Book World 10-17-71 Rut to KW for Tiger

A new radicalism of reason

Condemned to Freedom

By William Pfaff
Random House. 210 pp.
$6.95; paper, $1.95

Reviewed by
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The most disquieting revelation in the Pentagon Papers, to me at least, is not that our government deceived the American people, but that it deceived itself. It did so by sealing its ears to rising criticism as it embarked on the most senseless and morally dubious foreign adventure in our history. It was not brains our rulers lacked so much as a hearing-aid.

We are now blandly assured that all those plans for escalating the Vietnam War were simply "contingency plans" in the unhappy event it became necessary to destroy the country we wished to defend. Fair enough. But where were the contingency plans for the opposing course, for peace through negotiated withdrawal?

It is important to recall that in the crucial years 1964-65 objections to the widening war were not confined to bearded freaks. Week in and out, Walter Lippmann was posing arguments that are today commonplace about the follies of globalism. In *The New York Times*, David Halberstam had exposed the fatuity of official assurances about the war's military progress. Abroad, de Gaulle was saying aloud what other foreign leaders confided in private—that the war was unwinnable, given its nature, and that the wisest course was a political settlement based on neutralization of South Vietnam.

But on the evidence of the Pentagon Papers, these arguments were hardly made, much less seriously considered, where it counted. George Ball appears to have been the sole significant dissenter, but if one can judge by the Pentagon documents his doubts were cautiously expressed and almost ritually ventured—one senses that L.B.J. was grateful to Ball for making his mild dissent for the record, and then causing so little trouble about it.

Yet there was also dissent within the cold war intellectual establishment. William Pfaff is an outstanding example. He is an Iowa-born Catholic schooled at Notre Dame, a veteran of the Special Forces in the Korean War, a one-time executive of the Free Europe Committee, and since 1951 a staff analyst of the Hudson Institute, the think tank headed by Dr. Herman Kahn—not, one would imagine, the credentials of a New

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Leftist.

During the 1960s Pfaff collaborated with Edmund Stillman on three books which scathingly attacked the pieties of the cold war, warning prophetically (in *The New Politics*, published in 1961):

> To persist in the old apocalyptic struggle would be to invite terrifying retribution—a sterility, a poverty of response that are the sure marks of an atrophied and dying culture.

We persisted; retribution came. As an unheard voice then, Pfaff surely deserves an audience now. In *Condemned to Freedom* (an admirable title, by the way), Pfaff has expanded and sharpened his earlier arguments into what he describes as a "manifesto for a new radicalism of reason." But refreshingly unlike most manifestoes, his does not shout. It reasons.

If one can compress a subtle and complex argument, Pfaff contends that the root of our crisis is a collapse of popular faith in the legitimacy and competence of our political rulers. In foreign affairs, the cold war has become a squalid racket, in which disastrous interventionism in Asia is justified in effusions of implausible virtue, while elsewhere we have become the tacit ally of the Soviet Union, a relationship made explicit in the lack of American response to the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In Pfaff's mordant words:

> The old contenders, in half-hearted battle, are also half in alliance with one another to defy the forces of change and renewal. Together they present a bleakly reactionary spectacle.

This is one irony, that nations which once deemed themselves implacable ideological rivals are now in an unspoken unholy alliance; in Pfaff's terms, the president's new China policy can be read as an attempt to recruit Peking into the superpower club, at the expense of small fry like Taipei and Hanoi. Whether the calculation works, whether Dr. Kissinger is a new Metternich, remains to be seen.

A second irony is domestic: American liberalism, once a beleaguered faith, has become all-pervasive at just the time when its prescriptions can be seen to be hollow failures. The cure to our racial agony is not simply "integration," and the problem of poverty cannot be solved simply by a paternalistic administration handing out more money. Even the conservative opposition, Pfaff argues, is caught up in the spurious and simplistic attitudes of liberalism. What has passed for American conservatism, he maintains, is not conservative at all:

> It is a peculiar American inversion of liberalism, a caricature of liberalism which, like antimatter, exists only by virtue of what it opposes. It displays the identical optimism, the same naive historicism, the same conviction of American moral pre-eminence and mission to the world, the same ultimately materialist values as the worst of the American liberalism it purports to despise.

As in many such indictments, Pfaff is more eloquently negative than he is credibly positive. Surely it is an anticlimax to propose decentralization as a sovereign remedy—though, to be fair, Pfaff cautions that we should abandon any excessive hopes for a purely political solution to our moral crisis. He also argues that our rulers must take into greater account the dissent that rages around them.

It is not enough for a government to speak for the majority—the German Nazis and the Italian Fascists could both claim that they did—for a government must open its ears, if not its heart, to the minority. One vainly wishes that this had happened in 1964-65; one also wishes that at least one high official had resigned on principle as a senseless war became an immoral war. None did. That is part of our American tragedy. □