

**Dueling Catholic Periodicals: America's and Commonweal's  
Perceptions of the Cold and Vietnam Wars, 1964-1975**

David Settje  
Concordia University

*The years between 1964 and 1975 were divisive ones for the United States, and American Catholics were likewise divided over the two wars that marked the period: the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Two leading Catholic periodicals, America and Commonweal, reflected the debate that raged among American Catholics in these years.*

From 1964 to 1975, the Cold and Vietnam Wars affected U.S. Catholics deeply. Americans lived under the constant tension of a possible nuclear conflict because of the Cold War between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States of America. This standoff also led the United States to instigate a war in the Southeast Asian nation of Vietnam to stop the Vietnamese Communists. This combat resulted from the United States's continued reliance on containment, or the domino theory. The Vietnam conflict thus aggravated U.S. society's Cold War fears. Simultaneously, however, Americans began to debate Cold War policies for the first time. Some believed that the United States had to protect the world from Communist domination by stopping its expansion into Vietnam, while others labeled the Vietnam War an imperialistic attack on innocent peoples because U.S. involvement infringed upon their right to self-determination. A study of how America and Commonweal perceived and debated these foreign policy concerns offers historians the chance to begin understanding how a few Catholic leaders handled these issues.<sup>1</sup>

These Catholic periodicals' responses prove especially intriguing due to Catholicism's historic opposition to Communist atheism. As studies of Vatican diplomacy illustrate, the Catholic Church consistently denounced communism and allied with the Christian West against

Soviet and Chinese policies. But the Holy See often tempered this antagonism in order to protect churches and adherents that remained inside Communist borders. America and Commonweal paralleled this thinking because they consistently backed the Cold War against the USSR and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Nonetheless, they further demonstrate the societal split over the issue of U.S. actions in Vietnam. As Roy Palmer Domenico demonstrates, papal diplomacy regarding the Vietnam War did little to settle this dispute. Prior to the mid-1960s, the Vatican had allied with the United States against world communism; however, following the Second Vatican Council and the election of Pope Paul VI, the Holy See attempted to become a neutral force that sought peace. It still denounced communism, however, and feared alienating allies if it became entirely nonpartisan. American Catholics therefore received mixed signals from the papacy regarding Vietnam and debated without the benefit of a firm Vatican pronouncement. An examination of the two prominent Catholic periodicals mentioned above, the lay written/liberal Commonweal and the conservative/Jesuit America, provides one way to explore Catholic reactions to both the Cold and Vietnam Wars. Commonweal and America provide a starting point for scholars interested in understanding how Catholic Americans continued to fight the Cold War against the USSR and PRC but disagreed about U.S. involvement in Vietnam.<sup>ii</sup>

America and Commonweal demonstrate how two Catholic periodicals grappled with Cold War anxieties and divisions over the Southeast Asian war. America epitomized conservative thought on these two wars while Commonweal represented a liberal theological and political viewpoint. America had a circulation of 103,222, while Commonweal's was only 43,000. The discrepancy in numbers occurred because many Jesuits automatically subscribed to

America. Also, because more liberal than conservative periodicals existed, Commonweal had more competition from journals with similar viewpoints. Both journals, however, fared better than the majority of religious publications which averaged circulations of well under 25,000 and each had an above average subscription rate among Catholic periodicals. In short, these journals represent well typical Catholic points of view during this era.<sup>iii</sup>

Both periodicals agreed on prosecuting the Cold War against Red China and the Soviet Union, which squared with Vatican pronouncements. Throughout the Cold War, the Holy See denounced Soviet and Chinese Communist persecution of religion. The periodicals did the same. For example, each journal cautioned against total trust of the Chinese Communists, although America took a harsher stance. Both publications also vilified the Soviet Union. This harmony, however, disappeared when each periodical discussed the Vietnam conflict. America endorsed the policies of the various U.S. presidential administrations while Commonweal protested the war. These journals demonstrate the differences between prowar and antiwar Catholics who nonetheless agreed on the Cold War against the USSR and PRC. Both Catholic journals illustrate how their editors and readers despised the Communist governments in China and the Soviet Union but concurrently debated whether or not the United States needed to continue fighting in Southeast Asia.

Regarding the Cold War against the People's Republic of China, the editorial staffs at each periodical derided communism and warned Catholics that it endangered Christianity. They agreed with the Holy See that Red China threatened the future growth of the Catholic church. They tempered this stance, however, because America and Commonweal wanted the U.S. government to foster a better relationship with Mao Tse-tung's administration by recognizing the

PRC and formalizing diplomatic relations. In the 1960s, the United States had not yet recognized Mao's government, which led the United Nations to exclude his regime. Instead, the Nationalist Chinese forces in Taiwan held China's UN seat. But Catholic editors wanted the United States to allow Communist China into the United Nations because they hoped that it might further protect the Catholic church in China. Nonetheless, each journal qualified this support when they recognized China's oppression of its citizenry and harassment of its Christian population. Subsequent scholarship reveals that the Catholic periodicals rightly condemned the PRC for these acts. Red China did try to eliminate Christianity from its borders and regularly persecuted Chinese people who disagreed with Communist principles.<sup>iv</sup>

