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# REVIEWS

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## West's New Morality

**THE AMBASSADOR** by Morris L. West. New York: Morrow. 275 pp. \$4.95.

*Reviewed by SAUL LANDAU, an editor of Studies on the Left and a director of the San Francisco New School.*

IF ANY OF HIS READERS have reached the point where they feel that the United States involvement in the Vietnam war is immoral, dangerous and barbaric, Morris West will try to convince them that it is not as simple as all that, that there are men in our diplomatic service who face real moral crises every day, who must deal with *all* the facts, with the cold reality of the Cold War, and who must sometimes arrange murders in order to behave in the best tradition of the *new morality*.

In *The Ambassador* West outlines this new morality, the fine tightrope that requires the quick wit and devotion to the service of a James Bond, and the logical mind of a Thomist. The characters, and especially the heroes, in West's version of the United States Foreign Service (Saigon Division), are morally akin to both the quiet and the ugly American, possessed by the Puritan

sense of Godly — or historical — mission, and by the frontier compulsion to help your neighbor whether he wants it or not. The Yankee way of life must be illuminated for the native, yet it is impossible for any but the chosen people in the promised land to achieve the mercantile nirvana that has driven Americans since the 1630s.

The Australian Catholic novelist uses this mentality to build characters and moral themes. Is it any wonder that there is not a real person in the book? That there is no conversation, only pointed dialogue? When the hero, Ambassador Maxwell Gordon Amberly, is assigned to Saigon, he tears himself away from a Zen teacher who was teaching him the path to illumination after the death of a faithful wife.

The Zen teacher leaves him with the symbolic question: "What will you do when they ask you to kill the cuckoo?" We know this is sym-

bolic because otherwise it makes no sense. When he arrives in Vietnam, with a loyal young aide whom he loves like a son, the Ambassador is confronted by a Buddhist monk — burning. Then he discovers a conflict between the CIA chief in Saigon and the ranking member of the embassy over strategy and tactics. The CIA man, with a Jewish name, Yaffa, is plotting a coup with the generals because President Cung ( Diem ) is no longer the best instrument of United States policy. The embassy man, Adams, thinks Cung has done all he can and that United States policy will be best served by retaining him. In any case, Adams feels the United States Embassy would get involved in determining the policy of another country and everyone knows this is contrary to United States ideals. This is the problem the Ambassador must solve: What will he do with the cuckoo?

Using the real events of 1962 and 1963 as the plot outline, West traces the moral dilemma that confronts the Ambassador. We are introduced to Phung Van Cung, described as a Jansenist saint, whose only failing is that he is aloof from the people.

In an adoring interview in the Jesuit magazine, *America*, West re-

veals: "The character of the fictional President of Vietnam . . . Phung Van Cung, is very strongly built on the character of former President Ngo Dinh Diem." Surprise!

He is also a little stubborn, but he wants to do the best for his country. He is described as an independent man who loves freedom and democracy — but also as an "intransigent Catholic out of the Middle Ages."

For Morris West the moral conflict is whether to support Cung or to participate in his overthrow — and eventually in his murder. At this point Adams, the moralist, protests, although his morality is clouded by practicality. He offers his resignation (after the coup, of course) so that the policy is not disrupted. While he believes in self-determination, he has not seen enough since 1954 to convince him that the United States has prevented the people of Vietnam from even the possibility of self-determination. His great moral indignation is brought out over the murder of Diem. In an act of heroism he takes Diem from the Presidential Palace to the House of the Number One Chinese. Here West fosters the myth of Chinese inscrutability. Everyone is afraid of the Number One Chinese in Saigon. His house is safer than the United States Embassy. In any case Cung, the Jansenist saint, after a polite and genteel conversation with the head Chinese, refuses refuge and goes out and gets himself murdered by the corrupt generals (in whose favor the Ambassador has decided).

**M**OST OF THE BOOK consists of a series of phony dialogues and artificial description, and when sex is thrown in, however briefly, it catches the reader unawares. It is almost as if West were trying to prove that despite his stiff construction and Platonic dialogue there is a human being in the book or somewhere behind it. But even among

diplomats is it really so stuffy?

