

# America and the World: II

By ANTHONY LEWIS

## AT HOME ABROAD

LONDON, June 13 — The United States has no more admiring or understanding friends than the British officials and politicians who have dealt with us over the years on international questions. In the face of increasing American self-doubt, they have held to their belief in the strength of our society and in our willingness to bear responsibilities abroad.

It is striking, therefore, to find these Britons expressing concern about the American outlook. When they and their wives cross the Atlantic for a visit now, they return troubled about the decay of American cities and about the discouragement of their American friends. They understand, but they worry over what it may mean for the world.

"You are quite right to think about yourselves for a while," a former Cabinet minister said the other day. "You will not be able to do anything unless you get your own society right. But the turning inward may go too far."

A particularly gloomy view has been expressed by Prof. Peter Wiles of London University. In *International Affairs*, The Chatham House journal, he says that the United States has lost what a country must have to play a world role—"a great historic righteousness." Americans have come to discover "the weight of sheer evil in the nation's past" and are "reeling under its impact."

Professor Wiles believes the American system of liberal democracy will right itself at home. "Their system will save the U. S. people in spite of themselves," he says. "But we must consider whether in the process the panicky crew of this excellent ship will not throw a little ballast overboard. Might not that ballast be all present foreign policies? If so, where is our life-jacket?"

The overboard image may be exaggerated in its pungency, but the problem is certainly a fundamental one for the near future in American politics: Can the public, wiser, more skeptical, but still generous, be brought once again to accept the responsibilities that go with power?

Here the painful, wearying subject of Vietnam inevitably arises. For it is a Vietnam problem: We are turning inward in reaction against the moral cost of that war. The necessary beginning to the re-creation of American confidence in the world is to liquidate the cost of Vietnam.

To do that, some think we must admit that the American role in Viet-

nam has been criminal from the start—a genocidal Pentagon conspiracy. But that view will not make the American spirit hold, for hardly anyone will believe it.

The truth that has to be accepted about Vietnam is more complicated. Our part in the war was a blunder that turned into a crime; we got into it from the best motives, with all the old American righteousness. Now we have to learn the extremely bitter lesson that good motives are not enough. Even Americans can fight a bad war, an unjustified war.

What we have done has been unjustified as a matter of proportion, of means and ends. Even if the enemy were some simple devil labeled "world Communism," which he is not, his defeat would not have been worth our making millions of Indochinese peasants refugees, poisoning their crops and forests, bombing in millions of tons—and exposing our own young men to death or to loss of belief.

That is the cost we must liquidate. We must learn that the United States cannot properly—or effectively—use the weight of its military technology in a guerrilla war. We must learn that an American conscript army cannot fight a war of that kind, in a place and circumstances remote from real interests of national security.

In short, we must recognize that our part of the Vietnam war has been a moral failure — and will remain so whether or not it ends with Nguyen Van Thieu or some other anti-Communist still in power in Saigon.

That is where history will fault President Nixon and his adviser on Vietnam policy, Henry Kissinger. Mr. Nixon is undoing his predecessor's central strategic error, the commitment of American ground forces. But he has not been wise — the correct word may be big — enough to admit the moral failure of the whole enterprise. Instead, the Nixon-Kissinger policy is to go on talking simplicities about defending freedom.

The irony is that the American public does not believe any of that about Vietnam anymore. Most of the people know well enough that the cost to American society, not even counting the Indochinese, can never be justified. They are waiting for a leader to tell them that truth. Until then, until the lies about Vietnam stop, Americans will go on feeling doubtful about all responsibilities in the world, will continue turning in on themselves.

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