The Catholic periodicals' advocacy for Red China's entry into the United Nations stemmed from a variety of reasons. American Catholics hoped that inclusion in the global community might moderate Communist China's international politics against democracy and religion. Commonweal hailed President Richard M. Nixon's pathbreaking 1972 summit to China as "a bold move." The journal felt comfortable with such cooperation because they trusted U.S. leaders not to allow undemocratic Chinese ideas to infiltrate U.S. ideology while simultaneously assuming that they would gain an inside look at how China treated Catholics. This demonstrates that their willingness to deal with Red China did not erase their suspicion of communism. Concerns regarding the Cold War against the Soviet Union also fueled this Catholic advocacy for China's UN admittance. Due to a shared border dispute that diminished Sino-Soviet cooperation, each journal felt that an easing of U.S.-Sino relations would turn China farther and farther away from Soviet influence and thereby weaken world communism. America declared that the Sino-American relationship "has undoubtedly given the Soviet Union a

particularly severe case of the jitters.” Despite this backing of the PRC, each Catholic periodical still wanted to protect the Nationalist Chinese and their UN seat. They advocated a "two-Chinas" policy in order to allow each government UN participation. Thus, America and Commonweal endorsed recognition of Red China but primarily because they thought it helped undermine the world Communist fortress. In other words, their opinions squared with a pro-Cold War attitude that sought to defeat communism even though they seemingly sided with Mao's government.<sup>v</sup>

In a more condemnatory but still hopeful style, America and Commonweal contemplated Chinese influence in Vietnam. They feared that a Communist China bent on "expansionism and . . . romantic self-delusion" led the PRC to see Vietnam as an opportunity to gain world influence. Yet the periodicals trusted that easing U.S.-Sino relations might decrease the chances of Chinese intervention in the war. America wanted China and the United States to collaborate on a Vietnam War settlement. These theories demonstrate the periodicals' misunderstandings about the Vietnam War. Each editorial staff speculated that the Communist giants controlled the North Vietnamese and thought that China could end the war. Historians now know that, although China and the Soviet Union funded North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh largely acted on his own initiative. Nonetheless, and once again, the journals' logic for recognizing Communist China had little to do with a lessening of anti-Communist sentiments and more to do with political realities, in this case a hope for an end to the Southeast Asian conflict.<sup>vi</sup>

Despite their qualified support for recognition of Communist China, America and Commonweal editors cautioned that the Chinese Communists threatened world democracies and Christianity because of communism's devious nature. For example, editors maintained that the

Chinese had "a blueprint for world revolution [that] must be taken seriously." China's detonation of an atomic bomb in 1964 and the subsequent development of its nuclear capabilities especially concerned America. Commonweal worried about the fact that China exploded a Hydrogen bomb in 1967. China also launched a satellite into space and thereby worried these Catholic thinkers with their technological advancements. China's progress led the journals to remind readers to "keep the proverbial grain of salt within reach as we read more of the new China."<sup>vii</sup>

The periodicals also warned that the Chinese Communists oppressed their own people when they reported that Mao wanted to rid China of all non-Communist forces. He thus advocated the Cultural Revolution in which students ravaged the countryside destroying anything to do with Chinese traditions or religion. America editors reminded readers that China indiscriminately imprisoned visiting foreigners without "even the pretense of a trial." They claimed that China captured these prisoners and falsely accused them of spying. America's readership concurred with this assessment and maintained that China had killed millions of dissidents in the last forty years. America also blasted the Chinese government for hiding information from its citizens. For example, the journal purported that Red China did not tell most Chinese citizens about the death of Chiang Kai-shek in 1975, despite some people's continued reverence for the exiled leader. Commonweal and America both warned that the PRC advocated oppressive tactics to control citizens and stopped at nothing to make them submit to governmental policies; this Cold War fear of Red China persisted throughout the Vietnam War era, even while the same editors backed the United States's plan to ease U.S.-Sino relations.<sup>viii</sup>

The Catholic journals also worried about Christians in China because they faced constant governmental harassment. Commonweal lamented that the Communists virtually stopped the

Catholic church's missionary efforts inside China's borders. America also bewailed the small number of Chinese Catholics. It stated that "at the Communist takeover in 1949, there were 3.5 million Catholics in a hundred dioceses. What is left has since been driven into an underground." In addition, America stated that Red China's worst oppression occurred toward aging and imprisoned Catholics because the government wanted to stop all religious practices and so threatened to persecute older Catholics before they taught the younger generation about Catholicism. It stated that "the aging of the clergy, the closing of seminaries, the drying-up of vocations, the disappearance of priests, the imprisonment of Catholics, the fear of many Catholics even to baptize their children, let alone give them a religious education – all this has had a devastating effect on a once flourishing Church." Thus, both journals grieved the disconnection they felt with brethren in a universal Catholic church and blamed this separation on Red China's "enslaving powers."<sup>ix</sup>

