

PAST PERFECT Vietnam Redux?

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“American Foreign Policy & Vietnam”

Senator Wayne Morse

. . . Aggression has, throughout modern history, been a western practice, perfected long before the advent of Communism. It was Europe that expanded and conquered and laid waste, that created empires and planted colonies and ruled from afar. Christian Europe divided up Africa; it established its rule over much of Asia; it discovered America, wiped out the native civilization here, planted colonies and ruled them as long as it was able. It was the West—not Communist countries that invented imperialism and colonialism.

The United States itself expanded in less than 50 years from the Mississippi to the Pacific Ocean. In that same period, we announced the Monroe Doctrine and the Polk Doctrine, proclaiming in effect American hegemony in the western hemisphere. . . . Seemingly, American foreign policy is guided by the doctrine that once the United States arrived on the scene as a world power, everything stops. A world of flux was fine as long as we were moving to the top, but now that we are there, flux is a bad thing and we will do everything we can to preserve the status quo. . . . This is why the Administration protest that it seeks no permanent bases in Southeast Asia simply is not believed in the world. It can no longer be believed here, either, by reasonable men. . . . The military security of the United States does not lie in sending thousands of men thousands of miles from home to fight other people's battles and, in effect, to make every dispute in the world our own. . . . We are 6% of the world's population. If we are by far the wealthiest, we still will find it exceedingly costly to police everywhere from one end of the world to the other.

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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 Việt 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 Gruening (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; Việt 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. □

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