Letters

Vietnam: A National Catastrophe

Pollard (Letters 18 Aug.) calls upon university scientists to seek "actively . . . to improve the U.S. position in Vietnam." By this he means the use of "scientific ingenuity regarding weapons and techniques . . ." and other similar aids to the war technology. He justifies his call by stating the view of the Vietnam war as proclaimed by the Johnson administration. Many scientists, however, believe this view to be a false and distorted one. Several thousand university professors, including a large percentage of scientists, have expressed their opposition to the Vietnam war in public statements, newspaper ads, and open letters to the President. As two scientists who believe that the Vietnam war is both a national catastrophe and a moral blight for our country, we hope other scientists will consider, carefully, before responding to Pollard's call, whether cooperation with the Johnson administration in waging the Vietnam war is consistent with service to the true interests of our country and of mankind. It may, in fact, be wise for many of us who oppose the war to review our present professional activities in order to make sure that they do not unnecessarily contribute to the waging and prolongation of that war.

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Oil Shale: Conservation or Development

C. H. Prien argues the urgency of enlisting private industry in the development of the publicly owned oil shales (Letters, 18 Aug.). Otherwise, he says, the oil will arrive on the market too late to be burned. Other sources of energy will have captured the market, and the exploitation of the oil will be too unprofitable to provide jobs and taxes. This prognosis for the power industry would seem to be one of the best arguments for not exploiting the shale immediately. Our descendants may regard with astonishment our nonchalance in burning valuable, highly organized organic raw materials simply to obtain heat. If, for their biological and chemical industries, our grandchildren must resynthesize carbon chain from the carbon dioxide we bequeath them in the atmosphere, they may not honor our memory to the extent that we feel is appropriate.

In the same issue, J. W. Hand argues in addition that industrial scarring of the Green River shale land is acceptable because the land is already arid, desolate, and unscenic. Again with our grandchildren in mind, we should recall that Erasmus was the first Western man in perhaps a millennium to whom it occurred to climb a mountain for the view.

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China: A Reviving Power

Abelson's use of "an emerging power" in describing the technological advances of mainland China (Editorial, 28 July, p. 373) is entirely logical from the occidental viewpoint. Nevertheless, from a historical view, China is more appropriately a "reviving power," having had an intellectual flowering from 2852 to 1053 B.C., long before the Golden Age of Greece, as well as having made westward expeditions to the frontier of the Roman Empire and penetrations into the heart of Europe (A.D. 1206 to 1367).

Abelson also described "great steps" by China in achieving the intellectual status necessary to sustain an advanced technology. The first modern Chinese university, National Peiyang University, was founded in 1895 in Tientsin, actually 71 years after the founding of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the first U.S. engineering school. Despite this brief history of modern technical research and development, China has acquired the capability of thermonuclear power—a great step indeed!

The statistical inference from U.S. census figures leads me to reflect an additional revelation. The 1964 estimated census shows a U.S. population of 191,334,000 of which only 237,000 were Chinese (and many of these permanent residents were unqualified for elective status). Yet the 1 July 1966 membership list of the 740 U.S. scientists elected to the National Academy of Sciences included five Chinese men and one Chinese woman. This is a much larger percentage than one would expect to find among the front rank of scientists, based on the above census figures.

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Should Johnson Trust the Intellectuals?

Nelson's review of President Johnson's troubles with the intellectuals (News and Comment, 14 July, p. 173) is stimulating, leading to the conclusion that Johnson is at least as much sinned against as sinning. Since the intellectuals complain that they cannot trust Johnson, one also wonders why Johnson should trust the intellectuals; they have certainly given him little reason to do so. His roundly denounced Dominican adventure did not turn out to be the undiluted disaster the intellectuals predicted. . . . It at least avoided chaos and a bloodbath and secured a modicum of democracy.

The intellectuals demand that Johnson stop the bombing in Vietnam, hypothesizing that North Vietnam will negotiate in return. What a childlike faith! Why should the North Vietnamese negotiate if we will stop bombing without negotiating? They would naturally conclude that more concessions could be wrung with further refusal to talk. . . . From one viewpoint, Johnson's willingness to use naked military power is not a fault, but one of his greatest strengths. If John F. Kennedy had been similarly disposed there would have been no Berlin wall or Bay of Pigs disaster. On the other hand, his willingness to use naked power resolved the Cuban missile crisis for him. . . .