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Pete Hamill

END OF THE ERA

It is somehow fitting that Richard Nixon, the emptiness champion of the world, should have come to power at precisely the moment when it became necessary to declare the end of the American Era. An empty man recognizes emptiness, and the United States has come up empty.

There is no reason to rejoice in this development. There actually was a time when this was a younger, more selfless nation; when it seemed possible that our deeds would actually match our rhetoric. We thought we would bring technology to the far corners of the earth; we would defeat hunger and humiliation; we would demonstrate that a nation of free men could construct the earthly paradise. America was going to be the nation that was different; it would use power for the common weal; it would not seek empires or the domination of strangers. It would be the first Great Power with clean hands. As recently as Jan. 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy could say in his Inaugural Address:

"Let every nation know, whether it wish us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty."

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Those words were specious nonsense then (we were not, after all, paying any price, bearing any burden, or meeting any hardship to assure the survival and success of liberty in Spain, Portugal, South Korea, South Africa, Formosa and other boroughs of the "Free World"). But no rational American could even write them today with any confidence, never mind utter them from a public

platform in Washington.

Those were words that were actually forged in the 1950s, and they came from the sense of mission that the United States brought out of the Second World War. That sense of mission, and the confidence that underlay it, have now vanished. Americans have killed too many peasants in Asia, destroyed too many villages in order to save them.

So ten years later, Nixon is pulling back. He is pulling back, one can assume, not because of passionate beliefs, but because his political instincts tell him that the people of America want to pull back. A number of Americans are ashamed of what we have become in the world since the end of World War II.

The country that defeated the Nazis cannot be very proud of its Calleys. There is something in the American character that simply will not accept the machine-gunning of babies as an ordinary act of war, no matter how villainous the propagandists make the enemy.

But perhaps more than that is the sense of exhaustion in the country. You simply can no longer tell a man from Corona that his son must be drafted to join a standing Army of almost 300,000 Americans stationed in Europe when Great Britain, a nation those troops are protecting, has managed to abolish the draft. You simply can no longer tell a New Yorker that he must be responsible for half the globe when he looks down his street and sees Brownsville rotting in the sun.

We have been the most generous nation on the earth, but the generosity

became more and more distorted as the empty game of anti-Communism played itself out; we started with the Marshall Plan and ended up sending guns to West Pakistan instead of contraceptives and food. Those guns were used to slaughter the people of East Pakistan. More and more, our presence in parts of the world was seen as malignant and dangerous. It stood for power and nothing else. And many Americans became sick, finally, of being the men in the black hats. Moral responsibility, like generosity, finally became exhausted.

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So the 10 per cent surcharge on foreign goods, the devaluation of the dollar, the abandonment of the commitment to the gold standard (can any President ever again speak so solemnly about our commitments?) are part of a drawing-in. In effect, we are saying to the world: "Look, we tried. We started out with good intentions but somewhere along the way we messed up. Now, for a while, we're going to stay home. We're going to build that playroom we've talked about for 20 years and never built because we were off at some meeting. We're going to plant that garden. We're going to get the kids' teeth fixed and go out and buy a new suit. We're going to fix the leak in the roof and re-pave the driveway. We're going to get ourselves together. We're going to take care of our own kind. We can't lend you anything for now, because we're tapped out. We had our time. Now we're just another family on the block, no better and no worse than anyone else. In a few years, if you want to come around, you're welcome."

That might be a return to isolationism, but it is probably only a pause, a recognition that it's time to start thinking about ourselves. That Richard Nixon took the first steps in this direction is a small wonder, but not really a surprise. Republicans understand bankruptcy better than the rest of us.