Senator Fulbright observes, a reflection of domestic policy. It is also a reflection of the countervailing forces within that society, and of the impact of public opinion on the government. The value of a book such as *The Arrogance of Power* is that through its pages Fulbright can reach and affect

an audience that can change our foreign policy. He can do this because of his unique position as chairman of a Senate committee whose full powers he is only just beginning to explore, as a respected member of the intellectual Establishment with a worldwide reputation, and as a basically conservative legislator. The Administration is not impervious to criticism, particularly when it comes from such

people as J. William Fulbright and Walter Lippmann. There may be arrogance in our attitude toward power, but there is also deep anguish throughout the nation over the use of our power. Senator Fulbright has helped to focus and to channel this anguish into constructive criticism that may yet lead to the changes he desires. Therein lies the courage of his dissent and the importance of this book.

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