

MORE ON "RECKLESS RHETORIC"

Brooklyn, N. Y.

Dear Sir: In "Reckless Rhetoric and Foreign Policy" (*worldview*, November, 1970), Mr. Ernest Lefever charges Dr. Martin Luther King, Clergy and Laymen Concerned, and sundry other critics of the Indochina war with "an alarming deterioration in the quality of dialogue and debate on the vital issues of war and peace." In the spirit of Mr. Nixon, he urges that voices be lowered so that we together may create "a quality of dissent and support equal to the seriousness of the problems we confront." Reckless rhetoric is no doubt a bad thing, and the counsel to calm reflection and careful statement, especially on issues surrounded by passionate disagreement, should always be welcomed.

One wishes, however, that Mr. Lefever would show us the way. Within a few pages he manages to accuse "hitherto responsible and rational circles . . . of the church, the university, and the mass media" of, among other things, "subverting civility and fair play"; being "alienated from the mainstream of Western morality"; using "inflammatory code words"; using "double-talk [as] a subtle ploy to persuade by catch words rather than by honest argument"; receiving and promoting lies from "a Communist propagandist"; employing "Communist clichés and slogans" in speeches that "could have been drafted in Moscow, Peking, Hanoi, or Havana"; giving "aid and comfort to the enemies of peaceful change in Southeast Asia as well as to their allies in Moscow and Peking"; offering "incendiary rhetoric" that is "extremist and ill-informed," marked by "distortions and falsehoods, all presented in the garb of self-righteousness"; and so forth. If this is an example of the restrained and rational conversation Mr. Lefever recommends, his faculty for abuse when aroused must be truly marvelous.

Most of the above characterizations by Mr. Lefever refer to Dr. King's speech on the war delivered at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967, and sponsored by Clergy and Laymen Concerned. Before addressing myself to the errors in Mr. Lefever's account of that speech, we should be reminded of the assumptions which inform Mr. Lefever's critique. If, as his article suggests, everyone who challenges or denies these assumptions is reckless, this country is in a more fearful state than most of our critics have indicated. It is irresponsible, says Mr. Lefever, to "undercut the majesty of the presidential office." Terms used by the *New York Times* and others, such as "imperialism, repression, systemic violence, white power structure, military-industrial complex, racism . . . convey no coherent or accepted meaning." They "confuse rather than clarify" the American effort "to fight aggression from North Vietnam." As for domestic injustices against blacks and whites, "Where is the evidence that poverty is 'caused' by the system? What about the great variations in individual ability, initiative, and responsibility?" Dr. King's

speech is outrageous in that "it directed anger against the U.S. Government—perhaps the major temporal force for peace in the world." Radical talk is unjustified in a country "such as the United States, where the channels of political organization and peaceful change are open and responsive to the majority will, where minority rights are guaranteed under law, and where the right of peaceful dissent is protected by the government." These and other statements reveal Mr. Lefever's world of political discourse. His polemic is not against "reckless rhetoric" but against many of us who do not share his political perspective, a perspective which strikes me as—in the precise sense of the word—fantastic.

I deeply regret that Mr. Lefever did not content himself with a general complaint about the minority status of his worldview. He has chosen rather to make some specific allegations about Dr. King, Clergy and Laymen Concerned, and others. I understand this response both because I was involved in some of the events Mr. Lefever discusses and because I am, reportedly, the "Protestant clergyman" whom he misquotes. After some generally vituperative remarks about Dr. King, Mr. Lefever suggests that he is focusing on an otherwise neglected speech at Riverside Church. He calls the April 4 speech "remarkable and little-remarked." In fact, that speech occupied several columns on the front pages of some of the major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, for two days running. It was—and Dr. King concurred in this judgment—his most-discussed speech since that of the 1963 March on Washington. One would now have to add his final address in Memphis, April 3, 1968, making these the three most-remarked speeches of Dr. King's career. Far from "receiving little critical attention," as Mr. Lefever says, the Riverside speech provoked editorial comment, generally negative, around the country as well as formal reactions from major civil rights and other organizations. Such ignorance of the facts might have restrained less reckless men than Mr. Lefever from writing about the Riverside speech.

The speech was "sponsored and apparently ghost written by Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam," says Mr. Lefever. "It is difficult to determine the extent King was being used by Clergy and Laymen," we are told at another point. In a brief exchange with Mr. Lefever after the adjournment of a CRIA meeting in Washington, I mentioned that individuals in C.L.C. had gone over the speech in advance with Dr. King and his SCLC staff people. As far as I know, any figure of major public importance discusses in advance, with those in whom he has confidence, significant policy statements. Indeed, not to do so would seem irresponsible. The speech most emphatically was not "ghost written" by anyone in C.L.C., and I challenge Mr. Lefever to produce any evidence in support of his slurring remark. The Riverside meeting was sponsored by C.L.C. at Dr. King's request, but on what basis does Mr. Lefever suggest that Dr. King was "being used by Clergy and Laymen"? As the several current biographies

of Dr. King make clear (I especially recommend David Lewis' *King: A Critical Biography*, New York, 1970), he opposed the war long before the Riverside speech and had given public expression to his convictions—although those speeches were indeed “little-remarked.”

