



Present at the Creation

by Jonathan Aitken

FORTY YEARS ON WHEN AFAR AND ASUNDER/ *Parted are those who are singing today* are the chorus lines of the school song of Harrow, Winston Churchill's *alma mater*. It evoked such emotion in the wartime Prime Minister that tears poured down his cheeks in old age when he returned to his school and heard the boys singing the refrain. Perhaps its sentiments have some resonance as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of *The American Spectator*.

At the time when the first copies of *TAS* were being printed, I was arriving in Saigon as a 25-year-old rookie war correspondent. To this day I keep in my desk the press card issued in September 1967 by the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MAC-V), which under the signature of Captain R. W. Moorhead USN accredited me "to cover the operational advisory and support activities of the Free World Military Assistance Forces, Vietnam."

Although many members of the press corps in Saigon were reporting, sometimes with the glee of *Schadenfreude*, that the war was going horribly wrong for the U.S., I formed a rather different opinion from the viewpoint of the rest of the free world. I admired the courage of the American forces on the battlefield,

believed that they were holding the line for the nations of non-Communist East Asia, and predicted that the long-term effects of fighting to save these dominoes would bring great benefits of economic and political freedom for the countries concerned. For most of the past four decades, the prevailing liberal consensus has been that this domino theory was nonsense and that America's involvement in the Vietnam War was an unmitigated disaster. Forty years of this conventional wisdom deserves to be challenged.

Of course, the war had terrible negatives for the U.S. military and unforeseen consequences for U.S. domestic politics. Yet seen from the perspective of economic freedom in Asia, there were some powerful positives whose importance is often overlooked.

For the conflict in Vietnam bought time for the fragile community of non-Communist economies in the region. Four of them—South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—used that time to emulate Japan, transforming themselves into successful free market societies. These "four dragons" were later followed by "four tigers"—Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Time also brought about the split between Moscow and Beijing, followed by a

split between Beijing and Hanoi. Moreover, the example of the four dragons and the four tigers converted both Communist China and Communist Vietnam to economic policies that are today more open and more free than anyone would have dreamed possible 40 years ago. These changes came about as indirect collateral effects of the Vietnam War.

THE YEAR 1967 saw your High Spirits columnist also reporting on China's Cultural Revolution, the Arab-Israeli war, flower power in Haight-Ashbury, and U.S. presidential politics. I was in the Da Nang press center when I received a telegram from my editor in London ordering me to move to Hong Kong immediately since Chairman Mao's Red Guards were destabilizing, perhaps overthrowing, the colony's power structure. This was an exaggeration. The Red Guards' marches around Hong Kong were soon contained by the British-trained police. But there were a few anxious moments, such as when Mao's guardsmen demanded the hauling down of the three flags flying from the masts of the Hong Kong Hilton—the Union Jack, the Stars and Stripes, and the hotel's own pennant. The Hilton management yielded to this pressure, to much jeering from the Red Guards as the symbols of what they called “imperialism, militarism, and commercialism” bit the dust. At that moment there were several voices in the press club predicting the imminent fall of Hong Kong. How wrong they were.

Israel's staggering territorial victories in the Six Day War of 1967 led to other wrong predictions, namely that the Arab armies had been broken forever and that a permanent peace on the basis of the captured borders would be a deliverable reality. The latter proved right about the Golan Heights but wrong about the West Bank. Everyone underestimated the tenacity of the Palestinians, the emergence of the suicide bombers as a force for terrorism, and the inflammatory effect of Israel's settlements on occupied Arab land. We reporters were failures as forecasters in the Middle East.

As for Haight-Ashbury and flower power, it was fun but futile. I enjoyed my few days as a dropout in the company of such counter-revolutionary luminaries as Allen Ginsberg, Jim Morrison of the Doors, Pig Pen of the Grateful Dead, and Timothy Leary, the self-appointed high priest of LSD. The idea that flower power was some sort of new age spirituality looked bogus at the time and looks even more ridiculous now.

But as its devotees made hits out of songs like the Beatles' *Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds*, The Doors' *Light My Fire*, and Scott McKenzie's *If You're Going to San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your*

The idea that flower power was some sort of new age spirituality looked bogus at the time and looks even more ridiculous now.

Hair), it was surprising how many writers in the mainstream media treated this pop music as if it carried a serious message.

The message from presidential politics in 1967 was that unpredictability ruled. Although LBJ was increasingly beleaguered in the White House by the ferocity of the antiwar demonstrations, no serious reporter would have dared to forecast that the president would soon come perilously close to defeat in the New Hampshire primary, still less that he would decline to run for re-election in 1968. More generally, there was a fear that the 1960s were beginning to explode, as the passions and poisons that had been fermenting inside American society for most of the decade boiled over with a fury that traumatized the nation. A line from Yeats was much quoted by gloomy commentators of those days: *Things fall apart/ The center cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*

THIS STROLL DOWN THE MEMORY LANES of 1967 shows that we did indeed live through tempestuous, if not anarchic times. It was a great year for the newspaper and magazine business, so *The American Spectator* sure got the timing right for its launch date. But 40 years on, even though I am mostly parted by time and fate from my fellow chroniclers who used to report the news with me from Vietnam, Hong Kong, Israel, Haight-Ashbury, and Washington, D.C., it feels good to have survived for four decades in the writing and publishing business. It feels even better to be writing in my usual High Spirits column, not about things temporal but about things eternal. *TAS* has evidently acquired the wisdom to cover the long view! ❧

Jonathan Aitken, *The American Spectator's High Spirits columnist, is most recently author of John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (Crossway Books). His biographies include Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday) and Nixon: A Life, now available in a new paperback edition (Regnery).*