If Commonweal and America distrusted the Chinese Communists, then they absolutely despised the Soviet Union. Again, both journals' foreign policy opinions paralleled one another. Each castigated the Communist superpower because they feared that the Soviets wanted to control the world. For example, Catholic editors solely blamed the Soviet Union for the Sino-Soviet standoff. Although both editorial staffs appreciated that détente lessened the possibility of a nuclear war, they portrayed Soviet communism as a poor system of government that employed devious methods to gain diplomatic victories, oppressed its citizens, and persecuted Christians within its borders. These comments mirrored exactly those that they made against the PRC. Furthermore, they blamed the Soviet Union for enabling the North Vietnamese to continue fighting in Southeast Asia. Commonweal and America depicted the Soviet Union as an evil

empire bent on despotic control.<sup>x</sup>

America and Commonweal relished the fact that Sino-Soviet relations had faltered over the countries' shared border. The situation hardened the periodicals' hatred of the Soviet Union because they blamed Moscow for the border problem. In short, the periodicals accused the Soviets of wanting to control Chinese policy and ultimately bring about a "containment of China." By asserting that the USSR rebuked China's call for a border settlement because it did not withdraw Soviet troops from the frontier region, America suggested that China agreed with the United States's distrust of the Soviets.<sup>xi</sup>

The journals did relax their Cold War antagonism when they discussed détente, but their slackened hostility did not indicate a decrease in malevolence toward the USSR. During the early 1970s, the Soviet Union and the United States eased their standoff long enough to agree on a series of de-escalation agreements, or the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (SALT). Both periodicals applauded these efforts to reduce the risk of a nuclear war. Commonweal stated that "no gain, however minor, in control over nuclear warfare is to be belittled." America concurred that "any agreement between adversaries is better than none." Commonweal editors further suggested that U.S. leaders must instigate more arms control accords in order to soften hostilities. Despite the desire for peace through these settlements, however, America also theorized that détente had further ruptured the tenuous alliance between the USSR and the PRC; it hoped that "it will make the Chinese still more suspicious of the Kremlin's Marxist orthodoxy." Thus, the possibility of U.S.-Soviet cooperation became an opportunity to reduce Cold War tensions but did not totally alleviate Cold War antagonisms.<sup>xii</sup>

Even after lauding détente, Commonweal and America insisted that "nagging questions

persist." Commonweal questioned why the Soviet Union still believed in a Communist world revolution that "gives little evidence of occurring." America took special note of the Soviet need to purchase U.S. grain in the early 1970s. The editors mocked the fact that the United States had a record level of wheat production at the same time that Soviet agriculture struggled to feed its own people. America also speculated that the Soviets had to use U.S. food subsidies because the USSR "overspends on arms production." The journal thus accused the Soviets of underhanded international diplomacy. Both editorial staffs further wondered if the Soviets wanted to ease their U.S. diplomatic relations in order to "shield from outside eyes" the government's tyranny over Soviet citizens. Commonweal and America portrayed a devious Soviet Union that the United States had to monitor.<sup>xiii</sup>

As they had with the People's Republic of China, both journals consistently highlighted how the Soviet Union oppressed its citizens. Commonweal blasted the USSR for imprisoning any citizen who published anti-Soviet literature. They also reminded readers of Joseph Stalin's tactics, including tapping phones, opening mail, and threatening family members. To this end, the editors stated that the Communist party "can still wield just about as much muscle as it chooses" and therefore continued to harass dissident people. Commonweal also asserted that the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia proved that "Russia's is a brutal and untrustworthy government." America alleged that Russian high school students "are absorbing an adequate number of facts, but they have not been taught to think for themselves." Furthermore, the editors castigated the Soviet Union because, "in terms of prison population . . . , the Soviet Union still stands at the head of the international list."<sup>xiv</sup>

Commonweal and America especially worried about Christians trapped inside Soviet

borders. America editors traveled through the Soviet Union in the mid-1960s and disliked anti-religious propaganda and the official policy of atheism. Another trip to the Soviet Union in 1969 brought more consternation. The periodical mourned the fact that Soviet officials followed its editors and took them to staged church events where they found mostly "elderly women." America therefore assumed that the Soviets prohibited the younger generation from participating in Christian rituals. For example, a student admitted that his grandmother had him baptized as a baby but that "this was his last contact with the Church." Furthermore, the editors called the Soviet restriction on printing religious material, including Bibles, a threat to global Catholicism. This fact notwithstanding, Commonweal wanted to believe that the Soviets planned to ease harsh anti-Christian messages because the nation fretted about its world image. But editors acknowledged that "this doesn't necessarily signal a reversal of past policies." Both periodicals understood that the Soviet Union wanted to eradicate religion from its borders and so enjoined their readers to ask God to protect the Christian Soviets from becoming martyrs to a "Cold War villain" that disdained religious freedom.<sup>xv</sup>

The journals further exuded Cold War tensions when they attributed the Vietnam War to Soviet influences. Commonweal and America knew that the North Vietnamese government depended on Soviet military aid. Commonweal stated in 1967 that "the dependence of Hanoi on the Soviet Union is likely to grow greater the longer the war in Vietnam continues." America asserted that the Vietcong only survived because of Soviet funding. At other times, however, the journals speculated that the Soviets planned to eventually shy away from direct Vietnam involvement. Without evidence, they theorized that the Soviets wanted Vietnam to fall in order to blame the collapse on inadequate Chinese leadership. In truth, Moscow and Beijing funded

