COMMENT

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On History, Foolishness

By John Kenneth Galbraith

Following are excerpts from an address by John Kenneth Galbraith given earlier this year when he received an award in political economy at Memphis State University in Tennessee. Mr. Galbraith, former Ambassador to India and author of "Economics and the Public Purpose," recently retired as professor of economics at Harvard.

In these last weeks I've come to wonder if historians are not the needed resource in our time. We've been treating our misfortunes in Vietnam as though they were a peculiarly modern and American disaster. They are, in fact, merely the last in a long and remarkably consistent historical experience.

It is now just under 900 years since Trans-Alpine Europeans began extending the beneficence of their presence to the lesser races without the law. Then, as still, they saw themselves as the custodians of higher civilized values and the progenitors and evangelists of these values.

The first effort was, of course, the First Crusade, the beginning of an enterprise which continued, though with diminishing enthusiasm, for nearly four hundred years. Repeatedly it was reported back to Rome that there was light at the end of that tunnel. The Kingdom of Jerusalem, so quickly gained and so soon lost, would be redeemed. Since 1096, Austrians, Spaniards, French, British, Dutch, Belgians, Swedes, Danes, Russians, Germans, Portuguese and Italians have answered the call to a civilizing mission beyond their borders. The urge among non-Europeans has been shared by Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Japanese and Americans.

All of these efforts over all of these nine centuries have had three features in common. All have avowed some religious, cultural, moral, legal or other spiritual benefit for the people toward whom the effort was directed. All have involved, often with some tactful disguise, some element of economic interest for the country extending the benefit. All have ended in failure.

> *"There was the admixture of idealism and economic interest."*

The combination of high purpose and lower economic interest has been especially constant. The Crusades, as every schoolchild knows, were to protect the Eastern Christians from the Turks and to redeem Jerusalem from the infidel. But Urban II, preaching the First Crusade in Clermont in 1095, did not omit to mention that there was a lot of excellent land in that part of the world only awaiting occupation by the Christians. As men knelt to take the cross, there was a companion obeisance to the thought of good real estate.

The Spaniards combined a concern for extending the sway of the holy Catholic Church with an even more compelling interest in increasing their cash flow of silver and gold. The British sought to bring the rule of law, the benefits of sound government to Indians and Africans while bringing the trade of these peoples to London, Liverpool and Bristol. The American aim in Puerto Rico and the Philippines was deemed wholly selfless and benign and exclusively to assist subject peoples suddenly, almost accidentally, liberated from Spain. But it is not without importance that these islands were soon extensively covered with sugar plantations, mostly under continental ownership.

Except by a sycophantic minority that allied itself socially, politically or culturally with the paramount power, this civilizing effort was rarely appreciated; this was true even when the motives were exceptionally pure or the rule better by some standard than what preceded it.

India, in the last century, was an exceedingly well-governed country. In efficiency, honesty, stability, safety of person and property the British administration was a quantum step on from the contentious, corrupt and predacious despotisms that it replaced. To this day what was British India—that governed directly by the British Raj—is perceptibly more prosperous than that which was governed indirectly through the princes — the Nabobs, the Nizam, the Rajahs and the Maharajahs. This did not save British rule.

One must assume that the Soviets, after World War II, had a moral interest in extending socialism. This did not make them more welcome in Yugoslavia, China, Czechoslovakia, Algeria, Albania, Ghana and Egypt.

We did not, after World War II, seek directly to govern people distant from our shores. Like the Soviets we were too wise for that. Like the Soviets we proclaimed our aversion to colonial rule. But no less than other powers we sought to guide the political and economic development of other lands. No less than the colonial powers we sought to shape these developments to our own preference, which is to say our own image.

Our technique, in fact, bore a marked resemblance to that of Britain in the princely states of India—to what, in a less ambiguous age, was called indirect rule.

In Indochina, happily the extreme case, we supported rulers of our preference if not our choice. We worried, as did the British, about their behavior. On occasion as the paramount power we dismissed them if they were too bad. (Our standards were, however, more tolerant than those of the Raj; once in Junagadh state in western India it dismissed an animal-loving Nabob for staging an unduly elaborate wedding between two dogs named Roshana and Bobby. About 50,000 attended the ceremony, not counting the dogs.)

