

States of the Union

LEARNING ABOUT ASIA

BY RICHARD J. MARGOL'S



WHILE CONGRESS was appropriating another \$30 billion for the war in Vietnam, the Board of Education in my town was trying futilely to head off a taxpayers' revolt by recommending a pre-cut, no-frills budget—the sort of educational program that only a miser or a misanthrope would have thought lavish. One of the “frills” the Board considered, and then discarded, was a high school course in Asian studies, a last-minute effort to give our children a little knowledge about the history, culture and politics of half the world's population. It never had a chance.

Seven of Georgetown, Connecti-

cut's sons have already died in Vietnam. We parents saw their photographs and read their obituaries in the local weekly; we watched the slow funeral processions winding down Route 33, the headlights illuminating nothing at all in the noonday glare; and we silently counted the years before our children would reach draft age. It seemed to some of us that those sad processions, like the war itself, would wind on forever.

Those seven young men fell in a land they never understood, to protect us from alleged dangers they but dimly perceived. Their leaders had spoken solemnly of dominoes and Dienbienphu, of China and Communism and conquest. But what did those seven boys know of such matters? What had we taught them? Here is how they were introduced to China by one of their grade-school social studies textbooks (*Man Changes His World*, L. W. Singer, 1963):

“Those early travelers called China *Cathay*.”

“Oh, I like that name,” said Carol. “It sounds exciting and strange.”

“It does, doesn't it?” said Mrs. Parsons. “And *Cathay* was exciting and strange to people from far-away places. Travelers to China have always found it interesting. . . .”

In most elementary school textbooks China is simply quaint Cathay, a nice place to visit. As the child grows up, however, he finds that quaint Cathay has mysteriously become a world-wide menace. “Red China continued to threaten world peace by its activities,” notes my son's eighth-grade history text (*The Making of Modern America*, Houghton Mifflin, 1964). But that's not all. The text makes it clear that the very existence of Communist China is a direct consequence of U.S. blundering:

“Today many people believe that it was unwise for this country to withdraw its support from Chiang when he was fighting to keep China from falling into the hands of the Communists. Others hold that the Nationalist government had so little support among the people that only United States military intervention could have checked the Reds. All agree that the worst defeat for United States foreign policy and the

greatest victory for postwar Communism took place in China.”

Embedded in the text—and, consequently, in the minds of our children—is the myth of American omnipotence. This myth seems to have been a basis of Lyndon Johnson’s pledge in 1963 that he was not going to be the “President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.” He assumed he had a choice, and that the choice, fundamentally, was military in nature. With the best of intentions—in order to prevent another great “victory for postwar Communism”—Johnson invited one of the worst disasters in American history.

Marvin Kalb and Elie Abel have analyzed the myth in *The Roots of Involvement*. “We found no substantial evidence that the United States was driven by imperialistic motives,” they note. “Instead, we found a rich, generous, and powerful nation stumbling, step by downward step, into the longest, most costly, and most disruptive war Americans have ever fought, in the misguided belief that when things go wrong anywhere in the world the commitment of sufficient American dollars and—if need be—of American soldiers, must surely put them right.”

One wonders which textbooks our leaders read in school. President Kennedy was something of a historian, yet he seemed to know nothing of guerrilla warfare. Again Kalb and Abel write: “The President became more and more convinced that guerrilla insurgency was an entirely new form of warfare, requiring an entirely new kind of response. . . . In fact, guerrilla warfare was precisely what had confronted American troops for twenty years in the Philippines at the turn of the century.”

The Philippine experience could have been instructive. It contained all the seeds of Vietnam—the atrocities, the repatriation camps, the strange idea that by killing women and children we were somehow saving them. It began as a modest police action—the Filipinos were fighting

for their independence, after we had “liberated” them from Spain—and soon grew into a big, bloody war. “I want no prisoners,” said General Jacob Smith to his troops. “I wish you to kill and burn; the more you kill and burn the more you will please me.”

As the killing and burning increased, the doves at home began to flutter. “You have wasted nearly 600 millions of treasure,” thundered Senator George Brisbie Hoar (R-Mass.). “You have sacrificed nearly 10,000 American lives, the flower of our youth. You have devastated provinces. You have slain uncounted thousands of people you desire to benefit. You have established reconcentration camps. . . .”

THese are matters of record, but little of the record has found its way into schoolbooks. In my son’s text, the Filipino rebellion is disposed of in two muted paragraphs. “It took three years of stubborn fighting at a cost of 175 million dollars,” the authors observe, “to show the Filipinos that the United States meant to rule the islands.” To their credit, the authors also point out that “Americans who opposed imperialism read with shame of the cruel guerrilla warfare adopted first by the rebels and then by American troops—of fire, looting and the torture of prisoners.”

Another junior high school text (*This Is America’s Story*, Houghton Mifflin, 1963) describes the 20-year war in a single sentence: “Jungle fighting took many lives on both sides before the revolt finally ended. After order had been restored. . . .” One must assume that these are the sort of fatuous glossings to which young John Kennedy and young Lyndon Johnson were exposed years ago. A disaster of major proportions was treated as a minor problem; at worst, a mild aberration. Would current history have been different if textbooks then had emphasized our adventure in the Philippines as a moral and military blunder, a colos-

sal defeat for American foreign policy? What if the Board of Education in Blanco County, Texas, circa 1920, had spent a few thousand dollars for a course in Asian studies?

Of course, our leaders didn’t have to look beyond America’s borders to find precedents for the Vietnam “counterinsurgency.” The U.S. Army engaged in precisely the same type of warfare against the Florida Seminoles in 1835-41. Regiment after regiment marched into the swampy jungle, only to be ambushed by the Seminoles and malaria. Each time, as John Tebbel and Keith Jernison point out in *The American Indian Wars*, “the collapse of Indian resistance was announced as imminent. . . . It became an embarrassing joke in Washington.”

When the defeated Seminoles finally emerged from their hideouts (having consented, at last, to their removal to Oklahoma), “it was difficult to understand why the best talent of the Regular Army had been unable to demolish this tatterdemalion force in six years of warfare. They were emaciated, cadaverous, barefoot and in rags. Their women and children were . . . starved and nearly naked.”

Few Americans back then questioned the policy of Indian removal that led to the senseless war. It seemed clear that Florida had to be made safe for settlers, land speculators and slaveholders (whose runaway slaves were hiding in the Everglades and marrying into the Seminole tribe). The Seminole war was plainly “in the national interest.”

My son’s textbook makes no mention of the Seminole war. But it does devote a few lines to Vietnam: “The United States . . . dispatched over 10,000 servicemen as advisers, instructors, pilots, and supporting units. In the opinion of President Kennedy, the preservation of the independence of South Vietnam was one of the ‘vital interests’ of the United States.” The opinion, of course, was open to question; in the textbook no questions are asked.