

18 May 70

MONDAY

JOSEPH ALSOP

Sen. Kennedy Replies To Alsop's Open Letter

(Editor's note: The Joseph Alsop column which appeared on this page May 13 was in the form of an open letter to Sen. Edward Kennedy. Sen. Kennedy today replies to columnist Alsop.)

Dear Joe:

I have never before replied to an open letter with an open letter—but I agree with you that the times demand some rules be broken.

Though I am flattered that you imply I may have the capacity to bring this land to some unanimity of view in these difficult moments, neither I nor anyone else except the President can bring this nation together. And he can do so only by ending the war. It should be understood by now that the turmoil in America created by Vietnam results not from a public misunderstanding but from deep and personal convictions of right and wrong. I must say, without qualification, that I fully and openly protest against what has now become the war in Indochina. I am sure you feel that in taking this position I have allied myself with the naive, the idealistic and the young. I ally myself with no one, and I seek no one to join with me.

I simply protest the war and its consequences, as one person who has obligations of office, some sense of the responsibilities memory has placed upon me and as a man who has not escaped the "harshnesses of the historic process."

"Political lunacy" it was that brought upon us the events of the past two weeks. Yet I would not place that charge against those who came to Washington but on those who caused them to come here. As a nation we have had enough of war, and death, and divisiveness.

What Goal, What Prize?

What goal do we have in mind, what prize so enviable that this great nation must pursue Asians through endless jungles, across borders, in and out of their burning villages to give and take human life?

Do we do these things in 1970 for trucks and rice, rifles and bunkers, some mythical Pentagon in the forests? Or do some among our military or political leadership still suffer the illusion that a military victory can be won in Vietnam? Unfortunately, I must conclude, all public statements aside, that the motivation to move into Cambodia was the latter.

The continuation of these acts, if justifiable at all, could only be morally defended if the vital security interests and welfare of the people of the United States of America were at stake. I do not believe that they are. Nor do I believe that it was the very survival of our country that involved us in this tragedy in the first place.

At this late date, then, how can one persist in asking the American people, and especially the young, to support this war as just another painful incident in history made necessary by some grand and mystical design?

Archaic Definition

How can we ask the American people to keep a stiff upper lip, to wait out what many consider an immoral war, in the hope that one day it will be clear to all how thousands and thousands of innocent and combatant deaths were necessary to satisfy some archaic definition of the Great Power burden?

If those thoughts had persisted in us, even in the face of this great error in Vietnam, the Cambodian adventure should have cut all that. Cambodia should have shown us that no foreign adventure, for whatever reason short of national survival, is worth the threatened destruction of American institutions and traditional checks on presidential discretion.

And so perhaps we have now learned that what once was rationalized, in the atmosphere of a decade ago, as an attempt to maintain a balance in the game of world power politics has deteriorated into a monumental and historic catastrophe. Now we know it was an error—and now we must not only end it, but never commit that error again.

We cannot, in essence, so fear tomorrow and our ability as men to assure peace on this planet that we must constantly be at war—always striving, never reaching, always professing a desire for a higher order of life, never relying upon the higher instincts within us to attain it.

Question of Survival

It is, then, this question of America's survival that divides you and me. You attempt to draw an inverse relationship between United States and Soviet Union actions, i.e., as we show weakness in Vietnam or on our own campuses, Russia shows a greater boldness in her actions in the world. I would draw a direct relationship that maintains:

—The longer we remain bogged down in Southeast Asia, with periodic escalations that only serve to involve us deeper, the more latitude the Soviet Union feels in her Middle East adventures;

—The greater the growth in our military budget and preoccupation with things of war, the greater the growth in Soviet concerns with such matters;

—The louder the official noise and the more conflicting the arguments for an ABM system or Polaris or MIRV program, the more numerous the Russian implacements of nuclear missiles and construction of missile-bearing submarines;

—The more we escalate in Vietnam, the more the Soviet Union escalates her activities there.

In my view, it was our escalation in Southeast Asia that brought an end to the favorable developments that could have followed from the nuclear test ban agreement.

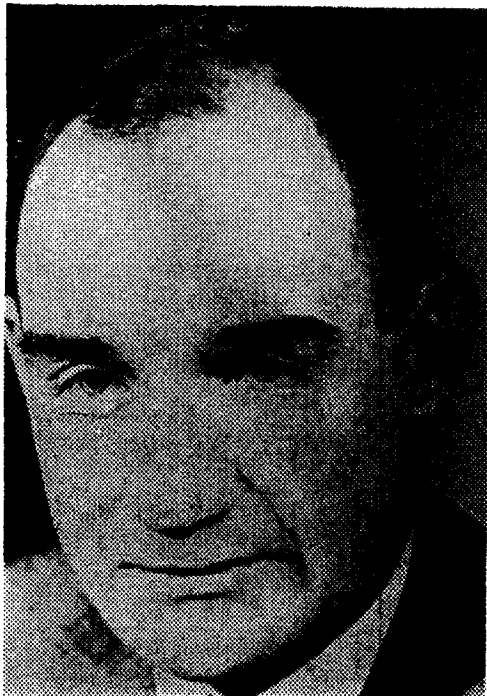
I Cannot be Deterred

So it is that I cannot be deterred from my abhorrence of the Vietnamese War by the argument that our extrication from it

means that America must assume the blame for the death of Jews in Israel: The strange logic that says that every Asian child who dies becomes a ghostly messenger to Moscow, warning the marshals of the Soviet Union that they must go easy on the banks of the Suez.

If it is Russia that we are now fighting in Indochina, then the American people should be so informed by their President. Then we will be forced to face at last the moral question of Great Powers destroying third countries to avoid the possibility of dealing with or facing each other.

On another level I do believe America's survival is involved in this awful war—her survival not within the family of the world,



KENNEDY AND ALSOP
Old Friends Exchange Letters

but within her own borders. As one of the most perceptive observers of the domestic scene, you must recognize the deterioration taking place in our society, among young people and between the age groups.

But we are a nation constantly being reborn, and we can thank our God that those newly arrived in our society will not casually accept the views and presumptions of their fathers, much less their errors. They do not protest their "country's successes on the battlefield," doubtful as those successes may be; they protest the very existence of the battlefield, for it has no place in their vision of the country that is to be theirs. And I support them in that.

'Sniff . . . of Tyranny'

When we were young, and struggling as a collection of colonies to go our own way, to make our own political choices, we had a spokesman in the English Parliament who supported our effort not out of affection but from a conviction and deep faith that the affairs of the world could be met by means other than stark violence.

He viewed the Colonialists in the prophetic terms that could apply to many in America today: "They augur misgovernment at a distance; and sniff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze."

In pleading before his king and country to allow our colonies to be free of England's domination without having to pass through the crucible of war, Edmund Burke said:

The proposition is peace. Not peace through the medium of war; not peace to be hunted through the labyrinth of endless negotiations; not peace to arise out of universal discord . . . ; not peace to depend on the juridical determination of perplexing questions; or the precise marking the shadowy boundaries of a complex government. It is simple peace; sought in its natural course, and in its ordinary haunts—it is peace sought in the spirit of peace; and laid in principles purely pacific.

I wish to conclude on a note as personal as can be carried in an open letter. I have long valued our friendship, and I mean to keep it. There are in America today enough people by half not talking, communicating or understanding each other. And I am mindful of the respect that President Kennedy and my brother Robert had for you.

You are quite right in noting that President Kennedy did not hold the view that our country is immune from history's dangers. I would only add that while holding that view he also never doubted that the future could be different.

Your Friend, Ted.