

## WHAT ARE YOUR STANDARDS?

Stephen Olsen, St. Olaf College

Only a few weeks ago, one of the most tragic incidents of the Viet Nam war occurred. You probably remember reading about it -- the battle involving 134 Vietnamese soldiers, four American advisors, and the Viet Cong. During the battle, the Viet Cong announced that all they wanted was the four Americans -- the Viet Nam soldiers could go home safely -- if they gave up the Americans. The entire Viet Nam force, 134 soldiers, deserted, leaving the four Americans, who never had a chance.

What was your reaction to that? My first reaction was contempt for those who had deserted and sorrow for the doomed American soldiers; furthermore, it raised the question -- Is the whole thing really worth it? Why are we spending billions of dollars and losing hundreds of American lives for a cause that the people in the very country that we are trying to defend aren't willing to fight for? An understanding of this tragic incident and the situation out of which it arose is essential to the thesis that I shall develop today: Before judging the overt actions undertaken by the United States, we should view them in the light of our ultimate goals.

I am extremely concerned with what seems to be a needless waste of life. My draft rating came a few months ago, and believe me, I follow with great compassion the international strife that could easily engulf me. You see, I'm one of those who still believes in the "old fashioned" concept of freedom. And when this freedom is threatened, I begin to get concerned!

You've got a big stake in America's international affairs too, probably more than you realize. Besides losing over 230 American lives in Viet Nam, those of you who are economically orientated may be interested to note that every time an American aircraft is shot down, it costs the U.S. over \$2 million. And you, too, are having



your way of life threatened -- and whether you consider that good or bad, it's still one of the most significant problems facing you today.

A modern philosopher noted, "We never pass judgement on anything or anybody without, by that act . . . , defining our own human limitation. The act of judging always, mercilessly, judges, first of all ourselves." If we are to judge our nations actions from the standpoint of goals, we must have a good understanding of just what they are. All of President Johnson's statements concerning our involvement in Viet Nam emphasize that our underlying goal is the protection of a basic ideological point of view. We have certain conceptions about people and about how things should be done -- ideas of freedom and democracy -- that we are trying to preserve. But I don't think we should be content just "to preserve" democracy. We can agree with Woodrow Wilson that democracy cannot be safe anywhere until it is safe everywhere, and with a prominent newscaster who recently observed that if we don't make a stand in Viet Nam, we'll be urged for the same reason not to take a stand in the Phillipines nor in Japan, nor anyplace until we face the communists on our own shores. Then it may be too late.

When we lose sight of this goal, our actions in Cuba, Viet Nam, and elsewhere are misinterpreted. Arnold Toynbee in Civilization on Trial stated, "It is a paradoxical but profoundly true and important principle of life that the most likely way to reach a goal is to be aiming not at the goal itself, but at some more ambitious goal beyond it." But it's hard to keep that ambitious goal, in our case, freedom and democracy, in sight with all the obstacles like Panama, Indonesia, and Egypt blocking the view. Obstacles, as someone once said, are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off the goal. The obstacles are, indeed, there for those who want to look for them -- and it's all too easy to be discouraged by them. However, our long-range goals are needed to avoid the frustrations that come from failure to reach the sub-goals. So, too, when we judge the merits of our country's short term actions, we must consider their effects on the preservation of freedom, democracy, and our way of life. Now, I suppose there are a few cynics who are just waiting for me to start waving the flag and singing a few nostalgic verses of America the Beautiful. We've become so quick to classify any expounding of our way of life as trite and all statements about it as a series of cliches. However, if you are inclined to view our country's basic conceptions of human existence as a series of cliches to rattle off, then I believe you should re-think your views. Louis Seltzer observed, "Too many of us stand at the foot of democracy's tree plucking its ripened fruit, while too few of us cultivate its soil and nurture its roots."

I think most of the criticism of our actions in foreign countries stems from this general apathy toward democracy prevalent in America today. Modern problems are complex, the cold-war seems to be endless, and the steady rain of communist propaganda fosters in us an apathetic attitude. But, this is something we can't let happen. Democracy doesn't flourish on sudden, startling, and sensational deeds of heroism. Its strength derives from the individual's constant commitment to civic responsibility. In this sense, democracy always is a goal to be reached, not a program that is finished.

Therefore, we must be willing to defend and advance this way of life, not just in Viet Nam, but also in Indonesia, in Panama, in Cambodia, in Cuba, in the Congo, and all over the world. Perhaps it's this seemingly ubiquitous challenge to our way of life that leads Secretary of State Dean Rusk to quip when asked by his jet pilot where they were going, "Go anywhere -- we've got problems all over!" But opposition to what we believe doesn't necessarily lead to defeat -- it merely shows the job that we have left to do. What we need isn't a new program; we have foreign aid, the peace corps, and the military commitments of our country toward places like Cuba and Viet Nam -- what we lack is the enthusiastic commitment to the individual American citizens! You see, we have to make a stand and fight for what we believe, or we'll have nothing left to fight for. These battles aren't won solely on the battlefield or in the embassy -- they're won too by the support we give them and our way of life here at home.

Incidents like the desertion in Viet Nam will occur again. Instead of the jungle, it may be in the desert, in the mountains, or in the forests. And your reaction to them may not be any different from what it was in the first instance. I'm not asking you to always arrive at the same conclusion about past, present, or future foreign policy of the U.S. I can't give you a "3 step" plan to solve all our foreign affairs problems or public apathy. The problem is much too complex for that. You'll have to make your own decisions about freedom. What I am asking of you today is simply this: when you make decisions about the merits or demerits of our overt actions, make them from the standpoint of the ultimate goals we have been talking about today. And keep in mind what Harold Stassen once said, "There will be selfishness and greed and corruption and narrowness and intolerance in the world tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow. But pray God we may have the courage and the wisdom and the vision to raise a definite standard that will appeal to the best that is in man; and then strive mightily toward that goal."