

# They Mouthed Morality

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Walt Rostow has stated the moral case for the war in Vietnam in these pages. No one who knows Mr. Rostow doubts his sincerity or depth of moral commitment. But the issue is not what it has been said to be—that those who made the decisions about the war were indifferent to moral considerations. The issue is the impersonal one as to the actual nature of these considerations, and the kind of logic that should be used in thinking about them.

It is odd for Mr. Rostow to call on George Kennan's animadversions against "moralism" to support the position he takes. His position is a study in moralism. Reading him, I have the same feeling again that I had when I discussed the war with some of its defenders in the Johnson Administration. It was the feeling of running into a blank wall, and turning around and running into another.

The first was a wall of facts to which I wasn't privy. ("If only you knew the facts that we know about Vietnam, you wouldn't hold the posi-

tion you do." Well, now I know some of those facts, and they are quite unlovely.) But the other wall was and is the Great Wall of Moral Absolutes, a wall of principles to which one clings against the facts, against experience, against feeling.

Mr. Rostow begins, in effect, by telling us to keep our guard up against moral doubts. He sets up an impossible ideal—absolute pacifism—and confesses to a feeling of sadness that we can't attain it. But we can't; life is hard. "All national policy—like the human condition itself—is morally flawed."

The operative moral question about the war in Vietnam is not whether war in general is "ugly and sinful." It is about this war, its necessity, its purposes, whether these purposes could be accomplished, whether they were worth accomplishing given the cost in human suffering.

And what about this war? Mr. Rostow says that it meets one condition for being moral because the "national interests" we have pursued in Vietnam are parallel to those of the South Vietnamese, who, in 1961

and 1965, wanted to fight for an independent destiny. The South Vietnamese? Which one? Which government? What about the South Vietnamese who are with the Vietcong?

Again, Mr. Rostow says that a war, if it is to be moral, must be conducted "so as to minimize damage to civilian lives." The argument, when offered in defense of the Vietnam war, is ghoulish. What is the relation of this abstract principle to mass transfers of populations, free-fire zones, the ghastly weapons we have used? Does the fact that all national policy is "morally flawed" relieve us from the responsibility of looking at facts?

The rest of Mr. Rostow's statement is similar. He says that our basic "power interests" in the world are morally legitimate because they are wholly "negative". We simply wish "to prevent the dominance of Europe and Asia by a single potentially hostile power." But what of the specific ways in which we have pursued this "negative" goal?

We cannot draw the lessons from Vietnam that some of its critics wish us to. The war is not a product of

"the system." It is the product of the Cold War mentality, of the inordinate influence of the Pentagon and its satellites, and of policies that were adopted only by circumventing the system of consultation with the electorate and its representatives. But the way we got into the war, the way we have argued about it, tells us something about our national life.

It tells us that the habit is widespread of asserting airy moral principles without looking at their content and consequences. Highly intelligent men, products of the best education we have to offer, think that they have done their duty by morals when they mouth abstractions whose living meaning is left unexamined, and cling to lofty goals without ever asking whether the legitimacy of these goals is affected by what is done in their pursuit.

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