

(October 30, 1983)

Perhaps some of you here have been watching the television documentary about the Vietnam War. It does not make for easy viewing; indeed, the memories it conjurs up are often quite painful.

One revealing aspect of this montage of old newsreel is that, with the benefit of hindsight, all our former leaders sound so much alike. At least to the extent that they addressed the Vietnam War, John Kennedy sounds like John Foster Dulles, and Hubert Humphrey sounds like Richard Nixon! With respect to the one issue which, perhaps, more than any other defines the quality and character of late twentieth century political history, leaders whom we ordinarily regarded as being diverse in belief and style are revealed as surprisingly monochromatic.

Equally sobering is the image of these leaders which their speeches and policies reveal. Looking at the films it seems almost as if the amiable and competent manager of the village hardware store had suddenly been put in charge of the affairs of state, and, confronted with a titanic clash of cultures and the outworking of vast and deep historical processes beyond his comprehension, he did what came naturally--he sent the marines!

The fact that one can flip one's TV dial from the Vietnam documentary to the news of today and scarcely notice the difference is riveting. It is true enough that, as commentators seem so desperately to remind us, Lebanon and Grenada are not the same as Vietnam. We know that each of these situations and places are unique in many ways. The awful sameness has not to do with the places themselves, but with the mindset with which they are being addressed. It is a mindset deluded by the hope that issues of politics and spirit can be resolved on the material level with outward weapons, a fantasy that no amount of hard experience seems able to shatter.

It is as if one were to regard a book merely as pressed paper pulp imprinted with black markings, or a Mozart symphony as a pattern of vibrations of the air molecules. To take this view would simply be to overlook the essential nature of a book or a symphony, to imagine that a book can be burned or a symphony censored, without realizing that they are movements of spirit which will continue to exist as long as they are held in spirit, regardless of attacks of their material level of manifestation.

It is those who understand the potentialities of spirit who affect civilization over the long run, in spite of their material reverses over the short term. 2,500 years ago, a great sage of China, Lao Tzu, having failed to convince various princes of the true way of life during a lengthy career of itinerant counselling, finally retired to a remote hermitage and, writing a concise scripture of a mere 5,000 Chinese characters, established the foundation of a noble civilization which flourished for many centuries. A thousand years later the prophet Mohammed, responding to a movement of spirit which came to him in a cave, turned a few sorry, nomadic tribes into the basis of a great civilization, the ideas of which still guide the behavior of millions upon millions of people in today's world.

And two thousand years ago there walked in Galilee One who was what we could be. Eliciting from those he encountered that seed of eternal and universal things that abides in each human being, he turned sinners into saints, social outcasts into public benefactors, common fisherfolk into fishers of women and men.

This puts our television documentary into perspective; it turns us from despair to hope. Indeed, it is doubtful that humankind has ever been much helped by those who keep announcing the sorry state of affairs. To do so is merely another form of the same faithlessness which provides the rationale for the resort to outward weapons. Those who know the reality of the inner, spiritual world, who know that a book is not merely paper and ink, believe in the triumph of the good, affirm it, strive for it, and help others to strive for it. Whatever their fortunes on the material level, they do not go down believing in defeat, expecting it, and submitting to it. They have faith in the possibility of the good; they know the truth, and it is the truth that makes them free.