*"That night I went to bed with Maggie Benton. Because she was eager and I was seized with an enormous need to affirm my virility, it was a very satisfying mating for both of us. When it came time to leave, she clung to me and wept a little and we both made beautiful promises. But before the last islands were out of sight, before we were swallowed by the empty air of the Pacific, I had already forgotten her."*

Suppose that the Ambassador was real, that he did resemble a real United States Ambassador—it makes our prospects all the more frightening. Or West "realistically" describing the way top diplomats discuss policy: The man from Washington is delivering the orders to the Ambassador, just before he goes to bed with the woman, who is never again mentioned in the book and has nothing to do with either the "philosophical" dialogue or the plot.

Is it McGeorge Bundy who meets the Ambassador in Hawaii?

*"Come on Max! We're old pros, the pair of us. To hell with all the bloody theoreticians. . . Let's have a swim and a drink. Maybe Maggie will take you to bed tonight! She's still a beauty, and she always did have a big yen for you!"*

*"It was good advice and I tried to take it. I surrendered myself to Maggie's effusive welcome. I changed into swimming trunks and drank Planters Punch on the lawn overlooking the beach. I swam in the warm, clear water, so different from the gray river and the stinking paddy swamps of Vietnam!"*

Are these really the people who make foreign policy decisions or is West a poor novelist, or both? He is not being critical, rather sympathetic to the plight of this man. But reality must be recognized and the way it works is part of that dilemma. The cynical Washington man says to the Ambassador,

*"If the generals take over we have to live with them."*

*"But the generals won't move without a sign from us. And that sign has to say that we will continue to back their Government in South Vietnam with aid and money and military support."*

*"So here's how we place the bets: money on the nose for the generals and a dollar on Cung to show. . . This is Washington, remember! This is democracy in action. . . It comes from the man at the top. But there's nothing in writing. There's no formal directive. . . If the generals win we had no part in it. If they lose, we pull you out and send a new man to make a new start with the Cung regime. It's rough, Max, I know, but that's the way it goes. Any objections?"*

*"No?"*

And there are no objections, except by Adams and finally by the young aide who infiltrates a Buddhist monastery and is murdered. But the objections are over minor issues, the most important of which is the murder of Cung: The killing of the Cuckoo. Cung, for all his stubbornness, is seen by West as the one hope against the Communist takeover. History according to West was changed because of a personality defect. In his *America* interview West said: ". . . Diem did an enormous job. The country was served well by him; he was truly *bene meritis*. And the country remembered this. The country wanted him, the Americans wanted him. . . It was just that he himself, by defect of personality, could not measure up to it. This is the tragedy that happens to people."

This squares with the *America* thesis on Diem: a Catholic dictator can't be all bad, although he is of course, subject to the failings of human nature — original sin and all that.

In the novel West accuses the Buddhists of allowing themselves, because of the tolerance of their

faith, to become infiltrated by Viet Cong Communists, and this is not just a fictional assertion. He told his Jesuit interviewer: "... I do believe that the Communists have strongly infiltrated the Buddhist movement in Vietnam." It is inconceivable that the Reds infiltrate the Catholics. Buddhists, of course, are vulnerable to this sort of thing.

West celebrates Cung (Diem) as the only moral man in the book, the only hero. The Ambassador might have been moral if he had behaved more in accord with his inner vision, which he learned from a Japanese Zen priest. This would have been to leave everything alone, for time cures all, and life itself is penance for sins. But he is a true American, as are all the Americans, frontiersmen with a mission that can't wait. However, the Ambassador can't bring the irascible Asian premier under United States control, namely, that he spend more time fighting the Viet Cong and less time persecuting Buddhists. We find out later, of course, that Cung was right all along because the Buddhists were tools of the Viet Cong.

**T**WO PAPER CHARACTERS are introduced in the book, one of which is clearly the author. He is an Australian novelist who meets the Ambassador and is asked to report on his conversation with the Premier. He does so willingly, becoming an agent of the United States government. He confirms the idea that the Premier is stubborn, i.e., unwilling to follow United States orders to the letter. West admits in *America* that "I gave at least moral assent to his (Diem's) death. You see, I had made some reports at the time to both the Australians and the Americans about my interviews with him."

Although West's protagonist, the Ambassador, after almost cracking up over the death of his young aide and the murder of Cung, winds up seeking peace in a Zen monastery, the business of soul salvation is a

phony theme. West sympathizes both with the Ambassador and with United States policy: "I didn't envy the Ambassador's position one bit, which is why the book was written in a sense sympathetic to the Ambassador." He makes the moral issue revolve around the murder of Cung, an American stooge to begin with, and even so the most ludicrous and unreal fictional character since James Bond. The real issues, the United States complicity in the subjugation of a people who are Buddhist, who do not want to kill each other, who desire peace and self-determination, and who would

probably vote for Ho Chi Minh if allowed—these issues are obfuscated.

