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SCANDIA



AN OPINION

BY RAYMOND K. PRICE, JR.
ON INTELLECTUAL ARROGANCE

THE "COURAGE" OF ONE'S CONVICTIONS
MAY BE MERE OBSTINACY

Raymond K. Price, Jr. was editorial page editor of the New York Herald Tribune for the last two years of its existence. He has also been on the staff of Collier's and Life, is now working on his first novel.

Senator Fulbright has lately been raising a great hue and cry about what he calls "the arrogance of power." The shrillness of his and his allies' complaints has provoked retorts about the arrogance of dissent. Both warnings have their pertinence (and impertinence). But more precisely to the point, in this Age of Arrogance, are what we might call the conceits of certainty.

It's part of our American folklore that there is some mystic higher virtue in having "the courage of one's convictions," as if to fight makes right. Yet all too often this supposed courage is little more than a closed mind, and these convictions merely a package of unsupported prejudices. I submit that what we need today is more people with the courage of their own uncertainties—a bit less arrogance and more intellectual humility. We need people who will stop haranguing long enough to listen, to question, to learn.

I recently finished nine years of writing editorials for the *New York Herald Tribune*. In the end, one of my most striking (and troubling) reflections was that I found myself less and less certain about more and more things. The more I wrestled daily with difficult public questions, trying to get at the facts behind the headlines, trying to sort out right from wrong, good from bad, practical from impractical, the larger became my own gray areas of doubt and uncertainty.

The same doubts, however, seldom seemed to assail the bankers and housewives and artists I kept meeting at cocktail parties, or the cab drivers or students who would occasionally lecture me, or the writers of angry letters to the editor. They *knew* just what we should do in Vietnam. They *knew* how we should handle school integration, or housing, or budgets, or taxes. They *knew* that this or that politician was a total knave or a sainted savior, or, more annoyingly, they knew that all the supporters of a candidate they opposed were either knaves or fools, or both. And they often had the irritating habit of insisting, with all the passion of ignorance, that others accept their own banal views as if they were Holy Writ.

And it's not only the nonprofessionals (or, more precisely, those venturing outside their fields of professional competence) who pass off their biases as fact. At

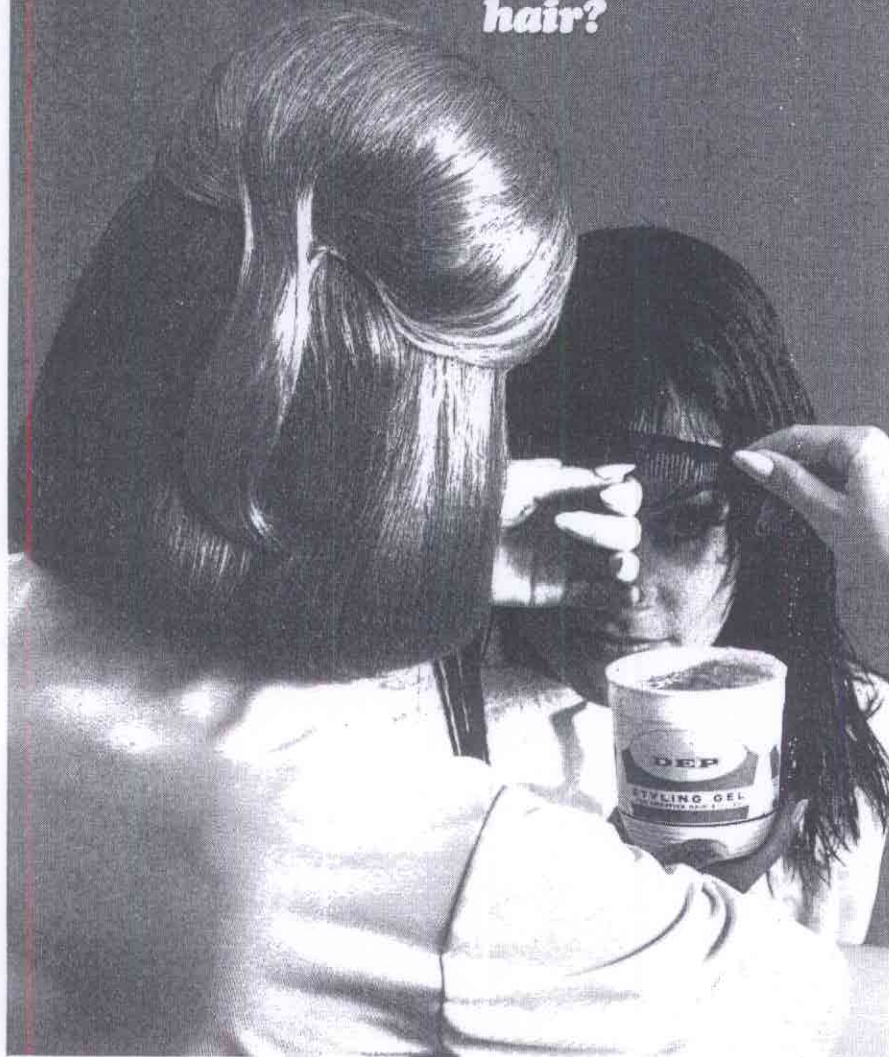
one gathering, during a recent political campaign, I fell into a discussion of politics with a group of psychiatrists. Speaking of Candidate X, one of the doctors positively declared him a paranoid schizophrenic. "Why?" I asked, dumfounded. (I knew the candidate rather well, and, while often disagreeing with him, I had immense respect for his brilliance, his wit, his charm, and his integrity.) "He thinks different [*sic*]," said the doctor. "He starts out from the same premises as other people, but he reaches different conclusions." Well, so much for the sanity of politics, and the politics of sanity.

