

worldview

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AN END TO ILLUSIONS?

In a recent issue of *U.S. News and World Report* Professor Hugh Seton-Watson admirably summarizes the choice that faces the West: "Either the peoples must accept more discomfort and the party leaders must face more unpopularity . . . or they risk being forced to decide between mass suicide and capitulation to the enemy. 'A high standard of living is the first priority' is just not true. To be alive and not to be a slave is more important than to live opulently."

The platforms adopted by both political parties, particularly in their planks on defense and economic assistance, and the positions which have been stated by both Presidential candidates, offer some hope that this choice may finally be made clear to the American people. James Reston once described the besetting illusion of Americans in world affairs as the illusion of omnipotence—the illusion that this nation can somehow *will* its triumph without, in the process, making unpleasant sacrifices. The greatest service Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kennedy can do the nation this autumn is to end this illusion forever by speaking the hard truths of international life in this decade.

These truths are outlined with remarkable precision in Professor Seton-Watson's essay "Neither War nor Peace," and they could serve as a guide to responsible campaign discussion of Cold War issues. The sum of them is that the struggle between Democracy and Communism is not nearing resolution through "victory" for either side—or even through stalemate; the struggle, rather, is entering its most dangerous phase. The leaders of the Western nations, unfortunately, have done little to prepare their people for the tasks that this phase will impose. On the contrary, they have too often spoken and acted as though the public good could be served even while every private good was pursued and achieved. This is the first—and perhaps the most fatal—illusion from which the nation must free itself. But it is not the only one. In the areas of defense policy, of economic assistance, and of the Soviet Union, we must face the uncomfortable facts we have too long evaded.

In defense policy we must prepare ourselves for the possibility (and it may be the best possibility we can hope for) of fighting a series of "limited" wars; and if we are to survive these we must greatly expand our conventional forces, even while we maintain an adequate nuclear deterrent. This, obviously, will demand large sacrifices from the American people.

We must realize also that our response to the economic challenge of the poorer nations has been at best tragically inadequate. If freedom is to have any future in the new nations of Asia and Africa a massive effort in economic aid must be made by the United States. And this too, obviously, will shake our easy dreams of an "affluent society."

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Early in the last decade, and even in the middle of it, we heard much talk in this country about an imminent (even though a mysterious) "collapse" of Soviet power. We tended, far too much, to see Communist power in the light of a devil-theory of history and to think that our righteousness could exorcise it away.

Much of our national rhetoric still suggests that Communism is one of history's temporary, more unpleasant aberrations, and that is bound to disappear. This illusion is the basis of many of our worst troubles.

T.S. Eliot described the comfortable generation of the 1920's in the much-quoted lines: "Here were a decent, godless people; their only monument an asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls." There is a danger, certainly, that this could be the American epitaph. The campaign of this election year may prove to be no better than most others; it may become another exercise in flattering the national ego and comforting the people with hopes of easy victories. But history is moving fast: whole continents are in eruption and the time for illusions is past. It is the high responsibility of both candidates to recognize these facts themselves, and to make them plain to the citizenry.

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