North Vietnam but never intended for the conflict to escalate into a world war. This fact, however, did not keep American Catholics from seeing Soviet and Chinese aid to Vietnam as proof of a world-wide conspiracy.<sup>xvi</sup>

Commonweal's and America's negative reactions to China and the Soviet Union, the two most powerful Communist nations during the 1960s and 1970s, illustrate how these Catholic editors continued to dread the presence of Communist governments and believe that Communist atheism desired to takeover the world. They also reflect the intrinsic anxiety most Catholics had of the Communist giants. Thus, a study of America and Commonweal demonstrates how leaders in the Catholic community added to the Cold War apprehensions that led the United States to antagonize the Soviet Union and Red China.

This Cold War harmony between the liberal Commonweal and the conservative America disappeared when the periodicals debated the presence of U.S. forces in Southeast Asia. The periodicals took opposite views of the Vietnam War: America defended U.S. actions while Commonweal criticized U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. America maintained a traditional Cold War posture by not accepting any form of communism. But Commonweal tempered its Cold War rhetoric with a hatred of the Vietnam War. They saw it as an imperialistic infringement upon the right to self-determination. Nonetheless, both periodicals felt that their position on the Vietnam War did not contradict their Cold War policies. America thought that the war represented Soviet and Chinese expansionism, while Commonweal saw it as a civil war only moderately related to the larger Cold War.

From August 1964 until Communist forces conquered Saigon in 1975, America editors supported official presidential policy regarding the Vietnam War. They saw it as a necessary

evil in the global struggle against communism. Regarding Lyndon B. Johnson, the periodical stated that "Mr. Johnson never talks about 'victory' in Vietnam, because victory in the traditional sense is not his goal. His policy is to convince the Communists that they can't pick up real estate cheaply or change the map by violence." America depicted Johnson as a tormented president who defended the world from communism and followed this course even at the expense of public opinion. One editor declared that Johnson's protection of South Vietnam demonstrated how he "tried to help mankind." This support for Johnson never wavered. Even after he dropped out of the presidential race in March 1968, the editors claimed that Americans misunderstood him. They insisted that he desperately wanted peace in Southeast Asia but not at the expense of U.S. security.<sup>xvii</sup>

Commonweal editorial opinions about Johnson differed sharply. The editors originally supported the president's 1964 bombing of Hanoi because they saw it as a limited action that might force the North Vietnamese to cease military activities. But this backing only lasted a few months before the editors questioned the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Commonweal criticized "the old mythology" that the United States fought "in Vietnam to protect the freedom of a people who want us there." Rather, the editors understood that the Vietnamese largely favored the Communist government because of a nationalistic desire to eliminate foreign control. They further chided Johnson when he called the conflict a "limited war" because it daily killed numerous people and ultimately applauded Johnson's decision not to run for a second term. After he left office, while many Americans eulogized his career, Commonweal asserted that the periodical "did not celebrate Johnson's presidency; it would be hypocrisy to say nothing but good now."<sup>xviii</sup>

The periodicals similarly disagreed about Richard M. Nixon. America defended Nixon's decision to stay in Vietnam despite his 1968 campaign promise to end the war. The editors stated that "Mr. Nixon . . . is trying to get out of Vietnam, but Hanoi will not let him." They claimed that Nixon presented peace plans to North Vietnam but that the Communists refused to listen because they hoped to weaken the president's domestic support through a protracted delay in the peace process. Indeed, subsequent scholarship demonstrates that the Communists did think that U.S. domestic unrest aided their cause; they refused to negotiate, hoping instead to bargain ultimately from a position of strength. Despite their support for the war, by 1972 the editors wanted it to end because they feared a U.S. defeat. But this stance still maintained their support for Nixon's Vietnam policy because America agreed with the president's call for "Vietnamization," or the preparation of South Vietnam to fortify itself. America supported Nixon's withdrawal plan as a solution that got U.S. troops out of Vietnam but allowed South Vietnam to still resist communism.<sup>xix</sup>

Once again, Commonweal objected to America's presidential praise and instead reprimanded Nixon. The editors delineated how he lied to the American people when he continued a war he had promised to end. They professed that "since announcing a secret plan to end the war last fall, Nixon has been embarrassingly inscrutable on Vietnam." They called for Americans to repudiate him because "his methods destroy what little morality or honor we still possess. He is not a symbol we wish to present as we face our fellow human beings." Furthermore, after Nixon announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the editors criticized his Vietnamization plan and insisted that such a policy was doomed to failure. Commonweal derided the president for promising a negotiated peace, waiting for years to implement this

settlement, and then continuing to claim that Vietnam needed protection from communism. The periodical supported Nixon's Cold War efforts against the Soviet Union and China but simultaneously denounced his Vietnam policy because they viewed each as two different issues: the first was a Communist empire that threatened Christianity and the latter was a civil war.<sup>xx</sup>

In accordance with the periodicals' presidential opinions, America supported the war throughout the conflict and Commonweal demanded a negotiated settlement. America gave three primary reasons for its position: it believed that the United States had to stop the expansion of communism, had to defend the South Vietnamese, and faulted the Communists for the war. America portrayed the United States's war efforts as a duty to the free world. In addition, it declared that the United States bolstered its own security when it prohibited the Communist quest for more territory.

