

# worldview

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## A CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

The government of the United States faces a crisis of credibility. Simply put, many citizens do not believe that the government officials are telling the truth about current issues—most significantly, about the war in Vietnam.

Evidence of the crisis is everywhere apparent. When Arthur Goldberg referred to the diplomatic peace offensive being conducted by the United States he said that "there has been great concern as to whether we really are pursuing what has been said is a path to peace. . . . We have had a great problem here maintaining our credibility with our own people." But this was merely open and official acknowledgment of a situation that had been long in the making and may not yet have gathered to a head.

The relevant questions, then, do not concern the existence of the crisis but rather why there is such a crisis, how damaging it is and what can be done to resolve it. The beginnings of such a crisis are always tenuous and obscure, open to interpretation and judgment. But for convenience, a good point to begin an examination of our present crisis might be a statement made by Arthur Sylvester when he was an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. Asked to account for what was termed "management of the news" during the period of the Cuban blockade, he answered that the government had an inherent right "to lie to save itself." Mr. Sylvester's response can be faulted for its expression, but not because he misinterpreted actual practice. Every government must, on occasion, conduct some of its operations in secret. This is neither a new nor startling discovery. What is novel is for an acting official to declare that maintaining that secrecy against enquiry necessitates "lies." A proper moral casuistry or a better political sense would find a better and more accurate term.

That upset might in time have quieted down but for two things. The first is that some newsmen felt they had been offered a view of "managed news" that was both complacent and self-righteous; they did not intend to let that issue disappear without continued examination. The

second reason is more important. High officials in our government issued statements which were later disproved or discounted, and many people quite naturally wondered whether indeed these statements were not lies.

The Vietnam situation itself accounts for some of the difficulties. It is messy, its history is fairly involved and Americans are generally less knowledgeable about Southeast Asia and its importance to the U.S. than they are about other areas where we have committed large amounts of men and materiel. No President has been able to speak with complete persuasiveness about why the U.S. is in Vietnam. A number of reasons have been offered, but where no single reason seems convincing, all are under suspicion. Further, the estimates about how long U.S. aid would be needed and how much would be required have been subject to constant correction and increase. However such faulty evaluations are explained, they do not inspire trust in the next estimate that is trotted out for inspection and approval.

In a situation where all statements about U.S. policy in Vietnam are going to be scrutinized, one would expect responsible officials to take special care. Unfortunately they haven't. The White Paper issued by the Department of State in February 1965, for example, was for many people an unconvincing document that did the opposite of what was intended. For them it illustrated the accuracy of U Thant's comment that "in times of war and hostility, the first casualty is truth."

To be more specific, some citizens who are both informed and concerned and who recognize that sincere and committed people can disagree about important issues, believe that the government has not been dealing fairly with them. This is not a question about policy only, for here they would expect differences, but about how that policy is presented. President Johnson, for example, says that our initial "commitment" to the Vietnamese people was made by President Eisenhower in his letter of October, 1954. Yet an examination of that letter reveals not a commit-

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ment but a highly tentative and conditional offer. Nor is there a treaty which places the U.S. under an obligation to use its own forces to defend South Vietnam. Again, the International Control Commission (constituted to enforce the Geneva Accord of 1954) is cited in the State Department White Paper to show that North Vietnam violated the Geneva Accord. But what is not cited are findings by the same Commission which indicate violations by South Vietnam and the U.S. Again, one White Paper attempted to prove that North Vietnam supplied large numbers of men and arms to the Viet Cong, but the evidence presented was ludicrously unpersuasive.

Other points could readily be made, but they add up to one charge. Apart from the actual policy of the U.S. in Vietnam, the presentation of that policy is lamentable. One can sympathize

with officials who must conduct a messy policy and yet maintain public support; some officials have a right to feel aggrieved at the charges made against them. (But the way in which some of these dissenters are treated—from Senator J. W. Fulbright to potential draftees who oppose the war—diminishes that sympathy.)

If this crisis deepens it will damage not only the debate concerning the Vietnam war, but the outcome of that struggle itself. It will, furthermore, weaken the authority of the government, not only with its own citizens, but with countries around the world. If the U.S. is to worry about commitment, national interest, prestige and honor—all terms that are invoked to support our engagement in Vietnam—it should examine the present relation of government and citizens in exactly these terms. J. F.

## ***in the magazines***

A close look at the Thanksgiving weekend activities of student protest groups gathered in Washington at the time of the "national peace march" organized by SANE, is provided by Renata Adler in the December 11 issue of *The New Yorker*. As Miss Adler describes the student movements in "The Price of Peace Is Confusion," "the charge of Communist inspiration . . . seems particularly wide of the mark." For, she writes, "if anything has characterized the movement, from its beginning and in all its parts, it has been a spirit of decentralization, local autonomy, personal choice, and freedom from dogma. On many campuses, even simple majority rule is regarded as coercive of the minority; policy decisions require a 'consensus.' As a result, very few policy decisions are made. In fact, it often appears that the movement may be, in the end, more right than left—that it may have picked up a dropped conservative stitch in the American political tradition. Individualism, privacy, personal initiative, even isolationism and a view of the federal government as oppressive—these elements of the right-wing consciousness have not been argued in such depth (least of all by the right wing itself, with its paradoxical insistence on domestic police expansion and on military intervention abroad) since 1932."

"The Gospel of Jesus Christ in its entirety, including the full spectrum of Christian morality, is the only hope for the world. But this is not what some clergymen are preaching," contends R. N. Usher-Wilson, a priest of the Church of England now liv-

ing in New York (*Christianity Today*, December 17). A number of prominent churchmen, he says, by their public statements during the last Presidential campaign and with regard to such matters as obscenity and civil rights, have led us to conclude that "the public moral attitudes of private persons toward race, poverty, and war are important; but the private morality of public figures is not important—or at least none of our business."

These "false alternatives of public and private morality," Mr. Usher-Wilson writes, may cause us to "lose sight of a vital purpose of the Church. For the Church must create a new type of society emerging from a new type of man. This does not mean that the problems of race, color, poverty, and war must not be tackled vigorously and head on. It does mean, however, that such effort must never become a substitute for bringing men to that rebirth which puzzled Nicodemus and every pragmatist who followed him. This world needs what St. Paul spoke of, 'If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation.' This new creation inevitably includes the fulfillment of personal morality. If we do not comprehend this, there is a very real possibility that the Church will become nothing more than a glorified social service agency.

"Without some character-creating power at work in men, society may well become prey to a pervading legalism backed by physical force," he warns. "For example, racial integration depends for its true success on men's freely choosing to associate with one another." But "without the creation of new motivation in individuals, it will be left to the state to