Further, Dr. King was a co-chairman of Clergy and Laymen from its beginning and was actively involved in its deliberations, attending steering committee and other meetings with remarkable regularity considering the press of his other responsibilities. I therefore further challenge Mr. Lefever to produce any evidence whatsoever suggesting that Dr. King “was used by Clergy and Laymen.” When one disagrees with a figure as widely revered as Dr. King, it is easier to attribute his remarks to the undue influence of people around him. At the risk of sounding reckless, I would suggest it is also evasive. Mr. Lefever's argument is with Dr. King, and it ill becomes him to focus on the myth he has conjured up of Dr. King's misguided minions.

Referring to a statement in the Riverside speech, Mr. Lefever is incensed that anyone should think the United States responsible for a million deaths—mostly children—in Southeast Asia. As Dr. King made clear beyond doubt, he believed that we (the U.S.) are primarily responsible for the last twelve or more years of conflict in Indochina. Mr. Lefever makes equally clear that he rejects this analysis. (We are protecting freedom against Communist aggression, according to Mr. Lefever.) Obviously, the calculus of who is responsible for killing whom hinges upon which of these analyses one accepts. But that at least a million people have died seems to me overwhelmingly evident. Although I have no way of taking a body count on the subject (nor does Mr. Lefever), I think it not at all improbable that a million civilians had died in the protracted Indochina conflict by April, 1967. I refer the reader to “Refugee and Civilian War Casualty Problems in Indochina: A Staff Report Prepared for the Use of the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, September 28, 1970.” If one limits himself to only those aspects of the report pertinent to the situation in the spring of 1967; if one understands the Indochina conflict, as Dr. King did, as it relates also to the territory surrounding South Vietnam; and if one takes into account the ages of the Indochinese “soldiers” involved, the assertion that “we may have killed a million—mostly children” is probably conservative. Considering the “may” in that sentence, the proposition, far from being reckless, is probably excessively cautious.

Again, for the record: I did not say to Mr. Lefever during our brief exchange that I was—nor was I—the author of the civilian casualty section of the speech, although I mentioned that I was among the people consulted before the speech's delivery. And at no point did I say, as Mr. Lefever pressed on the figure of “one million,” that “We in the Movement make up facts” to suit our needs. I did acknowledge that—obviously—“one million” is not a precise statistic, and I remember

noting the similarity to our conventional references to the “six million” Jews who died in the Holocaust.

Finally, in his catalogue of reckless inequities, Mr. Lefever includes *In the Name of America*, a 1968 publication of Clergy and Laymen, compiling reports on “U.S. military behavior in Vietnam compared with the laws of war which are binding on all Americans.” The book, he says, is a “one-sided, unfactual, and inflammatory critique of U.S. policy in Vietnam.” He fails to mention that the book is a compilation of relevant reports by the most distinguished American and European journalists in Vietnam. He fails to mention that the editing and commentary were done by Richard Falk, Professor of International Law at Princeton, a man who is certainly among the leading academic authorities on international law. Most remarkably, what he fails to mention is that the intervening three years have produced solemn evidence confirming the reports contained in *In the Name of America*. He says “the book fails to provide convincing evidence that U.S. forces persistently or even frequently violated the rules of war.” In the hope of rescuing something of Mr. Lefever's reputation as a man of integrity, permit me to suggest that he did not have time to read *In the Name of America* as carefully as he might and therefore overlooked this important paragraph in the preface:

Some critics will challenge the accuracy and authority of the documentation, on grounds that isolated press reports are unreliable, the reporters biased or the dispatches slanted. In response, we repeat that while the document does not pretend to be a legal brief, it does claim to be responsible and fair. Many of the correspondents are reporters of international repute. They were on the scene, and they have been trained to observe with care and to report with accuracy. They have no vested interests to protect. Furthermore, the dispatches have been taken from a wide variety of sources: reporters for newspapers from all over the country and all over the world are cited, many wire services and mass media from the broadest possible spectrum of interests have been quoted . . . Indeed, it is the cumulative impact of the dispatches, drawn from such a dazzling diversity of sources, that makes reading them such a heartache. The burden of proof is surely upon those who wish to discredit these dispatches, rather than upon those who are persuaded by them.

Even more pointedly, one must ask whether Mr. Lefever believes that the sad story told in the dispatches of *In the Name of America* has been discredited by subsequent events. Surely Mr. Lefever is familiar with the conclusions drawn in this connection by Telford Taylor, former American prosecutor at Nuremberg. One hopes he has listened to the multiplying tales of atrocity in the testimony of returning Vietnam veterans. No doubt he has heard something about My Lai. Or is it Mr. Lefever's view that generals, enlisted men, army prosecutors, congressmen and innumerable citizen observers are all part of “the elitist and authoritarian Left” that is

trying to discredit "the major temporal force for peace in the world"? None of this is mentioned in his attack. He does say that "the extreme Right poses little danger to the survival of our fundamental democratic institutions." He goes on to suggest that, by "extreme Right" he means the K.K.K. and the Minutemen. I am sure Mr. Lefever belongs to neither of these organizations. But, if one understands "extreme Right" in a way more pertinent to the present political spectrum, I am not surprised that Mr. Lefever thinks it poses little danger, since we all like to think that our positions represent what is best for the country.