America focused its prowar argument on alleged Communist expansionism. One editor claimed that "the great issue in the world today is freedom [upheld by the United States] vs. tyranny [propagated by the Soviet Union and China]." The editors claimed that the United States could not "afford, in the interests of world peace and its own security, to allow aggression and conspiracy to prosper." A reader wrote that "if we weaken in Vietnam and the Communists take South Vietnam, I believe they will not stop there but will go on to take over other Asian countries." The journal insisted that the Communists used Vietnam to test U.S. resolve against Communist encroachment. A majority of the letters to the editor regarding Vietnam echoed this fear and applauded the journal's prowar stance. Nonetheless, although historians know that the USSR and the PRC funded North Vietnam's military establishment, they also realize that Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese Communists acted of their own accord and did not simply

kowtow to the will of the Communist giants.<sup>xxi</sup>

The conservative periodical also insisted that the United States had to protect the innocent South Vietnamese from the terrorism of Communist guerrillas. In short, "any abandonment of South Vietnam to the tender mercies of the North Vietnamese regime would be an act of the gravest moral turpitude." One letter to the editor called it the United States's "duty" to help the South Vietnamese. America buttressed this point with papal statements. The editors claimed that Pope Paul VI sought peace in Vietnam, but only on the condition that it not "betray the independence and human dignity of the peoples involved." America never recognized that many South Vietnamese wanted to join the Communists and never addressed the corruption of the South Vietnamese government. And, even as it used papal statements to buttress its position, it ignored the fact that the Vatican tried to act as a neutral power in the war. Therefore, the journal's desire to defend South Vietnam sustained America's Cold War ardor because it cast the United States as a great defender of Democracy. It declared that the United States used its superpower status to shield smaller countries from the overwhelming might of communism.<sup>xxii</sup>

America also placed sole blame upon the Communists for the lack of a peace settlement. The editors contended that Hanoi shunned all peace proposals and therefore necessitated Johnson's slow combat escalation. They professed that negotiating "an end to war with the Communists is an extremely complex business" because North Vietnam refused to give concessions to the United States. They also theorized that U.S. officials had to use force to persuade the North Vietnamese to negotiate. In reality, both sides must share the blame for delaying the peace process because each wanted to end the war only in terms that favored its position. Nonetheless, America sustained its Cold War posture. It supported the Vietnam War

as an effort to stop Soviet and Chinese Communist expansionism, as a defense of the South Vietnamese, and because the Communists refused to negotiate a peaceful settlement without dominating the process.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In contrast, Commonweal clamored for an end to the war. The editors and readers questioned the domino theory's validity and asserted that if the Vietnamese chose communism it posed no threat to U.S. security. They therefore exposed a hypocrisy in U.S. ideology. The United States imposed its will on a foreign country and yet claimed to preserve Vietnam's right of self-determination. Finally, the editors reasoned that the war was immoral. Commonweal criticized U.S. preoccupation with a small Asian nation and divorced the Vietnam War from the larger Cold War that the periodical supported.

Commonweal blasted the domino theory as an outdated philosophy and stated that the United States should fight the Cold War without this archaic doctrine. The editors maintained that control of Vietnam did not assist U.S. Cold War efforts because of its autonomy from the Soviet Union and China. They further declared that "we must bring the longest war in American history to an end by leaving the matter to the Vietnamese." Furthermore, when it aligned with President Thieu of South Vietnam, the United States associated with a dictator who governed despotically. The editors asserted that "our national interests are not identical with those of South Vietnam, or at least the Thieu government."<sup>xxiv</sup>

Commonweal advised Americans to understand that, despite communism's serious flaws, the Vietnamese by and large wanted this system. It attested that many Vietnamese favored communism over the tyranny embodied in their current government. The editors even quoted South Vietnamese Vice President Ky in 1968, when he proclaimed that "Americans claim to be

here in name of their principles of democracy and freedom. I do not believe them; at the best, I believe them 50 percent.” Commonweal also took aim at its Catholic counterpart. It reproached America’s theory that the United States defended the freedom of South Vietnam, especially when America associate editor Father John McLaughlin found "B-52 bombing runs on the suburbs of Saigon . . . 'oddly comforting'" because they fortified the city against attack. Commonweal wondered how any Catholic came to find wanton destruction and violence on behalf of a dictatorial regime “comforting.” Importantly, such a stance did not indicate that the journal advocated Communist governments; rather, it remained steadfastly patriotic and dedicated to fighting the Cold War. But in regard to Vietnam, the editors declared the United States must allow the Vietnamese to choose their own system of government, no matter how flawed. They asserted that the Vietnamese might cooperate with the United States if allowed to control their own nation as opposed to being forced to accept a government they disliked. One writer asserted that throughout the United States’s Vietnamese intervention “free elections were rejected by our faction” because U.S. backed dictators could not win. In short, U.S. ideology needed to support self-determination without imperialistic interference.<sup>xxv</sup>

