

To the Editor:

Is Robert M. Smith not barking up the wrong tree on his trip down the "Slippery Slopes" of law school (Op-Ed Aug. 22)? Is Nixon a product of moral relativism? He may be immoral, but his political stance has been that of a moralist. His speeches are studded with moral absolutes. The clean-cut young, teetotaling Sunday school-Eagle Scout types around him are political missionaries, self-appointed protectors of public morals, who rode into power on a wave of moral indignation over the erosion of "goodness" under more pragmatic administrations.

I cannot imagine a Haldeman struggling with the complexities shielded by his simplistic dichotomy between "right" and "wrong." An accurate "cost-ben" analysis might have kept him out of Watergate, and the country out of Vietnam earlier. Now the legacy of Dulles' moralistic crusade seems to be taking us to Mindanao—where we once took a beating seventy years ago. But moralists are "right" and learn little from history. (Would another Philippine intervention now under consideration be immoral or just plain stupid?)

History teaches me to fear moralists

with a mission, and not pragmatists. A good illustration is the Protestant missionary who hailed every British invasion of China as an act of God. After witnessing the slaughter of Chinese defenders by Royal Irish in 1841, a Southern Baptist calmly testified: "I regard such scenes . . . as the direct instruments of the Lord in clearing away the rubbish which impedes the advancement of Divine Truth." Some pondered briefly over God's paradoxical decision to herald the "glad tidings" with the skirl of pipes and the roar of cannon. One American missionary defended Christian looting following the Boxer crisis as "high ethics" and suggested that sacking Peking again would speed up the negotiations with the Chinese Government.

At San Francisco State in 1968, political missionaries—preachy, moralistic, radical colleagues of mine—justified vandalism, bombing and the near-murder of two children of a conservative professor whose home was fire-bombed to end racism, poverty and the war. They also supported in moralistic tones Stalinism, Maoism, Weathermen, Black Panthers, Palestine guerrillas and those hoodlums in the I.R.A. at one time or another.

Without the deterrents of self-doubt, a reverence for the irony of history or even a sense of humor, moralistic missionary impulses degenerate into a myopic self-righteousness that obfuscates the distinction between ends and means. At least that "cost-ben" analysis sharpens this distinction and prevents such a mental shell game.

In the name of moral absolutes, men have been stretched, shot or "rehabilitated" on a rice paddy, napalmed, bugged or burglarized to achieve, respectively, Christian "love," classless "brotherhood," "freedom" and "lawn order."  
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