

# Correspondence

## The Berger "Connection"

To the Editors: Peter Berger's "Connections" piece, "The Berrigan-Nixon Connection," in the March issue of *Worldview* was a shock to me, as I have always been one of his admirers—though at times reluctantly so after he has castigated positions and movements with which I have sympathy. I have no desire to defend Daniel Berrigan's unfortunate statements about Israel, but I resent this writing about him with contempt when, at an early stage in the Indochina war, he did so much to stimulate the conscience of Americans. But I see this attack on Berrigan as a side issue. Berger's generalizations about the peace movement and his embracing of the conservatism of an imaginary improved Nixon are the more significant themes.

I do not know what the boundaries of the "peace movement" are, but it is false to suggest that the very pervasive movement against the war in Indochina was dominated by "the New Left," the boundaries of which are also uncertain. The movement of dissent has been many-sided in churches, universities, the press, in Congress and even among former makers of war policy and Vietnam veterans. This widespread dissent was stimulated to a considerable extent by the pioneers of the "peace movement," who were the earliest to understand the nature of the war and who were so insistent on keeping the issues of the war before the country that others could not evade them.

Berger's specific charge that either "the peace movement" or the larger movement of dissent played down the atrocities committed by the other side needs to be examined. For one thing, those atrocities were not the work of our government, and pressure from Americans could not stop them. Also, it has been important to correct the habit of being blind to the atrocities on our side. Other examples of this blindness

have been the silence about the massacres of Communists and suspected Communists in Indonesia in 1965 and the cover-up of the massacre of Taiwanese by our Chinese allies in 1947. I do not defend terror by anyone because others commit acts of terror on a much larger scale, but I believe that it has been right to emphasize the scale of the terror on our side on two levels. On one level there was the "pacification" program with its planned torture and assassinations of tens of thousands of people and the routine American connivance at the torture and killing of prisoners by the South Vietnamese. On the other level there has been the technological destruction of people, villages, "structures" and even the land for nearly ten years. These horrors on both levels were matters of official American policy. There was something especially repellent about the spectacle of men—often rather elegant men—sitting comfortably in Washington planning these horrors for reasons that ceased to be clear to many years before they stopped that planning.

As for the POWs, it is probable that some of them were tortured at some stage. Both Anthony Lewis and Mary McCarthy in the *New York Review of Books* (March 7, 1974) admit that this was so before 1969. Insofar as it was so, it should be condemned, but it should be realized that at times of intense bombing the provocation was greater than anything that our country had ever experienced. However, there are two facts about the POWs for which the evidence is clearer than it is about the torture. They would not be alive today if they had not been rescued and cared for by the people whom they bombed. Also, their health on their return was surprisingly good. This was in sharp contrast with the condition of those who have come out of President Thieu's prisons and torture chambers, for which our government has helped to pay.

I reject, as Berger does, the fanatical anti-Americanism which has sometimes accompanied opposition to the war. Yet so many years of strug-

gle, especially on the part of young people who know very little history, against these horrible wrongs committed by our government naturally generates anti-Americanism. Berger himself says elsewhere that the American presence in Vietnam has been "morally outrageous" and that it has been in cooperation with the Saigon regime, which he calls "murderously oblivious to the welfare of its people" (*Movement and Revolution*, p. 66). He also speaks of "the massive collapse in the plausibility of American political ideals as a result of Vietnam" (*ibid.*, p. 42). I hope that this anti-Americanism will pass and that those who oppose particular American policies and acts will learn to appeal to the best in our tradition, one present sign of which is the freedom for dissent.

It is news that there is much in common between Berger's conservatism and the conservatism that surrounds Nixon. The early Berger used to use sociology to unmask the illusions that support the status quo. As recently as four years ago he wrote: "As a sociologist, I am professionally attached to an intrinsically debunking perspective on Society" (*ibid.*, p. 85). What a far cry from the spirit of Nixon and his characteristic supporters! Berger's conservatism has always seemed to me to be an extension of the debunking stance he describes to the illusions that accompany proposals for change, and as such it has been very useful, at least as a warning, in spite of its tendency toward elitism. When Berger faces the most acute problems, as in his discussion of the need for a change of orientation of American power in the Third World (*ibid.*, p. 70) and in his attitude toward "the coexistence of unparalleled affluence and unparalleled poverty," his conservatism is of a completely different spirit from that of the conservatism that he gladly finds dominant in our country. Peter Berger is a many-sided phenomenon, and I hope that another side will soon appear.

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