

# worldview

A JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

## BRAVE NEW WORLD

Winston Churchill, in one of his most famous utterances, once declared: "I did not become the king's first minister in order to preside over the dissolution of his empire." Not even Sir Winston's fierce pride and iron will could arrest the course of history, however; the dissolution of empire could not be stopped, and Britain had to seek a new role as the leader of a commonwealth radically different from the one it had shaped in the century before 1945.

The United States, too, is in the process of seeking its role as the leader of a new "free world" — a world also radically different from the one over which, only a few years ago, many of us had expected to preside. John Fitzgerald Kennedy has assumed the awful responsibilities of the Presidency at a time when all is flux. His terrible burden, and his great responsibility, will be to find new patterns for order in a situation that could easily become mere chaos. And here the old prescriptions, the old guideposts, will not be greatly helpful to him. They were made for an easier and a more innocent age.

Indeed, some of the older prescriptions and guideposts for our foreign policy must positively be avoided in the years ahead. Chief among these are the two fallacies that plagued our international relations in the fifties. The first of these is the illusion that this nation could somehow *will* the world it desired and *impose* it upon the nations through fiat: this notion has its origins deep in our national history and psychology and has been well described as "the illusion of omnipotence." The second is an even more dangerous intellectual deception: it is a vision of the contemporary struggle as simply a battle between the angels of light and the forces of darkness, a battle in which no middle ground, no compromise and no conclusion except unconditional surrender are considered possible.

This latter has been called our national tendency to "moralize" politics. It is more profound than that. In its view of world politics in terms of God and the devil ("You are either for Me or

against Me"), and in its abrogation to ourselves of the role of God's vicegerent on earth, it is a theologizing of politics, an introduction into the political realm of absolutes and ultimates which the political realm cannot support.

These notions confused our policy in the past; it seems certain that they could bring us to disaster in the future. "The Sovereigns of the world are old and they will have no heirs at all," Rainer Maria von Rilke once wrote. His lines could be the epitaph for the postwar world that is passing. Two giants, the United States and the Soviet Union, did stride that world like two colossi: that world was indeed polarized between them. But this era is finished; the two colossi will indeed have no heirs.

A surging pluralism has been the mark of modern culture; each nation has been forced, however painfully, to adjust to it. Pluralism is now the emerging characteristic of international politics and the great powers will now be forced to adjust to this too. They must learn that in the struggles ahead all nations will demand to be equal, even though (to paraphrase George Orwell) some nations will remain more equal than others.

Only men free from rigid ideological concepts, free from political dogmas inherited from a simpler world order, will be able to deal with, and successfully chart a course in, such a pluralist world. The Kennedy Administration is just beginning, but one of the most hopeful things about it — and about the new President himself — is a freedom from political dogma, an intellectual curiosity, a receptivity to ideas, an enlightened pragmatism, a sense of complexity. These qualities will not "solve" our problems (nothing will "solve" them), but they may enable this nation to deal with the world as it really is; they may save us from disastrous retreats into idle hopes and empty dreams about a world that is past.