In asking for a greater leaven of doubt in our public discourse, I don't mean the kind of cynicism, fashionable in some circles, that simply disbelieves everything—this represents its own kind of arrogance. I mean an inner-directed doubt that recognizes one's own fallibility.

Our opinions are simply the end products of a process of judgment. This process can be no better than the facts we feed in, but it can be a great deal worse. At each step there is the chance of error: error in the factual input, in the relative importance we assign various elements of that input, in the significance we give them, in the conclusions we draw. It's a fair guess that for every opinion we hold passionately, someone else holds the opposite with equal conviction. One of us (at least) must be wrong. And the firmness with which we hold to our view is hardly a reliable guide to its correctness. In fact, I would suggest the opposite: the more deeply held a conviction is, the less we put it to the test of questioning, and thus the more likely we are to persist in error.

One of the most poignant documents in American history was signed more than two-and-a-half centuries ago by 12 men in Salem, Massachusetts. It is easy for us, now, to see the error of the witchcraft hysteria that swept Salem (the good people of that city had the courage of their convictions, and acted on them) in 1692, a year that saw no less than 11 women and 8 men hanged, one man "pressed to death," and 150 persons imprisoned on witchcraft charges. But not until that cataclysm of terror and vengeance was over did the 12 men of the jury that condemned the "witches" find sufficient doubt in their own souls to sign a paper declaring: "... we justly fear that we were sadly deluded and mistaken, for which we are much disquieted and distressed in our minds; and do therefore humbly beg forgiveness, first of God for Christ's sake for this our Error

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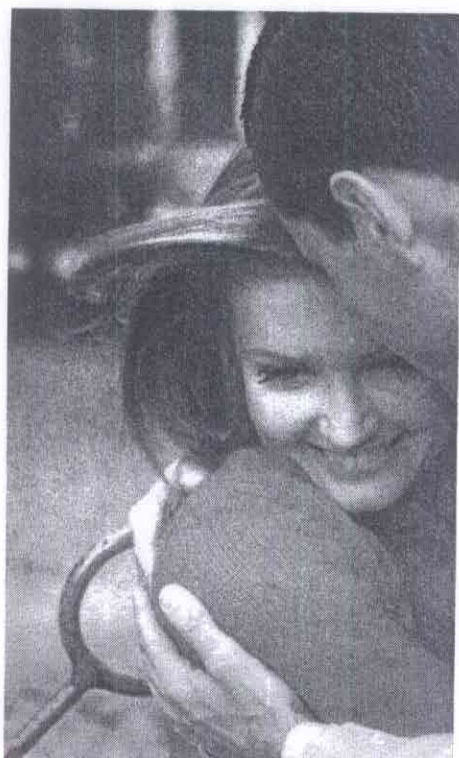
... we would none of us do such things again on such grounds for the whole World..."

They (and their victims) learned a hard lesson about the elusiveness of truth, and the camouflages that passion can lay over it.

