

ON THE DRY SIDE 177 AMERICAN MORALITY John Hyde

So long as we are not the victims, we do not respond even with sharp criticism to military occupation and terrorism for fear that the aggressors will turn on us. We justify our tolerance of aggression by pretending that those who abide by our standards and those who do not are morally equivalent.

By objective measures this is not so. There are better and worse behaved nations - there is a moral hierarchy of nations. In international affairs there is a party of freedom and that party is the led by the United States of America.

Take one of the objective tests, government with the expressed consent of the governed: in conventional terms, democracy. Democracy in Queensland and WA might be flawed by electorates of unequal population but there is no doubt that Australia is more democratic than South Africa. By the same test there is also no doubt that South Africa is more democratic than Mozambique.

Another objective test of the internal behaviour of nations is the direction of the refugee flows and whether the obstacles raised at their borders are intended to stop foreigners getting in, or citizens getting out. By those tests Australia is better than the Philippines, which is a great deal better than Vietnam.

The degrees to which basic human rights are respected by nations at home provide objective tests of national morality. People disagree about some of these rights but not the liberty to go about lawful business without fear of arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, deportation, physical violence or execution. Clearly Israel is better than Saudi Arabia, which is better than Libya.

Freedom of worship is another uncontroversial human right. Isn't Sweden's record better than Yugoslavia's and that better than Iran's or the USSR's?

Other uncontroversial rights are free speech, free movement, free association and assembly, fair trial and protection against self-incrimination, the right to be governed by ex ante rules (the rule of law) and privacy in one's own home. Australia only seriously offends one of these. That one is the right of association, which should include the right not to associate, even with a trade union.

The right to work and retain and dispose of the rewards of one's own effort is not as well respected. Australian industrial and occupational regulation, and taxation place us in the middle of the range for the first time.

However, by every test of domestic behaviour the United States is at or near the top of any list.

In international affairs too, the US looks good. The world is a dangerous and lawless place. The principles which govern United

States and Australian citizens nearly all the time when they are at home, do not always govern international politics, any more than they govern bar-room brawls. Even so, there are objective tests of international virtue.

The most important test is the existence of subject peoples - particularly people who would like to call themselves free nations. The United States has no Polands, Hungarys or Afghanistans. She conquered most of Western Europe in 1945 but there was no question of her staying there. Even after the blood-letting of World War II, as much of Germany as was in Allied hands was made a free nation promptly. In fact, so great was the trust, that West Europeans urged the US to increase the size of her Rhineland Army.

Such troops and military hardware as she has in Europe today would be removed promptly at the request of the host government. No one doubts this, while no one expects similar requests made by Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan would send the Soviet troops home - even less from the Baltic States, which have this century been incorporated in the Soviet Union.

The US has used its force to unseat unpopular despots; it did in Grenada. It has given military support to badly flawed regimes against regimes it believed to be more despotic; it did this unsuccessfully in Vietnam. It has given material support and training to movements which look like being friendly to the democracies and show more respect for human rights at home; it is doing this in Nicaragua. It has been willing to exchange support for a bad, in-terms-of-how-it-treats-its-people regime (Marcos) for a better one (Aquino). But since the Mexican war it has always got out.

The United States has made many mistakes and indeed committed many sins but the Soviet Union is not the moral equivalent of the United States, or of any of the democracies, any more than Germany invading Czechoslovakia in 1938 was the moral equivalent of The United Kingdom.

Unless we admit that there is a hierarchy of national morality we are liable by choosing our friends badly to make the world even more dangerous, as the British and the French did by choosing to remain friendly to the more powerful Germany rather than support the more virtuous Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Faced with potential enemies we wisely fear, and not having the courage of conviction, we allow marxists to de-legitimise the principles by which we claim to live. Witting and unwitting agents of totalitarian USSR harp on the democracies failure to meet their own relatively high standards but do not admit the hierarchy. Basically liberal societies criticise themselves - they can - but noise is not therefore a fair measure of comparative lack of virtue.

Despotic governments call themselves People's Republics or

Democratic Republics. Lawless nations criticise proclaimed breaches of international law by the US in Lybia and the UK in the Falklands. Bands of thugs and mercenaries call themselves People's Armies. The Communists in Nicaragua take Sandino's popular name calling themselves Sandinistas but Sandino was an anti communist patriot.

As Orwell predicted in his novel, '1984', the language and symbols of freedom have been taken over by 'newspeak'; there is a strategic attack on the notions of objective history and objective virtue. Everyone criticises the US. They can afford to, they do not fear her.

With Lybia the US may be tactically in error. There can however be no doubt that she is the moral superior of her critics.