Finally, Commonweal asserted that the Vietnam War’s immorality undermined U.S. global authority. The journal therefore declared that the Vietnam War endangered the United States's superpower status in the Cold War against the Soviet Union and China. Commonweal designated U.S. involvement as "a crime and a sin." In fact, the editors stated that the United States had inverted historic truths with its actions in Vietnam against innocent peoples and, therefore, "peace has become war, honor shame, freedom force." They even maintained that unprincipled values governed the United States's military deeds. In 1972, they scolded the

president and Americans who celebrated Christmas while the United States bombed Asia with "ghastly anti-personnel bombs that kill and maim soldiers and civilians alike." The periodical wanted a negotiated peace because containment was a farce, because the Vietnamese desired a Communist government, and because U.S. actions were immoral.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Importantly, a majority of the letters printed by both periodicals agreed with the respective journal's editorial position. However, each published a few correspondence that disagreed with their stances. This fact further demonstrates the rift in American Catholicism created by the Vietnam War. These dissenting writers concurred with each periodical enough on other issues to subscribe to the publication but disputed either America's prowar posture or Commonweal's pacifism. Letters to the editor reveal how the readers also debated involvement in Vietnam. Interestingly, printed reader responses never refuted either journals' Cold War position.

A few America readers called the editors "barbaric" because they advocated the Vietnam War. One subscriber admonished them for thinking that they had become experts on foreign affairs. He stated that the United States had botched efforts in Vietnam and wondered, "are we to stand by, wring our hands, not tell them [U.S. policymakers] how dumb they are, and make no specific suggestions?" Finally, he called the editors "stuttering slob." Another reader asked, "how can you continue your blithe description of the wanton destruction and murder we are inflicting on the Vietnamese as 'a reflection of America's continued concern for humanity?'" Other readers more politely asked the editors to reconsider their policy and take a moral stance of objection. Even some Jesuit colleagues wrote to disassociate themselves from America's hawkish attitude.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The same circumstances existed for Commonweal. Most readers agreed with the editors' antiwar bent, but enough wrote letters to the editor in support of the war to exemplify how Catholics debated Vietnam. One reader asserted that he, too, disliked senseless killing, but defended the Vietnam War because the United States's "announced policy is to assist the South Vietnamese in establishing a viable, independent state" while the Communists subverted this admirable goal. Other letters defended the popular Cardinal Francis J. Spellman, a war supporter and traditional anti-Communist crusader, from Commonweal attacks. The editors contended that Spellman took advantage of his clerical position to whip up hysteria in favor of an imperialistic war. In contrast, one reader wrote that Spellman's view was "the universal voice of concern by free men for their suffering brothers" in Vietnam. A priest more blatantly asserted that the editors who wrote the Commonweal commentaries "certainly seemed to have a Communist brainwashing." He continued that "when the Pope was critical of the United States [and its activities in Vietnam] I felt he deserved a good belt in the nose." These letters illustrate that Commonweal readers, while mostly in concurrence with the editorial policy, debated one another about the Vietnam War.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Clearly, America and Commonweal diametrically opposed one another regarding the conflict in Southeast Asia. The conservative periodical supported the chief executives and justified the war as a necessary evil while the liberal publication derided the presidents and reasoned that the United States undermined its ideals in Vietnam. But neither journal thought that their Vietnam position contradicted their hostility toward the Soviet Union and Red China. America agreed with presidential policy and defended the domino theory because it linked all Communist governments together. But Commonweal stated that U.S. involvement in Vietnam

wrongly applied Cold War fears to a civil war. The editors asserted that no justifiable reason existed to explain U.S. actions against Vietnamese self-determination.

The liberal Commonweal and the Jesuit America demonstrate how these Catholic periodicals in the 1960s and 1970s coupled Cold War hostilities toward the Soviet Union and Red China with their debate over U.S. involvement in Vietnam. America and its readers sustained Cold War fears when they discussed the war because they believed that all Communists, including those in Vietnam, worked together to take over the world. But Commonweal saw the Vietnam War as a civil war in which the Vietnamese merely fought to choose their own government. However, this policy allowed them to continue their Cold War rhetoric that the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China still threatened Christians and democracy. They further demonstrate that the Vatican's mixed-signals regarding Cold War politics and the Vietnam War fostered a Catholic culture of debate during this era. These periodicals reveal how Catholic Americans debated the Vietnam War but agreed about the need for a standoff against the Communist giants. They thereby sustained Catholic Americans' Cold War hostilities in the midst of a debate about containment.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>i</sup> In part, this essay derives from the fact that few scholars examine attitudes toward both the Cold and Vietnam Wars within American society. A plethora of volumes study collectively the political and combat aspects of the Vietnam War; for a good survey see George C. Herring, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1986). Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield's An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990) offers the most comprehensive study of the peace movement. Furthermore, no one has done a scholarly study of Catholic perceptions regarding Cold War policies and their relationship to Vietnam.

