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Revolution Make Believe or Real

Students are killed at a Kent State Demonstration.

A massive demonstration in New Haven protests the political overtones of Bobby Seale's murder trial.

Overnight the war in Vietnam spills into Cambodia when Americans, sick and tired of the war, thought our troops were coming home.

In New York, construction workers launch a highly organized assault on young peace demonstrators while police stand by, make no arrests, and fail to bring any charges. The left accuses the police of complicity and enforcement of "Z"-type law and order; the right cheers the construction workers' violence, grateful for vicarious release of frustration and hostility, and satisfied that at last the kids have been shown that there is another side to the question.

As rhetoric and violence escalates in intensity, we ask ourselves IS OUR COUNTRY POISED ON THE BRINK OF REVOLUTION? Or is the student left in cosmopolitan America indulging in dangerous self-delusion, in naive revolutionary make-believe?

As part of our answer, let us examine some of the characteristics that past revolutions have had in common.

Alienation, especially of the intellectuals, has been one of the earliest signs that a society is faltering. People in large numbers find that the political system is out of whack with the values that they would like to see guide its actions. As a result, they either withdraw into a shell, refusing to have anything to do with the political system, or they turn activist and try to change it. I need hardly mention that we see both kinds of alienation all around us today.

Another factor associated with the beginning of revolution is financial breakdown, especially if it occurs after a period of sustained economic growth. While the plummeting stock market may not represent such a "breakdown," it is clear that we are in a severe economic slump after having enjoyed a peak during last year.

Inefficient and inflexible government machinery further adds to dissatisfaction with the system. Members of the government start experiencing increased self-doubt: they "lose their touch," as it were, finding it difficult to justify to themselves continuation in a position of rule. They therefore become politically inept, and/or defect to the opposition. Now, how much of this is going on in today's United States? A bit difficult to judge, but maybe the unprecedented organization of the employees of the Department of State's AID section in opposition to the extension of the war into Cambodia represents a straw in the wind. But we should not generalize from such isolated incidents: we simply do not have any evidence of the kind of alienation within the government taking place comparable to that which occurred in former revolutions.

What next? After the alienation phase reaches certain proportions, we find the discontented organizing for the overthrow of the existing system, launching appeals and recruitment drives (with care so as to avoid repression), and forming coalitions with other organizations whose aims are similar. The stage of non-violent revolutionary politics that follows features the enunciation of revolutionary demands which are tantamount to a call for the abdication of the regime — or else. Rather than signing its own death warrant, the regime responds with force. If governmental coercion fails (usually due to a combination of stupidity in its employment, desertion of members of the armed forces and police to the side of the revolutionists) and failure by the rank and file to obey the orders of their officers), the government falls and is replaced by a revolutionary regime. Clearly, little of all this has occurred so far. **Some revolutionary organizations exist, including the Weathermen of the SDS and the Panthers, as well as the regular Communist Party, I suppose, but no coherent, unified movement seems to have materialized.**

But can we afford the smugness of comfort because revolution in this country appears at present not to have proceeded beyond the stages of alienation and preliminary organization? That depends on our judgment of the trend of the times — specifically our estimate of the probability that certain conditions will develop which would act as catalysts and precipitate full-scale revolution. A partial list of such conditions might include the following four, here presented in order of descending probability:

1. **Confrontation politics of the student left and other radicals is repeatedly and increasingly met by government coercion, while the administration intransigently refuses to shift policy in the direction desired by the militant opposition or to give some of the opposition leaders a voice in the highest councils of state.** This, says Chalmers Johnson, is a prescription for a slide to disaster since the mere fact that the government has to rely increasingly on the use of force to maintain its rule will erode its claim to represent the legitimate aspirations of the people, its competence to maintain order and tranquility, its right to ask of the people that it be given the benefit of the doubt. Furthermore, confrontation politics is virtually certain to ultimately provoke the forces of the status quo to over-reaction and blunder,



which will have the effect of politicizing previously "silent" people and swing them into the ranks of the opposition. The Kent State tragedy is perhaps the most dramatic example. The willingness of increasing numbers of people to believe that Black Panther Fred Hampton was murdered by Chicago police, and to give the Panthers rather than the government their sympathy and benefit of the doubt in what to them appears to be a systematic police campaign of persecution aimed at crippling and ultimately liquidating the Panther movement — this is also making convinced anti-system zealots of former confused fence-straddlers. The Jacksonville killings, the Georgia violence, the Santa Barbara riots and deaths — the examples can be multiplied, but the point has been made. Violence polarizes.

2. **A major escalation on top of the Cambodian adventure while the embers of the Cambodia-Kent-New Haven protest are still aglow might furnish another catalyst for major revolutionary violence.** The very least that can be said of the Cambodia intervention is that the U.S. political end of it was handled ineptly. Coming only a week and a half after Presidential assurances that 150,000 more troops were being brought home before next spring, it inevitably convinced cynics and already committed anti-war protestors as well as a number of confused non-committed that the President's rhetoric could not be trusted. Belated assurances that this new facet of the war will be limited in duration and geographic extension have shored up some marginal support from potential opponents. However, an incursion into Laos, or a significant delay in getting out of Cambodia and/or a scrapping of the 21-mile restraining limit, no matter how militarily defensible, will so shatter the administration's credibility that hordes of disillusioned will join the ranks of the militants, and the violence escalator will in all probability be cranked up to full tilt.

3. **What about if Wallace wins the next election? Unlikely as it may seem now, let us not ignore the possibility that the frustrations of the right, as exemplified by the marauding New York construction workers, could become sufficiently widely shared if the next two years bring intensified student and black militancy that a racist extremist government would be voted into power. The revolutionaries would like nothing better. The ambiguity of the situation would be removed. To them the devil incarnate would now be the target. The forces of light versus the forces of darkness. The moderate political middle ground would find itself in dire straits trying to maintain relevancy in such a polarized situation. I predict that a Wallace regime would not remain in power for a full four-year term.**