*The Ambassador*, in which every page hints at the undiscovered moral problems about the war in Vietnam, actually contributes to the mystification and confusion about United States involvement in the civil war. The bad guys are the Viet Cong. But who are the good guys? They are the ones concerned about the murder of one man, about whom to support: an irritable President who is fiercely independent or a group of corrupt generals who will follow orders and ultimately serve United States purposes (democracy and

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freedom). These moral questions are so complex, so intricate, that no reader can decide without some shadow of doubt. These are the phony questions, used by a well-known novelist to propagate the very theme that the United States press and State Department have worked hard at establishing: the situation is too morally complicated

for any citizen to judge. It is best to leave to Caesar what is in the realm of Caesar.

In the end West sits on the moral fence, despite his righteousness. His interviewer asks him: "What will you do when they ask you to kill the cuckoo?" "Yes," replies West, "What will you do when they ask you to kill the cuckoo?"

## Millis' Demilitarization

**AN END TO ARMS** by Walter Millis. New York: Atheneum, 301 pp. \$5.95.

*Reviewed by* ARTHUR I. WASKOW, *Resident Fellow, Institute for Policy Studies and author of The Worried Man's Guide to World Peace and the forthcoming From Race Riot to Sit-in, 1919 and the 1960's.*

SEVERAL GENERATIONS of Americans have learned much of what they know about war and peace from Walter Millis. Millis began his career in 1931 with *The Martial Spirit*, in which he examined the reasons why the United States had fought its first overseas war. During the succeeding three decades he moved deeper and deeper into the heart of the war-peace issue, and built a reputation as one of the nation's most judicious students of military affairs. In recent years, he has begun an examination of the ways in which the war system itself might be abolished. His latest book, *An End to Arms*, presses forward on this most recent aspect of his life and work.

Millis' view of the abolition of war is most unorthodox, in a spirit that can be traced all the way back to the tone of his first book. He has never succumbed to the pompous glorification with which militarists have greeted war, nor to the pompous horriification with which pacifists and internationalists have treated it. As he explained in *The Martial Spirit*, "I have stressed the

satiric aspects of the war . . . Every war in modern times has presented precisely the same elements, though ordinarily they are concealed beneath the immense tragedy which war normally involves. Our War with Spain merely offered an opportunity to examine them in one case where that tragedy was not present." As Millis clearly recognizes, the tragedy of war was multiplied many times when H-bombs entered the arsenals. But the satiric aspects of war were multiplied as well, and it is upon the deeper meaning of multiplied satire that Millis chiefly dwells. It is upon the total absurdity of modern war, rather than upon its total destructiveness and wickedness, that Millis rests his belief that war can now be abolished.

To some readers, the "new" Millis, concerned with the abolition of war, seems utterly unconnected with the "old" military analyst. (Thus one bookseller in Washington reports that government officials buy "Millis on war," but not "Millis on peace.") Yet there are two clear roots in the older "Millis on war"

which reveal the basis for a flowering of his concern with the end of the war system. One of these roots was exposed in *Why Europe Fights* (1940), a study of the process by which the peace of Versailles grew into the war of Poland. Millis suggested there that the basic blame for the war must be placed neither upon Hitler, although he took "the most active part," nor upon Chamberlain and Daladier, although their weakness, when they might have been firm, helped lead to war—but rather upon the fact that "there was simply no way in which the knobably building blocks of the European nations could be put together into a stable and working system without a war." Millis did not try to suggest in *Why Europe Fights* what sort of system might hold European states together without a war, but he was clearly searching for an international-systems approach, and was going beyond the analysis of internal drives toward war that had characterized his earlier studies of the American entry into war in 1898 and 1917.

The second, and more directly nourishing root for Millis' recent work was a chapter of *Arms and Men* (1956). This book had reviewed, in terms of technological, political, and social history, the development of American military policy from Concord to Korea. Its last two chapters discuss what Millis calls "the hypertrophy of war," and the baffling problem that hypertrophy posed to military men and their political bosses. By "hypertrophy" Millis meant what can perhaps more graphically be described as elephantiasis. Anyone who recalls the horrifying photograph in our high school geography texts of an African native with elephantiasis trundling his testicles in a wheelbarrow will realize that a limb or an organ can become as utterly useless if it swells up to hundreds of times its normal size as if it had withered away entirely. This, Millis was suggesting, had happened to war. It had grown so