<sup>ii</sup> For Vatican Cold War diplomacy, see Eric O. Hanson, The Catholic Church in World Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) and Roy Palmer Domenico, "America, the Holy See and the War in Vietnam," in Peter C. Kent and John F. Pollard, eds., Papal Diplomacy in the Modern Age (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994). Few treatments of Vietnam Era religious life currently exist. However, a few volumes mirror other Vietnam War histories. Mitchell K. Hall provides a solid study of the religious organization formed to protest American involvement in Vietnam in Because of Their Faith: CALCAV and Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Specific to Catholicism, William A. Au's The Cross, The Flag, and The Bomb: American Catholics Debate War and Peace, 1960-1983 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985) and Patricia McNeal's Harder than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth-Century America (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992) address average American Catholics during the Vietnam War. Au explores Catholic intellectuals to understand how they formulated their justifications for and against war in general, the

---

Vietnam Crisis specifically, and nuclear weapons. Although Au offers a good study, he does not examine popular opinion. McNeal obviously scrutinizes Catholic pacifists during that era.

<sup>iii</sup> For circulation statistics see Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1968).

<sup>iv</sup> For Vatican policy toward China, see Hanson, The Catholic Church and Kent, Papal Diplomacy. The People's Republic of China did persecute religious believers on a regular basis. This fact buttresses Catholic pronouncements against Red China. For more information, see John McManners, ed., The Oxford History of Christianity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 532; Luo Zhufeng, ed., Religion under Socialism in China (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1991); Alan Hunter and Don Rimmington, eds., All Under Heaven: Chinese Tradition and Christian Life in the People's Republic of China (Kampen: H. K. Kok, 1992); Donald E. MacInnis, Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972); Richard C. Bush, Jr., Religion in Communist China (New York: Abingdon Press), 1970.

<sup>v</sup> William Pfaff, "The China Trip," Commonweal (Hereafter CW) 96 (31 March 1972): 78-84; "The China Trip," CW 96 (17 March 1972): 27-28; "Mr. Nixon at the Summit," America (Hereafter Am) 126 (26 February 1972): 194; "'What's It All About, Alfie?'" Am 126 (11 March 1972): 249; Henry S. Reuss, "Two Chinas," CW 84 (20 May 1966): 251. Gordon H. Chang, Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948-1972 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>vi</sup> Wilson C. McWilliams, "Will China Intervene?" CW 85 (17 February 1967): 553-55; "It Takes Two to Tango," Am 125 (7 August 1971): 50. For Chinese influence on the Vietnam War, see

---

Qiang Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Regarding Soviet sway, see Ilya V. Gaiduk, The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996).

<sup>vii</sup> "The Chinese Riddle," CW 82 (1 October 1965): 711-12; "Atomic Cloud Over Asia," Am 111 (31 October 1964): 504-5; "H-bomb Warnings," CW 86 (14 July 1967): 435-36; "Red China Joins the Club . . .," Am 122 (9 May 1970): 486; "Evaluating the New China," Am 124 (5 June 1971): 583.

<sup>viii</sup> George Woodcock, "Lessons Through the Barrel of a Gun," CW 86 (7 April 1967): 81-84; "Red Guards: Broom or Tiger?" Am 115 (29 October 1966): 503; "Prisoners of Peking," Am 121 (1 November 1969): 375; "The End of an Era," Am 132 (19 April 1975): 292; Thomas J. Flynn, "China Ledger," Am 125 (18 September 1971): 162-63.

<sup>ix</sup> Louis Wei Tsing-Sing, "The Church in China," CW 85 (25 November 1966): 222; L. La Dany, "Religion in Red China," Am 120 (8 March 1969): 282-83; "Vatican Overture to Peking," Am 128 (5 May 1973): 404-5; "China and the Holy See," Am 124 (12 June 1971): 601.

<sup>x</sup> Scholarship justifies much of the fear that Catholics held toward Soviet treatment of religion. It reveals that the Soviet Union hindered Christian practices well into the 1960s and 1970s. After a lull in religious suppression following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev persisted with bureaucratic efforts to confiscate Christian-owned lands, to prohibit the establishment of new churches, and to persecute priests for anti-Soviet activity. They also forbade religious education for young Soviet citizens, whether in churches or in private homes. Dimitry Pospelovsky, The Russian Church Under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982 2 vols. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984); Owen Chadwick, The

---

Christian Church in the Cold War (New York: Penguin Books, 1992); Martin McCauley, The Soviet Union since 1917 (London: Longman House, 1981).

<sup>xi</sup> "Who's Containing Now?" CW 83 (28 January 1966): 490-93; "Mr. Brezhnev's Lead Balloon," Am 129 (13 October 1973): 258.

<sup>xii</sup> "The Games Powers Play," CW 91 (24 October 1969): 91; "Better Than Nothing," Am 115 (24-31 December 1966): 819; "No Going Back," CW 93 (16 October 1970): 59-61; Benjamin L. Masse, "Commerce With Communists," Am 112 (1 May 1965): 639-41.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Decoupling the Fear Factor," CW 89 (15 November 1968): 237-38; "Poor Harvest for the U.S.S.R.," Am 133 (27 December 1975): 452; "Dollars and Rubles," CW 98 (28 September 1973): 515-16; "Food for Peace in Danger," Am 129 (1 September 1973): 108.

