

worldview

A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

THE PRESS AND THE PRESIDENT

WARS OF NATIONAL LIBERATION IV

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MAY

1966

VOL. 9 NO. 5

Not many months ago, most responsible commentators noted and regretted the lack of open and informed debate on Vietnam. In spite of some noted if belated exchanges on a fairly high level it is questionable if we have yet had such a debate. Nevertheless, there are some people who would already call a swift halt to the present exchanges. President Johnson has told the American people that the nation's task is not easy, the road ahead may be long and rocky. But he is very sensitive to the rocks that are put in his own path by domestic critics. And so are many of his supporters. Not surprisingly the harshest words are directed at those who combine responsibility and influence in keeping the debate open—those who write for the press.

Anthony Howard put the case most succinctly when he wrote in the *London Observer* that "with the President's critics in Congress overwhelmed, the American Press stands today as Lyndon Johnson's most formidable foe." The result is that there is a "concerted plan of professional demotion of the President's newspapers critics." The plan takes the relatively simple form of circulating important opinion—that is, the opinion of important people—that, for example, Walter Lippmann is "senile" and that there really is "nothing sadder than the decline in Scottie [James] Reston's reputation." The treatment afforded these two estimable commentators serves as well for others. What Howard saw as a plan was sufficiently impressive for him to ask whether "having crushed Congress, can it really be L.B.J.'s desire now to castrate the press?"

The press, however, is not so united that it can be regarded as a single weapon trained against the President. Within the press itself there are sharp reservations about the role the press is currently playing. For example, Cyrus L. Sulzberger of the *New York Times* wrote that "the Great Debate on Vietnam has been featured by misinformation, passion, political opportunism, vanity, and hints of a smarmy dislike for President Johnson. . . . Elegant platitudes founded on myth are offered to the President as substitutes for policy." Joseph Alsop, who warned against "some of the most important reporting from Vietnam," asked: "who is more

likely to play ducks and drakes with the facts—reporters rather obviously reflecting the outspoken preconceptions of a great newspaper, or Gen. Westmoreland, who is one of the soberest and most brilliant field commanders in U.S. history?”

In an editorial in the *Reporter* Max Ascoli said that “Against Rusk is a motley crowd of pompous scribes and of men still cherishing the great future lying in their past” and went on to ask, “Haven’t we had enough debates, enough globalism, enough of hawks and doves? Given the character of Lyndon Johnson, it would not be surprising if he had, in his own unique way, stimulated the whole outpouring, counting on the time when the debaters would be hoarse and the listeners bored. Respectfully, we suggest the time is now.”

Respectfully, we disagree with the foregoing opinions. We do not think that Lippmann is senile or that Reston is slipping. The Great De-

bate has been marked by passion—as it should be—misinformation and vanity, but it has not been all on one side. Some of the reporting from Vietnam has *not* been accurate, but it has not always been the fault of the reporter. It may be that listeners *are* bored and debaters hoarse, but if so they will simply have to recoup their powers. For the debate has not been stimulated by the character of Johnson but by the policies he has established for U.S. action in Vietnam. These policies, which will have important consequences, are still under scrutiny and examination; they are still open to criticism; they are not so determined that they simply await their secure execution. There is no sense in saying at this point “My country’s policies—right or wrong!” The debate may not be the Great Debate that some have called for and it may never become that. But it is a necessary debate and it is necessary that it continue. We may not, in the President’s words, allow ourselves to grow weary so early in the struggle.

J. F.

in the magazines

A Kansas State University political scientist writes in the Winter 1966 issue of *A Journal of Church and State*, that “the national military emphasis and peacetime conscription raise new problems for church-state relations. The so-called ‘wall’ between church and state has been breached on a large scale in wartime before, but the recent twenty years of military preparedness is unparalleled, and threatens to turn a breach into a permanent rupture.”

Merlin Gustafson limits his examination of “military aspects of church-state relationships” to the years 1945-52, finding “some implications for religious freedom” in the Truman Administration’s approach to “universal military training, the military chaplaincy, and the politico-religious ideology of the cold war.”

Gustafson points to “evidence that continued opposition to universal military training from religious organizations influenced the Truman Administration to seek increased religious emphasis in the armed services. If for no other reason,” he writes, “such action could make peacetime military conscription more palatable to religious interest groups.” The

armed forces chaplaincy itself, Gustafson contends, “illustrates in another way the nebulous relationship which existed between church and state during the Truman years. Strict separation existed neither in fact nor in theory. Furthermore, some distinct theological tendencies were encouraged by the state. An amalgamated religion-in-general was promoted. Free exercise of religion for the serviceman meant in practice that he was free only to accept or reject the chaplain and the religion provided by the quota system for his army post or ship. According to the Army Manual, in theory at least, religion was to have a conservative function. It was intended to protect and preserve the American way of life. It also had utility; it would make a better soldier, a better fighting man.”

The author also points to the “lack of consistency in granting exemptions from military service during the Truman years.” For example, “ministers and divinity students were automatically exempt. The draftee who objected to military service for religious reasons was favored over the person who objected merely on philosophical, political or sociological