

Saturday Review

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The Tragic Flaw

A MISCONCEPTION is haunting the world. It is the idea that the main danger of war today is represented by the differences dividing the nations. These differences are serious enough, but they are not nearly so serious as the similarities.

What the nations have in common are ways of dealing with foreign affairs that are inconsistent with the requirements of peace. Their habits are conditioned by long centuries of acting and reacting in the arena of absolute sovereignty. These habits have invariably led to violence in the past and are producing violence today. The habits are readily identifiable. The absolutely sovereign nation arrogates to itself the right of decision, whether or not this impinges on the decisions of others. It has no desire to be governed or limited in its ability to propose or dispose. The aggregate of such desires is combustible and potentially catastrophic. Equally dangerous is the absence of objectivity by one nation in appraising the intentions or actions of others.

The tragic flaw in human society is the inability to apply the yardsticks or requirements of logic or decency that exist inside the nations to the national units in their relations with one another. Codes of morality laboriously built up over centuries for moderating and governing the behavior of men are set aside at precisely the point where they are most needed—the point of confrontation between nations. Up to that point, there are all sorts of restraints and procedures and devices for establishing the facts of

a case, for clarifying meaning, for measuring action alongside intent.

Inside the nation, an individual cannot draw up his own rules of evidence or invoke the right to make summary judgments where serious disputes with other individuals are concerned. But then, suddenly, all these elaborate safeguards and civilized procedures cease to have meaning or viability at the national summits. Everything goes into reverse at that point. The distinction between defending the national interests and pursuing them becomes almost impossible to define. Judgments can be arbitrary. The men at the top cannot function outside their context; their defined responsibility is to the nation, not to the human grouping as a whole.

War is not merely the result of a sudden breakdown in communication in the affairs of nations; it is the culmination of it. The communication failure is inherent in the way nations try to communicate and in the exemptions from objective reasoning that nations grant themselves. That is why wars grind on to exhaustion; total subjectivity destroys alternatives and options more thoroughly than bombs destroy cities and villages.

All the world's institutions of learning, no matter how hallowed and ivied, remain monuments to the collective ignorance of man in the techniques for maintaining and nurturing civilization itself. All the efforts of religions to make men aware of their ethical obligations and their spiritual resources are largely wasted and marginal unless they have

some bearing on the ideas and actions of the national societies in their intercourse with one another.

Meanwhile, too, all the turnings and churning of men and groups inside the nations—the quest for individual growth and gain, the thrust for even-higher levels of prosperity—all these can only be regarded as distractions so long as the world lacks a rational or workable method for preserving peace.

At the core of man's evolutionary struggle is the attempt to create the circumstances under which individuals are more rather than less likely to be decent and rational. Students of human behavior don't exhaust themselves trying to determine whether man is inherently good or evil; they concentrate on the conditions that make it possible for the good to emerge and the evil to be arrested. Absolute national sovereignty sets the stage for the least salutary manifestations of human behavior.

It is difficult to say where the new realizations and energies will come from. Most certainly it would be unreasonable and unrealistic to expect the men who are the highest representatives of the absolute sovereignties, and therefore their prime victims, to lead the way. They need—and many of them would welcome—the full involvement of all those who understand the requirements of objectivity, whose values begin with an awareness of the uniqueness of human life, and who know how to see the connections between cause and effect.

—N.C.

Digging a Well

By S. Dorman

THE old man talked to his rig as if it were a horse: gaddup, ya dumb thing. All day the house shook to the pound of the bit chewing through red rock.

(Water, water, running clear, come fill our cups.)

At night his rusty horse stood in the autumn mist until early the man came to call it by name: ya dumb thing, gaddup now. Sand, red rock, trap rock, the truck leaped with each deep bite.

(Water, we hear it pouring in our dream well which is never filled.) Five days the rig made thunder as it bored. Silence cooled our ears like liquid when it stopped; the old man cried: water's here!

(Water, rising clear, driven up the shaft of day to sunlight tilting on its skin. We kiss the image fractured there.)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Talking Points

MARIO PEI in his article "The Hidden Politics of Words" [SR, Jan. 15] took a very realistic view of the continuation of cultural colonialism in Africa and elsewhere. And he was also far-sighted enough to recognize "a larger linguistic picture, one that tends inevitably toward a single tongue for world-wide use, one in which all men, swallowing their national pride, will be able to communicate directly and practically." His expert belief in both the need and possibility of a neutral auxiliary tongue is reinforced by the current use of Esperanto in Asia, Europe, and America.

For while the élite of the developing nations has the time and money to study French and English in Oxford, Paris, and New York and use them as the *lingua franca*, this is only a temporary solution. The next generation of African leaders will not graduate from exile and jail or from the religious missionary school.