We surrounded our Nabobs with advisers—Lodge, Taylor, Bunker, Graham Martin. These were the modern, though perhaps more permissive, equivalent of the British Resident at the princely court. We armed our men against their indigenous enemies and like the British supplied supporting force of our own. We further sought their fealty, if not in the case of General Thieu their enduring gratitude, by providing massive subsidies. We did depart from the British model in one respect. They spoke of colonialism; we said always that we were securing the independence of the people in question.

As also over the 900-year history there was the admixture of idealism and economic interest. Freedom—freedom from the discipline and the coercion that few doubt is a feature of Communist administration — was the motivating ideal.

I've never thought that the companion economic interest was the direct profit of American corporations. They were doing quite well without the war. The stock market invariably went up on news of peace. I spent much of 1968 raising money for the antiwar campaign of Eugene McCarthy. By far the largest part of our support came from businessmen, the largest contributions being from Wall Street.

But Americans were moved by the belief that to preserve free enterprise

and Vietnam

in the United States we had to act to preserve it everywhere else. Let one country succumb and more would be threatened. It was a proposition that was without merit. What happens in Vietnam has no appreciable bearing on what happens in Europe or the United States. Whether a poor, rural society calls itself Communist or capitalist makes little difference. It is a poor, rural society in either case. Only a very sensitive ideologist, walking through a Laotian jungle, can tell whether it is a free-enterprise jungle or a socialist jungle. But this was not the point. We had persuaded ourselves of this interest.

In keeping with all the history we were rejected. In light of the history we should hardly be surprised.

You will ask why, in relation to Hanoi, the Chinese and Russians did better. One answer is that they were wiser: No Chinese or Russian troops were sent; no great body of advisers debouched; there was a Pentagon East but no Kremlin East. To this day we do not know which country, China or the Soviet Union, was more influential in North Vietnam. They weren't thrown out because they weren't there.

We do know that where the Soviet influence and presence have been strong the experience has been similar to our own. In Yugoslavia, China, Algeria, Egypt, the Soviets have been thrown out. I once asked a Soviet journalist what they did with their failed Yugoslav, Albanian, Chinese and Egyptian strategists. Did they, following our humane practice, send them back to teach wisdom to the young? Were they available for thoughtful seminars at some Bolshevist equivalent of the Council on Foreign Relations? Did they explain how it was all for the best on the Op-Ed Page of Pravda? He replied only: "We have them."

Voltaire killed off Dr. Pangloss rather early in his academic career; it was a wise decision, and we should deplore the recent efforts to revive him and put him on the White House payroll. But there are two aspects of our Indochina experience which are not altogether dark.

There is a well-articulated view that what happened in Indochina is inevitable under capitalism. It reflects an uncontrollable imperialist drive — for markets, for outlets for investment, for justification for military spending and power. We see that an inability to be guided by historical experience was far more plausibly the cause.

The Vietnam policy was made by men of limited vision who did not know the limits of their vision. They were themselves an historical accident. Some were holdovers from the time when foreign policy was the only proper public profession for a gentleman. Others were members of the legal, business or academic Establishment who had discovered that foreign policy was a source of personal prestige—that the aura of American power in the years of success after World War II reflected luminously on those in its service.

Few could perceive the great historical current against which they were proceeding. Almost none could grasp the most elementary of political propositions which is that men will not die to sustain the greed and graft of others. I speak with some personal animus here. There were individuals who made this case. We were dismissed with that contempt which is so marvelously the manner of those who do not understand, do not wish to understand.

Foolishness, even stupidity, to which I attribute blame is not a minor problem in our time. But, unlike the imperialist dynamic, it is not inherent in the system. It could be remediable. In the case of Vietnam there was a remedy. It came out of the good sense of the country as a whole. It is in this that we can justly take the satisfaction.

When before has a great country stopped in the middle of a war, assessed the wisdom of its participation, decided it was wrong, asserted the judgment against all of the chauvinist tendencies aroused by armed conflict, dismissed from power those responsible and brought its participation to an end?

The answer is never, for unlike the French before us we had a choice. The country corrected the error of its leaders on Vietnam. It was not a defeat but a triumph of good sense. Surely our critics abroad might take more note of this achievement. Does it not say something for democracy?

However, let us not make the presence of this remedial power a license for any more such mistakes.

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