<sup>xiv</sup> Jeri Laber, "The Svetlana Era," CW 86 (23 June 1967): 390-92; James Critchlow, "The Moscow Trials," CW 87 (1 March 1968): 646-49; "Czechoslovakia Invaded," CW 88 (6 September 1968): 581; "Academic Freedom in the U.S.S.R.," Am 116 (20 May 1967): 745; "Of Many Things," Am 128 (24 March 1973): 248.

<sup>xv</sup> Thurston N. Davis and Eugene K. Culhane, "Religion in the Soviet Union," Am 114 (19 February 1966): 252-59; C. J. McNaspy, "Religion Behind the Iron Curtain," Am 120 (12 April 1969): 450-53; "Religion in Russia," CW 83 (18 March 1966): 685-86.

<sup>xvi</sup> Wilson Carey McWilliams, "Ending the Cold War," CW 85 (6 January 1967): 363-65; "Party Caucus in the Kremlin," Am 115 (29 October 1966): 499. William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996).

<sup>xvii</sup> Edward T. Folliard, "Vietnam Choice: Hysteria or Stamina," Am 112 (6 March 1965): 306; Edward T. Folliard, "President Eager to End Peace," Am 114 (22 January 1966): 121; "The

---

President's Finest Hour," Am 118 (13 April 1968): 475.

<sup>xviii</sup> "North Vietnam's Bloody Nose," CW 80 (21 August 1964): 559-60; "No More Myths," CW 84 (10 June 1966): 325-26; D. Gareth Porter, "Is This a Limited War?" CW 86 (24 March 1967): 9-11; "Requiem for LBJ," CW 89 (31 January 1969): 546.

<sup>xix</sup> "'No' Again From Hanoi," Am 126 (5 February 1972): 106; "Mr. Nixon on Vietnam," Am 120 (24 May 1969): 605-6. Duiker, The Communist Road.

<sup>xx</sup> "Nixon the Predictable," CW 90 (16 May 1969): 251-52; Michael Novak, "Let a Million Voters Bloom," CW 94 (2 April 1971): 79-81; "The Quarterback's Peace," CW 95 (11 February 1972): 435-36.

<sup>xxi</sup> "'To Do What Must Be Done,'" Am 113 (7 August 1965): 126; Jefferson Caffery, "A Diplomat on Vietnam," Am 115 (20 August 1966): 165; David A. Sork, "The War in Vietnam," Am 117 (11 November 1967): 531-32. For Soviet and Chinese involvement in Vietnam, see Duiker, The Communist Road, Donald Nelson, The Making of Détente: Soviet-American Relations in the Shadow of Vietnam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), Zhai, China and Gaiduk, Soviet.

<sup>xxii</sup> "A Canadian Views Vietnam," Am 115 (12 November 1966): 574; "Horror Story in Vietnam," Am 118 (11 May 1968): 629-30; William D. Lynn, "Concerned About Vietnam," Am 116 (15 April 1967): 544-45; "Vietnam as a Matter of Conscience," Am 118 (6 January 1968): 5-6. Palmer, "America, the Holy See."

<sup>xxiii</sup> "The Bombs Fall Again," Am 114 (12 February 1966): 219-20; "The Long Hard Road Toward Peace," Am 118 (18 May 1968): 661. Duiker, The Communist Road; Robert Dallek, Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973 (New York: Oxford University Press,

---

1998); Jeffrey Kimball, Nixon's Vietnam War (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

For a good study that demonstrates the blame both the United States and North Vietnam share for the failed peace process, see Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy (New York: Public Affairs, 1999).

<sup>xxiv</sup> "Peace Now," CW 97 (5 January 1973): 291-92.

<sup>xxv</sup> "Ky's About-Face," CW 88 (3 May 1968): 196-97; "Rebuttals," CW 101 (14 February 1975): 392-95; John Deedy, "News and Views," CW 89 (20 December 1968): 390.

<sup>xxvi</sup> "Getting Out," CW 85 (23 December 1966): 335; "A Department of Peace," CW 89 (21 February 1969): 631-32; "What New Atrocity?" CW (21 January 1972): 363-64.

<sup>xxvii</sup> "Richard John Neuhaus," Concerned About Vietnam," Am 118 (20 January 1968): 55-57; Leon Sullivan, "South Vietnam's Neighbor's," Am 114 (22 January 1966): 109-11; Edwin K. Go, "What to Say About Vietnam?" Am 117 (25 November 1967): 627-28; Leigh A Fuller, "A Jesuit Dissenter," Am 118 (23 March 1968): 363.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Donald R. Weidman, "Pfaff on Vietnam," CW 82 (26 March 1965): 2; Henry J. Meade, "The Cardinal and War," CW 85 (10 March 1967): 663; Peter A. Eiden, "Anent Vietnam," CW 86 (14 April 1967): 107.