Do we understand the difficulty which the learning of English presents to the average foreigner? Do we really think that weak and newly established public school systems can put the learning of French and English into their curricula in addition, say, to Swahili in Tanzania when in the affluent United States we are still trying to teach English and decide how Amer-English should be written? I have seen how the radio stations at Dar es Salaam, Kampala, and elsewhere in East Africa were hampered by having to use seven or eight languages. And, as Dr. Pei suggests, the international auxiliary language, free from colonialist associations, provides a more comprehensive and permanent answer.

MARK STARR.

Long Island City, N.Y.

Liquor and the Law

WE WERE very surprised to read the derogatory remarks made by Horace Sutton [SR, Dec. 11] regarding the liquor-importation law that became effective October 1, 1965.

As I am sure you know, one of the problems facing the states today is sales to minors, and under the former federal statutes, any minor was permitted to bring back into this country one gallon of alcoholic beverages, which was tax- and duty- free. The alcoholic beverage laws in the majority of our states in the United States prohibit delivery of liquor to minors, possession thereof, home delivery of liquor, delivery by common carrier other than a licensed consignee, and importation less than that allowed by federal law. So in reality the former regulation flouted the enforcement of sales to minors and the state laws.

The passage of this new importation law has the effect of precluding the violation of the alcoholic beverage control laws of the several states, brings additional revenue into the state and federal treasuries, and greatly assists enforcement officers in carrying out their duties.

As in any other new regulation, it does



"I'm sorry, but this is a quintet."

take time to educate those who enforce it, but . . . I am sure that, if you have young children of your own, you would rather have the liquor confiscated than have them pay the duty and consume it illegally.

J. WILLIAM PACE, Chairman,
Joint Committee of the States to
Study Alcoholic Beverage Laws.
Washington, D.C.

Getting to the Theater

THE ARTICLE by John F. Wharton, "The Plight of the Out-of-Town Theatergoer" [SR, Jan. 22], prompts me to write and offer another idea meant to encourage the theatergoer, particularly after he has just finished his Sunday paper and is itching to order tickets. He's in the mood, ready to buy, but can't—not until Monday morning, by which time need has evaporated.

Worse yet, it isn't even possible to call up Monday morning and say, "Reserve two tickets for me." Instead, he has two choices, neither particularly palatable: get in line (if he lives in New York) or send in a mail order and hope for the best.

For whatever it's worth, I'd like to make a suggestion that someday may prove valuable: establish a theater credit card system.

The details we leave to those most directly concerned with the financial mechanics, but there are at least two main possibilities: a) have the consistent purchaser of tickets deposit \$50 as a drawing account or b) follow the lead of the other credit card systems. Assume that the individual is honest, give him a credit number for identification, and hold ticket orders phoned in against this number. This would be particularly effective if some central number were established that one might call on a Sunday, thus reaching individual theaters or all of them.

What's the worst that could happen? If, after a week, a check to cover this phone order has not been received, the tickets could be sold. What a marvelously inexpensive way to accommodate the customer and make him feel wanted!

LUCIEN R. GREIF.

New York, N.Y.

WE WANTED to see the World's Fair; we wanted to stay near the center of things in the bigtown; and we wanted to see *Hello, Dolly!* All in July.

We sent our money away for reservations to: New York World's Fair 1964-1965 Corporation, to a midtown hotel, and to the St. James Theatre. All in January.

We had a wonderful time in New York. So what's the difficulty?

H. C. PETERSON.

Lima, O.

MR. WHARTON's advocacy of a central theater agency is, I feel, well taken, but his advocacy of package deals is not. When my husband and I visit New York it is for a limited period of time. During our stay, we want to go to the theater, see some of the current museum and art gallery exhibits, shop, eat in certain restaurants, see a dance recital, and visit with two families and numerous friends. This is possible only by very careful planning (and asking our New York-based relatives to purchase tickets for us).

If we bought package deals for Broadway productions (whether they included plays we did not want to see, hotels we did not want to stay at, or dinners we did not care to eat) we would not be getting more for our money; we would merely be paying more for what we want. Suppose that in order to obtain tickets to a popular play we had to purchase comparably priced seats for two duds? Then we would be priced out of the theater just as effectively as if we had to go to a scalper.

MARGARET S. KORNEICH.

Dallas, Texas.

EDITOR'S NOTE: SR's theater critic, Henry Hewes, offers the following clarification: "If one is interested only in 'hits,' then what Mrs. Kornreich says is true. But just as with other products, the package deal in theater tickets often serves to introduce the consumer to a show he wouldn't have gone to otherwise but may appreciate more than the overblown hit whose surface values may have made it more alluring."