

# THE PRESENT TRAGEDY OF AMERICA

*Hans Morgenthau*

It is, of course, trivial to say that the foreign policy of the United States is not only in a political and military crisis — and financial crisis you might add — but also in a moral crisis. This moral crisis has particular significance for the United States. Take, by way of contrast, the moral crises through which Soviet foreign policy has passed since the end of the second world war. Take, for instance, the moral crisis which it faced in consequence of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, and the moral crisis it is still facing by virtue of its invasion of Czechoslovakia last year. Obviously those crises considerably decreased the prestige and influence of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union has emerged from those crises as something different from what it was before. For the Soviet Union today can no longer claim to be the fatherland of socialism, the disinterested vanguard of the international proletariat. It has revealed itself to be just one nation-state among others, seeking its advantage by the same means by which nation-states have always sought advantage.

The United States is in a much worse position than is the Soviet Union. For from the very beginning of American history there has always existed an intimate and organic relationship between the moral stature of America — as conceived by itself as well as the outside world — and its position among the nations of the world. In the May, 1969 issue of *worldview* there is an article which states that it is all well and good to say that the United States must put its own house in order, that it must look after its own moral stance but, the article continues, you're not going to defend Singapore or Indonesia against the Communists by doing this. Well, nobody outside an insane asylum has ever pretended that this is so. But it is still true that aside from all those specific advantages or disadvantages a nation may experience in relation to other nations, in a very particular and unique sense the domestic position of the United States, the way the country lives up to its pretenses, or the way in which it does not live up to those pretenses, has a direct relevance upon its position amongst nations.

That is to say, the United States, in a unique sense, is being judged by other nations, and it is judged by itself in terms of its compliance with the moral standards which it has set for itself. This is not an invention of historians looking backward, nor is it an ideological justification and rationalization which has now been

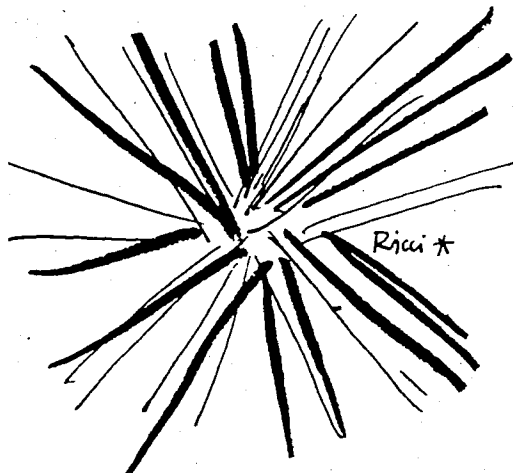
adopted, according to the highest authorities, by “neo-isolationists.” It is an incontestable fact of the historic experience of America. It was not a contemporary “neo-isolationist,” but Thomas Paine, who said that the American Revolution was not made for America alone but for mankind. What is more important, both the most morally conscious segments of the American population and those who looked at America from the outside took it for granted that here was in process a noble experiment in statecraft; that a society was being founded on principles on which no other political commonwealth had ever been founded; and that the success or failure of this experiment was not just of relevance to the parochial interests of the United States but to mankind. Because here — so it was believed both by Americans and by outsiders — here was a test case which decided the fate not only of America but in a sense of all humanity.

This is not something I or other historians have read into American history. The manifestations of this ethos of America are obvious from the documents of the late eighteenth century, and they are obvious from the whole history of the United States into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is this ethos which has been the source of America's strength at home; it was one of the main sources of its prestige and influence abroad. What constitutes the present tragedy and crisis of America in general and, more particularly, of American foreign policy is the fact that our rulers are no longer fully conscious of this ethos and that our actions bear an only extremely remote relationship to that ethos. In other words, we have not been betrayed by Communists or by the enemy without, we have in a sense betrayed ourselves.

I remember vividly the discussion about Vietnam I had with a world-famous scientist at one of the Pugwash Conferences in Sweden two years ago. This man, very deeply moved, said, “You Americans don't know how we have looked to you as the last best hope, and how we now feel betrayed.” It is this betrayal, not only of the ethos of America but of the trust which, you may say, the best representatives of humanity have put in the United States, that constitutes the tragedy of America today.

It is interesting to note that this is not a phenomenon

which has been created by the Vietnam war. It has been greatly strengthened and accentuated by the Vietnam war, but it has not been created by it. I've just re-read a paper I had written in 1960 for the Democratic Advisory Council on the American position in the world, in which I quoted a Gallup Poll which showed that, in India for instance, an overwhelming majority of people who were questioned thought that the United States was the main menace to peace, competing with the Soviet Union and China for that dubious distinction. Now if this happened about a decade ago, it is obvious how much more disastrous the crisis of the moral position of the United States in the world has been by virtue of the Vietnam war. We have noticed, not only from the Russian example but from our own experience — take Mr. Rockefeller's recent abortive trips to Latin America — to what extent the real power of a nation consists not in the number of nuclear warheads it holds or the number of divisions or aircraft carriers, but of the moral image it presents — not only in words but, more particularly, in deeds — to the rest of the world.



Although this has always been so — I think it was Napoleon who said that it is not the bayonets but the spirit which wins battles — it is so in a particularly acute sense in the nuclear age when the instruments of mass destruction are so enormous that they are completely out of joint with any possible objective of a rational foreign policy. Thus the fact that a nation like the United States has a nuclear capability sufficient to wipe out every man, woman and child living on this planet a couple times over is completely irrelevant to the power it is able to bring to bear in Vietnam. In other words, it is exactly the enormity of nuclear power which makes it impotent in the face of

an army of peasants fighting in Vietnam. The discrepancy between the means of violence and the objectives of foreign policy is so extreme that the means of violence are simply useless.

You will want to ask what the military position of the United States in Vietnam might be if the United States did not have a single nuclear weapon. It wouldn't be worse; it would almost certainly be better because the U.S. would not be restrained in its conduct of the war by the fear of nuclear war. Were you to ask what Great Britain or France can do by virtue of having nuclear weapons that they could not do without nuclear weapons, the answer would have to be, "Absolutely nothing." Great Britain can't do a thing because it has nuclear weapons which it couldn't do without them; the same is true of France. And you can even go a step farther and say that if Great Britain and France did not deflect large quantities of scarce resources to the development and maintenance of a nuclear armory, they would be much better off than they are now, because they could then use those scarce resources for constructive purposes.

This peculiar discrepancy between the enormous and unprecedented and virtually unimaginable power which the nuclear powers have amassed, and the rational objectives they can pursue on the international stage, accentuates the issue I have traced before — that is, the moral problem of American foreign policy. You may even say that there exists an intimate connection between those two phenomena. It is exactly because the United States has been fascinated with military power — with the number and efficacy and the destructive capability of nuclear warheads — that it has neglected the real source of its strength: the moral example it has presented to the rest of the world, and which in a negative sense, you may say, it even represents today.

The United States today is not judged in view of its domestic situation as other nations are. We are not judged as the British are judged with regard to, say, the race problem, or as the French were with regard to Algeria. We are judged in a rather peculiar sense, which is a reflection of the particular moral virtue which we have represented to the rest of the world and which we have not only neglected but have really shoved aside as a standard for our actions, domestic and international.

Thus the crisis of American foreign policy is, on its most fundamental level, a moral crisis, and this moral crisis is not limited to foreign policy. It is the moral crisis of America herself as revealed in her relations with other nations.