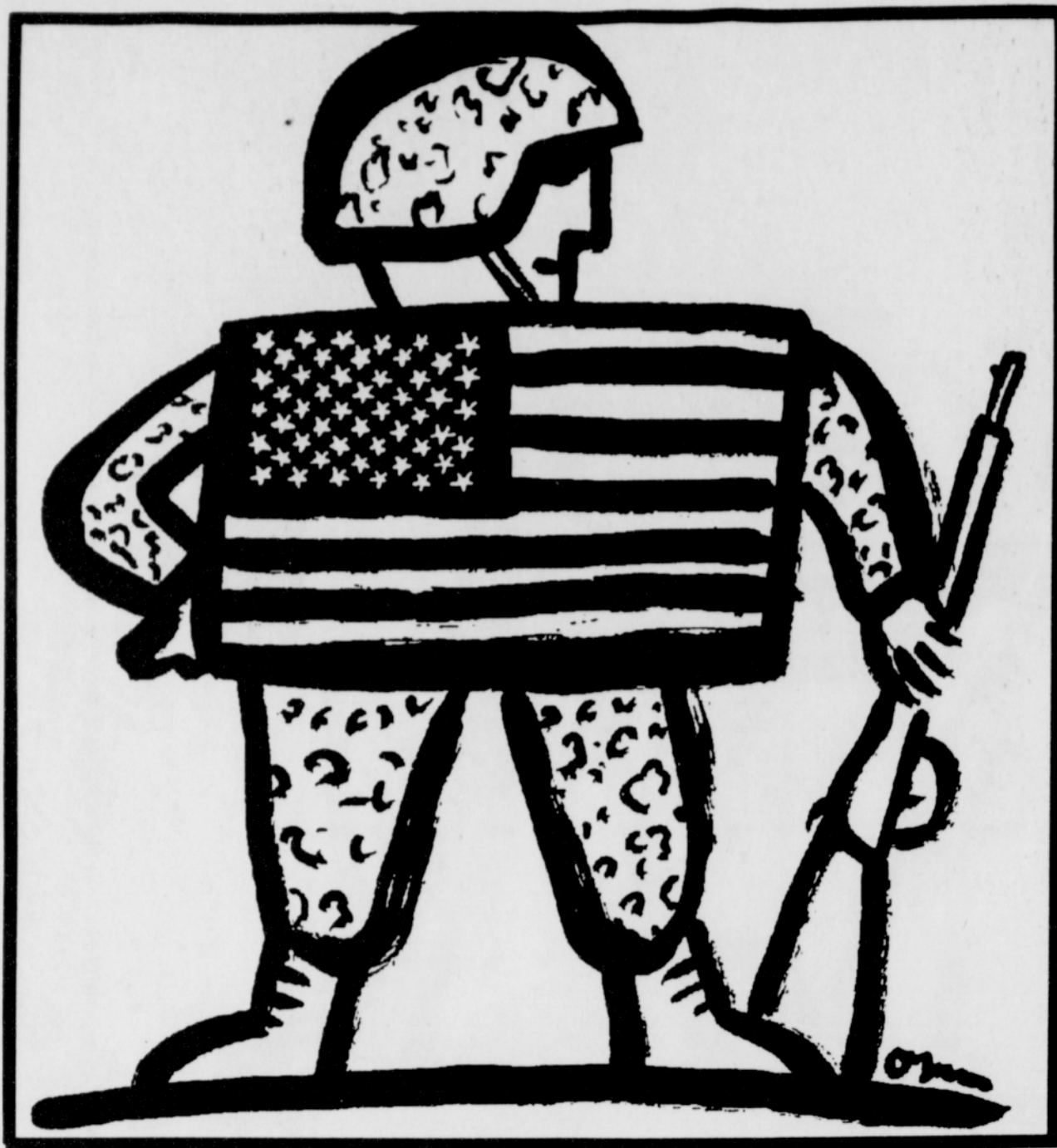




JOHN OVERMYER

EMPIRE

FROM PAGE 13

war with massive force on October 26 and drove the Americans southward to the line that originally divided Korea.

Once again one thinks of the way American leaders failed to comprehend the willingness of black citizens to settle for promises of future equality and freedom at home. They had first misread and misapplied that episode in their dealings with the Russians, then with the Chinese and finally, with increasing frequency, in Latin America, Africa, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The mistaken assumption that other poor and demeaned peoples would display similar forbearance almost seemed like the cosmic cost of such prejudice and racism.

