PAST PERFECT

Vietnam Redux?

PERRY GLASSER

Wayne L. Morse was elected to the US Senate by the people of Oregon as a Republican, split with his party over McCarthyism, and in the later 1950s was persuaded by Lyndon Johnson to join the Democratic Caucus. In 1964, he was one of only two senators to vote “nay” on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the congressional resolution that endorsed presidential expansion of military force in Southeast Asia. Morse believed the resolution violated the War Powers Clause of the US Constitution.

The North Vietnamese Navy had allegedly opened fire on US naval vessels on two separate occasions. There is considerable evidence that no attack ever actually occurred, neither the first nor last time a convenient fiction allowed an imperial president to propel America into conflict.

First Johnson and then Nixon prosecuted America’s involvement in a civil war in Southeast Asia purportedly to contain communism and expansionist China. Neither president felt compelled to ask for a declaration of war. By some estimates, the Vietnam conflict cost as many as 2.5 million lives. The fall of Saigon in April 1975 marked the unification of North and South Viet Nam, the goal for which the Vietnamese people had fought since before World War II, initially against the French, later against allies gathered by the United States.

Evidently, Morse and Ernest Gruen (D-AK) were the last two US Senators to have not only read the Constitution, but accepted its charge that they be guided by facts and conscience rather than partisan considerations or being swept into a patriotic fervor by a dire prediction such as the loss of American credibility or the spread of communism because of the domino effect. Forty years later, China is a capitalist society with the second-largest economy in the world; Viet Nam enjoys “most-favored nation” trading status. What sort of domino is that?

Morse’s understanding of the West’s historical role seems extreme to those of us who note the tide of illegal and legal waves of immigrants into the United States. No one flees to Mexico; no one sails a rickety craft to Haiti. If the West is so rotten, why do so many want to come here? Still, though hindsight may always be perfect, surely we need to agree that our moral compass, the US Constitution, cannot continue to be ignored.

The colonialism and imperialism Morse identified as the core of a ruthless American ethic has in our time moved nearer to the surface. We have just experienced an election that leaves us with a head of state who not only ran against a Democratic opponent, but ran against his own party in a campaign marked by the strident rhetoric most appropriate to fourteen-year-old boys in a pissing match. Yet despite having been the targets of personal invective, his defeated Republican opponents suck up to the seat of power; we seem daily to experience governance by a schoolyard bully and his unprincipled lackeys.

When Wayne Morse chose to dissent, he identified our surest protection from ourselves, the rule of law. The US Constitution is no more than fading ink on crumbling parchment if our elected leaders are allowed to ignore it, yet if citizens can demand that they observe the Constitution, our best protection against tyranny will continue to be a living document.