Often what we pass off as the courage of our own convictions is, of course, nothing more than the uncritical acceptance of someone else's. A charismatic leader can lay down a set of arbitrary dicta, and multitudes will bow to them as immutable truths. This has been most strikingly demonstrated in Communist China, where the "thoughts of Mao" have lately bantered the greatest mass madness of the decade. But we see it in our own country as well. We see it among those who boast (and yes, some do boast) that they have to read their favorite columnist in order to know what to think (they brandish the name as a status symbol); we see it in the periodic sweep of fads and fashions across the political landscape, in the parroting of catch-phrases, in the sudden stampedes to the latest Liberal or Conservative cause, and in the breathless adulation of the latest political hero, be it Bobby Kennedy or Ronald Reagan.

Only a few years ago, pundits were bemoaning the supposed apathy of what they labeled the Silent Generation; then came the Beat Generation, marked by a sort of mystical outsidership. Now we have what might be called a passionate, or committed, generation—a set of attitudes by no means limited to the young, but caught up in the whole cult of youth and epitomized by the zealots of the New Left. To say that this latest crop of young firebrands (the New Left) are simply angry young men and women is to miss the point. There is a strain of elation in their attacks. Where others got their kicks smashing windows, they are intent on smashing the whole social and political structure. The sense of power one feels when setting off an explosive, the vicarious thrill that draws crowds to watch the operation of a house-wrecker's ball—this helps fuel an orgy of wantonness that runs through the Get-Out-of-Vietnam demonstrations, the civil disobedience of civil-rights extremists, the riots in the Negro slums. And we have been timid in our efforts to counter it, partly because of our blind obeisance to the totem of "the courage of one's convictions." Yet there can be no rule of reason except among people willing to reason together—and this means hearing the other fellow out, not merely hurling insults or worse.

I'm not trying to knock dedication, per se. We need dedicated people, and we need people who burn with passion's fire. But we can do without those who insist that they alone have a monopoly on virtue, or wisdom, or truth. Our public debates today deal with extremely complex issues, and they keep getting more complex all the time. Nowhere is this more true than in the realm of foreign policy. Moralistic posturings are not enough. We live in an [continued on page 106]



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Man talk

[continued from page 68]

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9. One set of in-laws will offer to finance your honeymoon, and this will make you think that you will somehow be indebted to them. On the other hand, the offer will be tempting. You will finally decide to take it, and he will decide not to take it. Then you have to start all over.

10. Two nights before the wedding, even the sleeping pills won't work. You will pace the floor and wrestle with the sudden thought that the whole thing is a mistake. For one horrible moment, you will think about running away. Then you will realize that if you do, you will put an entire industry out of business—the caterers, the preacher, the baker, the travel agent, et cetera. All that money gone, not to mention the deposit on your new apartment! It ends with a tearful phone call to him; then you find out *he* had the same bad night, and you both sort of laugh and cry at the same time and by the time you hang up, you're very glad you're getting married. Congratulations.

An opinion

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imperfect world of imperfect people, where the facts are often not pretty, often contradictory, often dull, and often badly reflected in the headlines. But the conduct of foreign relations (including the conduct of war and the search for peace) requires a vast knowledge of those facts, as well as a sense of the requirements of power, the patterns of history, and the subtleties of intergovernmental relationships. Most of those who shout, "Get Out of Vietnam!" or "Bomb Hanoi!" and who stop troop trains or heckle the Secretary of Defense or picket the White House, can't really know what they are talking about. They are usually passing snap, emotional judgments on a highly involved tactical and technical situation, and the diplomats and military men (to whom they refuse to listen) can be excused if they run a trifle short of patience.

The wise man knows the limits of prudence, and the prudent man knows the limits of wisdom. Francis Bacon once wrote: "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties." We may never arrive at those final certainties. But if more of us spent a little time totting up all the things we have "known" to be true that turned out false; if we were a bit more careful to distinguish between what we know and what we believe, and to express our beliefs in terms of probabilities rather than certainties; if, that is, we had the courage of our doubts, and searched more discriminately after fact, we at least would have a far healthier public discourse. We wouldn't always be right, but at least we would be more nearly right more of the time—which is the best man can hope for.

Of course, everything I've said here may be wrong. But I doubt it.

Mademoiselle for May 1967