The Roosevelts, the Trumans and the Achesons, and most of their successors, fundamentally misconceived the deeply patriotic — even loving — commitment of American blacks to what Martin Luther King Jr. called the 'Dream of America'. And because they could not acknowledge the existence of an American empire, they could not comprehend (let alone understand) that other so-called inferiors felt the same love for their cultures; and viewing America as an empire that threatened the integrity and existence of their cultures, they would ultimately fight rather than accept indirect destruction.

The empire had been brought to bay. Dwight David Eisenhower understood the essential truth, and further realized the future character of American society depended on how the culture responded. His first objective when he became President in 1953 was to end the Korean police action before it spiraled into World War 3. That accomplished he set about to calm Americans — cool them off and refocus their attention and energies on domestic development. He was a far more perceptive and cagey leader than many people realized at the time, or later.

The image of a rather absent-minded, sometimes bumbling if not incoherent Uncle Ike was largely his own shrewd cover for his serious efforts to get control of the military (and other militant cold warriors), to decrease tension with Russia and somehow begin to deal with the fundamental distortions of American society. He clearly understood that crusading imperial police actions were extremely dangerous, and he was determined to avoid World War 3. When Britain, France and Israel attacked Egypt in 1956 over the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the President called British Prime Minister Anthony Eden and scolded him sharply: "Anthony, you must have gone out of your mind."

When the moment came, Eisenhower could be just as blunt with Americans. A good many of them were probably

shocked when, in his farewell address of 1961, he spoke candidly and forcefully about the military/industrial complex that since 1939 had become the axis of the American political economy. That was such a catchy phrase not many of them noticed that he went on to assail the distortion of education involved in that consolidation of power. The historically free and critical university, he noted, "the fountainhead of free ideas and scientific discovery, has experienced a revolution in the conduct of research.... A government contract becomes virtually a substitute for intellectual curiosity."

The speech was not an aberration. Eisenhower had become ever more deeply concerned with those issues after retiring from the Army. While it was true he was not an intellectual, and was conservative in many ways, it is also true he had a firm sense of how the State had gradually taken over the very process of creating and controlling basic ideas — the ways of making sense of reality. Or, in a different way, how the State used its extensive control of information, and its ability to make major decisions in the name of security, to create an ideology ever more defined in content as well as rhetoric as an imperial way of life.

Eisenhower's most serious weakness did not lie in his fidelity to a rudimentary version of marketplace economics, or even in his excessive caution about how quickly and how far he could move the American citizenry away from its imperial obsessions with Russia, China and other revolutionary movements. It was defined by his unwillingness to translate his valid perceptions into strong policies and active, sustained leadership. He lacked former President Hoover's (or even Churchill's) toughness about accepting the limits of American power and his knowledge the only way to deal with the costly and unhealthy consequences of empire was to begin creating a different way of life. Given his charisma, Eisenhower could have initiated an irreversible momentum.

Failing to do that, he left no dynamic legacy. The militant advocates of the global imperial way of life quickly reasserted their power and policy. They, too, recognized that the Chinese counter-intervention in Korea had brought the empire to a critical juncture. Their response was to reassert American power and get on with policing the world in the name of benevolent progress. Led by John Fitzgerald Kennedy and calling themselves the New Frontiersmen, they perfectly expressed the psychopathology of the empire at bay and its consequences. Onward and outward in the spirit of NSC-68. "Ask not what your country can do for you," intoned Kennedy in his 1961 inaugural address, "ask what you can do for your country." By country, of course, was meant the empire.

Kennedy and his advisers had the brilliant perception to talk about empire in the classic idiom of the frontier. That propaganda gem is of itself almost enough to justify honoring them as the cleverest imperial leaders of their generation. The best Henry Kissinger could do a few years later was to blurt out a crude reference to the same idiom, presenting himself as Gary Cooper in the movie *High Noon*. The excessively self-conscious Doctor Cowboy will ride on stage in good time but let us concentrate for the moment on those Kennedy hands who were born and bred to empire.

"Our frontiers today," cried Kennedy, "are on every continent." America has "obligations," he explained, "which stretch 10,000 miles across the Pacific, and 3,000 or 4,000 miles across the Atlantic, and thousands of miles to the south. Only the United States — and we are only 6% of the world's population — bears this kind of burden." He understandably neglected to mention that the burden was somewhat eased by the benefits of controlling a grossly disproportionate percentage of the world's resources. He was more concerned with creating the psychological mood of impending doom: "The tide of events has been running out and time has not been our friend."

The failure of the effort early in 1961 to overthrow Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba intensified that trauma. Not only did the rhetoric become more apocalyptic ("This time of maximum

danger") but Kennedy immediately began a massive buildup in the spirit of NSC-68 (three special requests for extra funds during 1961). Then he indulged himself in a truly arrogant and irresponsible act. Knowing the United States enjoyed a massive superiority in strategic weapons, Kennedy publicly goaded, even insulted the Soviet Union about its inferiority.

