

The Ideology of War

By TOM WICKER

On March 19, 1968, not long after the great Tet offensive in Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson went before the National Foreign Policy Conference to declare:

"Danger and sacrifice built this land, and today we are the Number One nation. And we are going to stay the Number One nation."

On April 30, 1972, while the North Vietnamese spring offensive is still going forward, President Richard M. Nixon went to the Texas ranch of John Connally and told an audience of millionaires that in Vietnam "in the final analysis what is really on the line is the position of the United States as the strongest nation in the world."

At the Connally ranch, Mr. Nixon also observed that a Communist victory in Vietnam would cause the office of the Presidency to "lose respect" in the eyes of the world. This was a repetition from his recent television speech in which he said that "if the United States betrays the millions of people who have relied on us in Vietnam, the President of the United States, whoever he is, will not deserve nor receive the respect which is essential. . . ."

These remarks about "respect" may put some in mind of "The Godfather," that other hard-nosed commander in chief and "man of respect." In the Godfather's world too, maintaining "respect" was usually a matter of willingness to use force.

That is a comparison that may seem shocking, but interesting light is shed on it in a new book, "The Roots of War," by Richard J. Barnet. Mr. Barnet observes that history repeatedly demonstrates how "individuals get medals, promotions and honors by committing the same acts for the state for which they would be hanged or imprisoned in other circumstances."

And he quotes Cavour: "If we did for ourselves what we did for our country, what rascals we should all be."

But the passage about "respect" in Mr. Nixon's television speech continued: ". . . respect which is essential if the United States is to continue to play the great role we are destined to play of helping to build a new structure of peace in the world." And that has to be read against his remark in Texas about "the strongest nation in the world," which so nearly duplicates Lyndon Johnson's statement about "the Number One nation."

Mr. Barnet's book suggests that it is no accident that two Presidents so outwardly different as Mr. Johnson and Mr. Nixon should state such similar conceptions of the nation's place in the world; indeed, they only echoed the statements of most of the foreign policy leaders of the post-World War II era. It is Mr. Barnet's thesis that

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the society, economy and Government of the United States has determined American foreign policy in that period, and that—contrary to popular belief—that policy has not been a necessary and virtuous response to the challenges of other countries.

As the first of three primary "roots of war," Mr. Barnet sees what he calls a "national security bureaucracy which increasingly comes to play by its own rules without regard to what it does to the country it is supposed to be defending." This "small, durable and exclusive club" fashioned and enforced a national-security orthodoxy based on the forceful assertion of American interests, when necessary.

The club's origins in the highest levels of business and finance meant that the second of the three "roots of war," the capitalist economy, could exert influence almost without trying. That was important, Mr. Barnet writes, because "as long as the American economic imperative is growth," the need for raw materials, markets and new jobs decrees that "the pressures toward economic expansion and military presence abroad will be irresistible."

The third root of war, in the Barnet thesis, is "the vulnerability of the public to manipulation on national security issues." Confronted with the orthodoxy and commitments of the national security bureaucracy, most Americans have been willing to acquiesce and believe—particularly because bureaucratic decisions customarily have been cloaked in the "national interest" and put forward through the supposed majesty and authority of the Presidency, that almost mystical office toward which every American is coached to show undeviating "respect."

Even so, it has been necessary to have a guiding ideology to explain and maintain support for a policy that has involved the United States, since 1945, in military or paramilitary operations in Greece, Iran, Guatemala, Indonesia, Lebanon, Laos, Cuba, the Congo, British Guiana, the Dominican Republic and Vietnam. That ideology has been and still is the necessity for the nation to be "Number One" and "the strongest in the world"—not, it is always explained, for its own selfish benefit, but so that it could, as Mr. Nixon most recently put it, "play the great role we are destined to play of helping to build a new structure of peace in the world."

Dean Rusk used to call it "organizing the peace." Anyway you phrase it, it means managing the world.