

OPINION*

THE PLAIN LESSONS
OF A BAD DECADE

by John Kenneth Galbraith

The decade of the sixties, in the absence of a massively successful revisionist exercise, will be counted a very dismal period in American foreign policy. Indeed, next only to the cities, it will be considered the prime disaster area of the American policy and it will be accorded much of the blame for the misuse of energies and resources that caused the trouble in urban ghettos and the alienation and eruption in the universities. The result was in very dim contrast with the promise.

The promise was bright—"Let the word go forth . . . to friend and foe alike," President Kennedy said in his inaugural address, and no one doubted the power and not many the wisdom of the word. The prestige of foreign policy in 1961 was enormous. No one much cared about who was to run the Treasury. It mattered greatly who was to be the Secretary or Under Secretary or even an Assistant Secretary of State, although there were enough of the latter to form a small union. In the early months of the new Administration, numerous quite marvelous ideas were spawned for strengthening or improving or revising our overseas affairs. There was to be an expanded and reorganized aid program, a Grand Design for Europe (subject to some uncertainty as to what that design might be), the Alliance for Progress, the "Kennedy Round," a Multilateral Force, the Peace Corps, counterinsurgency, an expanded recognition of the role of the new Africa, a dozen other enterprises which did not achieve the dignity of a decently notorious rejection.

*Each issue of FOREIGN POLICY will carry a guest editorial by a distinguished contributor. The editors are pleased to commence this series with Mr. Galbraith's article.

Now ten years later one looks back on—seemingly—an uninterrupted series of disasters. The comic-opera affair at the Bay of Pigs; the invasion of the Dominican Republic to abort a Communist revolution that had to be invented after the fact; severe alienation throughout Latin America; broken windows, burned libraries and more or less virulent anti-Americanism elsewhere in the world; over everything else, the brooding, frustrating, endlessly bloody, infinitely expensive and now widely rejected involvement in Indochina.

So it seems in retrospect. And at least one of the successes of these years seems a good deal less compelling when one looks back on it. In the Cuban missile crisis President Kennedy had to balance the danger of blowing up the planet against the risk of political attack at home for appeasing the Communists. This was not an irresponsible choice: to ignore the domestic opposition was to risk losing initiative or office to men who wanted an even more dangerous policy. There is something more than a little wrong with a system that poses a choice between survival and domestic political compulsion. The missile crisis did not show the strength of our policy; it showed the catastrophic visions and resulting pressures to which it was subject. We were in luck, but success in a lottery is no argument for lotteries.

II.

Yet not everything in these years went wrong. Our relations with Western Europe and Japan caused no particular pain; these had been the theaters of ultimate misfortune in the twentieth century, always assuming war to be such. And, over the 1960's, relations with the Communist countries improved both in the vision and in the reality.

When the decade began, the official vision of the Communist world was still that of a political monolith (the word was still much used) relentlessly bent on the destruction of what few were embarrassed to call the Free World. If there were divisions within the Communist world, they were presumably on how best to pursue the revolution. Foreign policy vis-à-vis the "Sino-Soviet bloc," as it still was called, was accordingly a facilitating instrument for a larger conflict. During his long tenure as Secretary of State, Dean Rusk was criticized for his conviction that foreign policy was subordinate to military convenience. But if conflict with the Communist world was the great and inevitable fact, the Rusk view was at least consistent. Diplomacy, like truth, is an early casualty of war.

But that vision has now dissolved. True believers are still to be found in the more airless recesses of the Pentagon. Retired Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs; Joseph Alsop, Kenneth Crawford, one or two other aging sages; cold war diplomats solemnly contemplating the world over their martinis in the Metropolitan Club, still evoke the Communist conspiracy on which their fame and fortune were founded. They rejoice in anything that seems to suggest a revival of the conflict; they try to warn a generation that does not share their wisdom. But their influence is waning, and their message replaces even nostalgia in what remains. The terrible fact