He scared the Russians viscerally, and in the process not only prompted them to launch a desperate effort to correct the vast imbalance but very probably touched off the internal Soviet dialogue that led to the confrontation in 1962 over Russian missiles in Cuba. The more evidence that appears about that moment on the edge of the abyss, the more it seems probable the Russians never had any intention of going to war. Taken with all appropriate skepticism, Premier Nikita Khrushchev's account very likely contains the essence of the truth: Moscow was less concerned with the possibility of a second invasion of Cuba than with somehow — even at sizable risk — jarring Washington into a realization that, if pushed to the wall, the Russians would fight rather than surrender. Given their grave inferiority, the only way they could make that point was by creating a situation that would dramatize for Americans the threat as experienced daily by the Soviet Union.

Kennedy's understanding of the message was limited. He spoke of the need to avoid further such crises, but he clearly felt that America had regained the initiative, that he was now free to deploy American forces to prevent or control further change that might weaken the American empire. He did talk about accepting diversity among the poor and developing nations, and about programs to facilitate some social and economic improvements in Latin America and other countries. And he did make some efforts, as in the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps, to act on that rhetoric. But he also embarked upon an obsessive campaign to murder Castro, and he deployed between 15,000 and 20,000 American troops (many of them in the field as 'advisers') to intervene in the revolutionary civil war in Vietnam. Those frontiers on every continent were going to remain frontiers in the traditional American meaning of a frontier — a region to penetrate and control and police and civilize.

This essay, an effort to review our development as an empire and to encourage a searching dialogue among ourselves about the character of our culture, does not attempt to offer a detailed construction of American foreign policy. Hence it would be a contradiction in terms to wander off into a blow-by-blow account of recent events. But it does seem useful to explore some of the contemporary aspects of our imperial way of life.

We begin with the relationship between NSC-68 and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s; and assume that American leaders, whatever their prejudices or racism, believed the empire would provide blacks and other disadvantaged groups (including poor whites) with greater opportunities and rewards. Their most popular euphemism for empire — growth — was invoked on the ground that even small shares of an ever larger pie would produce improvement for everyone. And elitists like Acheson had reason to believe that minorities and other poor would continue to be patient until the fruits of empire were harvested.

But the war in Korea, and the related increase in military spending, revealed the true priorities of the empire and hence dramatized the discrepancy involved in talking about empire in terms of liberty, freedom, equality and welfare while denying those benefits to large numbers of people at home. That contradiction was further highlighted by the nonviolent nature of black protest against being denied elementary equity on the buses of Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 and in the eating places of Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960. Some white Americans recognized and became upset about that contrast, but neither Eisenhower nor Kennedy devised an effective response. The former was socially and politically too conservative and cautious, and the latter was more concerned with standing up to the Russians all along America's global frontier.

But Lyndon Baines Johnson did make a brave — and in the end tragic — effort to resolve that visceral contradiction in the imperial way of life. He tried to make major improvements in the quality of life for the poor and disadvantaged of all colors (and therefore for all other Americans) and at the same time secure the frontier in Indochina. That proved to be impossible because by 1964-65 the dynamics of empire as a way of life left him no room to maneuver. Given the legacy of prejudice and racism and the global definition of America's political economy and its security as formulated in NSC-68, Johnson was trying to swim in the sky. But at least he tried.

Stated bluntly, the President could not muster the votes to help the poor at home unless he honored the imperial ethic in Vietnam. He simply did not enjoy the personal and political advantages that enabled Eisenhower to move quietly toward a less grandiose foreign policy. That meant any effort to make structural reforms at home would provoke a militant reaction around the classic imperial theme of "Who Lost Whatever Wherever?"

Johnson first tried to finesse the war issue. Therein lies the stuff of great drama. A modern Shakespeare might well do it this way: If only LBJ had gone with his instinct as a Southerner to recognize in the Viet Cong foe the American blacks driven to violence, then he might — just might — have begun the process whereby Americans said no to empire and yes to the vision of community. But the imperial North had forever scarred the South — left it resentful and determined to prove its valor and equality. There is a great play in that old fear of the South transformed into a recognition of the truth that one either frees the slaves or confronts a rebellion. But the North failed to learn that lesson during Reconstruction after the Civil War, and so Johnson had no allies to help him redefine the truth of America.

Old Town Framing Co.

1287 COMMERCIAL ST.
ASTORIA 325-5221

THE COLUMBIAN CAFE

1114 MARINE DR.
ASTORIA