I applaud Mr. Lefever's call for "a quality of dissent and support equal to the seriousness of the problems we confront," and hope that he will join in the reformation he demands.

Richard Neuhaus

Richmond, Va.

Dear Sir: After reading Ernest W. Lefever's, "Reckless Rhetoric and Foreign Policy," (*worldview*, November 1970) the reader wonders whether or not the title applied to the subjects of the article or to the author who wrote it. It is a source of concern that such a piece could have come from a friend who is usually so cool and academic, so calm and realistic about foreign policy matters. But in this recent article he seems to be completely unaware and uncritical of his own reckless rhetoric, and his comments about others should not go unchallenged. Since Lefever himself suggests in italics, "*The same rules apply to both sides*," I am sure that he will not mind a friend helping him pull the mote out of his own rhetoric.

The first bit of recklessness that the reader finds in this *worldview* piece is Lefever's Joe McCarthyism. It is the author's contention that there has been a verbal assault on the character of our political leaders and the integrity of our democratic institutions; that this assault has been made by demagogic revolutionaries and nihilists, and that responsible and rational circles, which stood fast against the "crude, and by comparison mild, rantings" of the first McCarthy, have been taken in. According to this analysis, "small but significant sectors of the church, the university, and the mass media have wittingly or unwittingly fallen prey" to the rhetoric. He mentions the *New York Times* and J. William Fulbright, specifically, implying in the way in which he has put his paragraphs together that these people have been led from rational argument by Angela Davis, Rap Brown, and Jerry Rubin. The prime example of this is Martin Luther King. Ernest Lefever reveals to us in a confidential parenthesis that he received damaging information about King's mode of speech-making from acquaintances of the latter, although these informers remain anonymous in the article. Moreover, he implies that King was used by the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, and that he undoubtedly gave aid and comfort to the enemies "of peaceful change in Southeast Asia as well as to their allies in Moscow and Peking." Now is this not the essence of

reckless McCarthy rhetoric? That is, those citizens who have raised serious questions about what we are doing in Vietnam have been: (1) duped, (2) used, (3) have given aid and comfort to the enemy, (4) and are therefore in danger of treason. It is also a part of McCarthyism to imply that (5) the case for the opposition cannot stand on its own merit, and (6) even if it should be meritorious, it should not be championed because other, perhaps unsavory characters support the same cause and make us guilty by association. I cannot refrain from pointing out the clever rhetoric in which Lefever impugns the loyalty of King by making it appear as though King, of all people, was against "peaceful change" in Southeast Asia.

The second bit of recklessness has to do with the author's rather cheap victory over Martin Luther King. Lefever is particularly concerned about King's Riverside Church address, in which King said, among other things, that we "may have killed a million [presumably civilians]—mostly children" in Vietnam (brackets are Lefever's). Lefever is also incensed by King's charges that the United States has tested out our latest weapons, built concentration camps like those which Hitler built in Germany, and has produced "at least 20 casualties" for every one Viet Cong inflicted injury. He calls this charge "outrageous." There are several things that bother me about Lefever's rhetoric at this point. One has to do with his own use of figures. He maintains that Hanoi and N.L.F. forces have "murdered, tortured, and kidnapped tens of thousands of civilians" and that in 1960-61 alone, the Viet Cong murdered 6,130 and abducted 6,213 important persons. The first figure is a very round one, and for neither one of them does he produce a shred of evidence. Moreover, in an aside separated from his text by dashes, he admits with regard to the casualties caused by the United States that "perhaps as many as one-tenth the number King mentioned" may be nearer the truth. Why can he be so exact in one case and so nebulous in another? There is no evidence adduced for his last estimate and no explanation as to why his opinion should be any more acceptable or any less outrageous than King's, except for the fact that it is lower.

The second point has to do with Lefever's use of King and a speech which is now about three years old. Of course, it seems to be popular nowadays to beat a dead King. But why should Lefever pick him when others, still alive, are making King's charge, and making it even worse. For example, in *Atrocities in Vietnam* (Philadelphia, 1970), Professor Edward S. Herman of the Wharton School of Finance does a little contemporary calculating of his own. For example, on the basis of Defense Department figures he finds that we have employed 9,279,295 plus tons of ordnance in Vietnam, 1965 through 1969, while the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese have used only 17,500 tons for the years 1967 through 1969. Correlating this massive discrepancy of firepower, and employing other data as well, he estimates that between 1965 and 1969 there may have been 1,116,000 civilians killed and 2,232,000 wounded in South Vietnam. These figures do not include those who have