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Finger Exercises On Themes of State

CRISES OF THE REPUBLIC

By Hannah Arendt
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By EDWIN M. YODER Jr.

HANNAH ARENDT IS that rarity of our time, a genuine political philosopher—our best since Walter Lippmann went into retirement. This is a short collection of four of her recent finger exercises on great themes of state.

The best and most stimulating is "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," a meditation on the Bantam edition of the Papers. Miss Arendt offers us an interpretation of their lessons that is both refreshing and bleak. Insofar as these lessons were not obscured by the judicial flap over publication, they have been drawn variously by almost everyone with a special point of view to advance. The war's apologists maintain that the Papers distort the policymaking process. The war's critics maintain, as vehemently, that they lay bare a cynical imperialism, the plunder of an Asian Naboth's Vineyard, quite as calculating and unadmirable as 19th-century colonialism at its worst.

That this road to disaster was paved with petty deceptions Miss Arendt would not deny. As usual, she notices more subtle points. "The most momentous and best-guarded secret" disclosed by the Papers, she finds, is that military and civilian policymakers so often disregarded the accurate forecasts of the intelligence gatherers. The Papers show, for instance, that the CIA never subscribed to the so-called "domino theory," never endorsed the theory that the Viet Cong were "externally directed or supported" to a major degree by Hanoi, and never believed that massive strategic bombing of North Vietnam would shatter the insurgency in the South. In each case, however, official policy was postulated and sold to the American public on precisely contrary assumptions. Why?

Stupidity and cynicism cannot be ruled out, but Miss Arendt offers the alternative hypothesis of "defactualization"—a lapse of ability to absorb and deal with reality. Instead, she believes, an eager appetite for illusion prevailed: "It is as though the normal process of self-deceiving were reversed; it was not as though deception ended with self-deception. The deceivers started with self-deception . . . they anticipated general belief and victory in the battle for people's minds." They nearly won it; but accurate press coverage of the war, and harsh events, kept breaking through the veil.

Miss Arendt has, I think, put her finger on a solid truth that is no less difficult to grasp for all its solidity. Indeed we recoil from it. "Defactualization" is more disturbing, less palatable, than the devil theories. It is easier to deal with falsehood than with illusion. None of us is eager to believe that the errors of Vietnam flowed from a deeper flaw in the policymaking role that somehow mysteriously immunized it against both the lessons of history and the reports of the CIA. Deliberate liars may be found out and expelled: it is far less easy to decide what to do about a system that encourages "defactualization."

The other essay collected here are, for various reasons, less interesting. Like the essay on the Pentagon Papers, "On Violence" mercilessly exposes a disorder—the monstrous growth in the technology of weapons and force, coupled with a forfeiture of assent by legitimate political authority—for which no easy solution can be suggested.

I take it, however, that the accompanying essay on "Civil Disobedience" is designed to offer practical counsel for the problems posed by the others. Miss Arendt argues here for a more tolerant, less legalistic view of the systematic dissent from established law or policy that we are accustomed to condemn (or praise) as "civil disobedience." It is, she argues, a form of legitimate opposition and should enjoy institutional sanction, the more so as it embodies that action by "voluntary association" that Tocqueville found at the heart of American political genius. It is, in her interpretation, a kind of Calhounianism-without-race that becomes unavoidable when large numbers of citizens cannot accept a policy, yet are denied redress in the courts because of the "political question" doctrine.

Here I must quibble. It is true, as she says, that the debate over civil disobedience has been too much dominated by lawyers and lawyerly modes of debate—as great issues of state often are in this country. But it is not certain that massive civil disobedience can be successfully institutionalized. It relies on the rule of law. And even if the "political question" doctrine were swept away, and the justices of the Supreme Court behaved even more like philosopher-kings than they do, it is not foreordained that they would offer the dissenters relief, and fairly certain that if they did so the elected policymakers would pay little attention in extreme situations.

Hannah Arendt

Miss Arendt's writing is at times forbidding, usually because it is rich and subtle beyond our uses, though too often because she had a certain fondness for the mere manipulation of terms. But it is always rewarding. She is our most pertinent and penetrating—and accordingly our most practical—political thinker. We feel about her essay, as we do about the great classics of political thought, that while it is pleasant to agree, agreement is not the immediate goal. The true reward lies in her capacity to stretch our minds—to call us from the easy banalities to the rigor of first principles.

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