

The US Cold War Mindset

Why American leaders chose a course of action in Vietnam that, from a 21st Century vantage point, looks fundamentally flawed at best and blindly irrational at worst cannot be understood without taking into account the experience of World War II and the virulent anti-Communism of the Cold War. Today, Munich seems like ancient history and Communism an extinct religion, so it is difficult for us to imagine the mindset of US Presidents, Secretaries of State, Congress and the American public at a time when memories of Chamberlain's "peace for our time" and Pearl Harbor were still vivid and the Red Menace was felt to be an existential threat.

In *Ending the Vietnam War*, Henry Kissinger's summarizes the worldview and underlying principles of American leaders in the post-war period.

Most countries go to war to resist concrete definable threats to their security. In the twentieth century, America went to war - - from World War I to Kosovo - - largely on behalf of what is perceived as moral obligations to resist aggression or injustice as the trustee of collective security.

This commitment was especially pronounced among the generation of American leaders who had in their youth witnessed the tragedy of Munich. Burned into their psyches was the lesson that failure to resist aggression - - whatever and however it occurred - - guarantees that it will have to be resisted under much worse circumstances later on. . . . Geopolitical analysis of the specific dangers posed by Communist conquest of a distant country was deemed subordinate to the twin slogans of resisting aggression in the abstract and preventing the further spread of Communism. The Communist victory in China had reinforced the conviction of American policymakers that no further Communist expansion could be tolerated.

Policy documents and official statements of the period show that this conviction went largely unchallenged. In February 1950, four months before the start of the Korean conflict, NSC [National Security Council] document 64 had concluded that Indochina was "a key area of Southeast Asia and is under immediate threat." The memorandum marked the debut of the so-called Domino Theory, which predicted that if Indochina fell, Burma and Thailand would soon follow, and that "the balance of Southeast Asia would then be in grave hazard."

Ending the Vietnam War (2003) page 13.

Although it is today's received wisdom to dismiss the Domino Theory as a fundamental misunderstanding of how Communism actually spread, in the 1950's the theory seem eminently plausible and the constant analogizing of Communism to an insidious disease

reinforced the idea that it could be transmitted from one country to a neighboring one, like a contagion.

That the US and all that it stood for was under siege by wily and ruthless Communist operatives was the message of *The Ugly American* by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer. The best-selling novel, published in 1958, depicts the shortcomings of the U.S. diplomatic corps - - their insensitivity to local language, culture, customs and their refusal to interact with the local populace aside from the post-colonial elite. All this is in marked contrast to the polished abilities of the USSR's emissaries. American ignorance and complacency are shown to result in Communist diplomatic successes and US failures. American diplomats, depicted as obtuse and inept, are contrasted with "ordinary" Americans whose efforts to help the local people and stymie the Communists are squelched by State Department bureaucrats. The novel, which sold over five million copies, reflected and reinforced fears of Communist aggression and made such a deep impression on Senator John Kennedy that it influenced him to create the Peace Corps when he became president. A film based on the book and starring Marlon Brando, was released in 1963.

The novel is simplistic and attributes the success of the Communists to their professional preparation for diplomatic work, their discipline, and their diabolical cunning. If America would only utilize diplomats who were ordinary folk and exemplified basic American virtues, the authors seem to say, the US could turn around its deteriorating position in foreign nations. Both the Communists and the Americans, good and bad, are far from fully realized characters; they are more like stick figures utilized to make the authors' points about the faulty implementation of US foreign policy. That the appeal of the Communists might be due to their offering a vision of a better life for the vast majority of the population who worked the land is not seriously considered.

The novel, published after the victory of the Communists in China, the stalemate of the Korean War, and the McCarthy frenzy in the United States, was intended to jolt Americans into more effectively opposing the threat of global Communism. To reinforce their message, Burdick and Lederer wrote a "Factual Epilogue" to *The Ugly American* in which the authors paint a grim picture of the geopolitical situation in 1958:

Without pitting one Soviet soldier against one American soldier, the Soviet has won a staggering series of victories. In the few years since the end of World War II, Russia has added 700,000,000 people to the multitude already under direct rule. Its land empire has been swollen by 5,000,000 square miles. In Asia alone, Communist arms have won wars in China, Indochina, and Tibet, and gained prestige and restless stalemate in Korea. In Italy, Egypt, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, to name a few, Communist parties have become strong contenders for power. In a recent poll taken in India, Chou En Lai, the Chinese Communist leader, was a three-to-one favorite over President Eisenhower. In the Middle East our prestige has rapidly diminished while that of Russia has increased. In

South America our Vice President has been spat upon and assaulted in a shameful demonstration of antagonism toward our country,

Even among the nations which seemed committed to us there is a rising tide of anti-Americanism. We have been attacked by the press in the Philippines, Japan, and the Republic of China, as well as in those less firmly committed lands whose friendship we seek by spending large sums in foreign aid - - Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Pakistan.

The Ugly American, page 283

The novel accurately reflects the predominant post-Sputnik outlook in America - - that America is losing its battle with Communism and must wake up and address the challenge more vigorously if it is to have any hope of attaining victory. This mindset paved the way for US involvement in Vietnam.