

Vietnam And Israel

Up Market Street they came last week, chanting: "Hands off the Middle East!" And their lead placard read: "Vietnam and Palestine: Two fronts, one war!"

The most interesting thing about these 75 young people, vigorously exercising their constitutional rights, was that they represented some combination of pro-Arab sentiment, and of American anti-war sentiment.



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These two sentiments apparently need some untangling, given the bitter Vietnam experience, and the current American involvement in the Middle East. At last week's Fact Corps briefing at the San Francisco Jewish Community Center, the young people present had one prime question: "How do we explain the difference between Vietnam and Israel?"

At first glance, this is all a little puzzling. The qualitative differences between the American involvement in Vietnam and in Israel are really not so difficult to tick off; e.g.:

—Some called the Vietnamese war a civil war in which America interfered. Israel is a sovereign nation, which has been attacked by other nations.

—Most people considered South Vietnam a dictatorship. Israel is a democracy.

—Some considered South Vietnam a puppet state, which could not exist by itself politically or economically. Israel is a politically and economically viable nation.

—South Vietnam could not defend itself militarily without American military forces. Israel can defend itself against the Arab nations without the help of outside military forces — as long as it can buy military supplies to match those given to the Arabs by the Russians.

—Many people were skeptical of the abstract "domino theory" which was used to validate America's involvement in Vietnam. (Would it really have become a Chinese satellite?) But the Middle East is undeniably of direct economic and geopolitical importance to the U.S.—and of direct consequence to world peace. This area is still, through its unique access to deep seaways, the "crossroads of the world," one of the prime launching pads for ambitions of domination and conquest.

But what do such items have to do with Rev. Daniel Berrigan, noted American anti-war activist who last week addressed the Association of Arab-American University Graduates, part of the newly formed National Association of Arab Americans? Berrigan criticized the Arab governments, but, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "levelled his main attack at Israel." He said that Israel "has passed from a dispossessed people to an imperial entity," which advocated "expanding violence."

There have been, roughly, four very different kinds of anti-war sentiment in this country: 1) The Gandhian pacifists who are against all war, revolution and rock throwing. It turns out that there are very few of these. 2) Those who are not so much anti-war as they are anti-American (without necessarily supporting some other nation). Their premise is that the U.S. is basically evil and imperialistic, and therefore any U.S. act abroad is by definition evil and imperialistic. 3) The isolationists, who, without ideology, would prefer to get on with enjoying life here, and forget about the messy world out there. This is the historical lobotomy set. 4) Those who recognize that the U.S. has a responsibility—for its own sake at least—in the world—but in whose judgement, for varying reasons, Vietnam was a mistaken, misbegotten, ill-fated, cruelly and criminally mis-handled exercise of that responsibility.

It is only those in that last group who genuinely ask: "What's the difference between Vietnam and Israel?"—and for whom the above list of differences is pertinent. When the isolationists ask, it is a rhetorical question; they resist America's involvement in good cause or bad, as do the pacifists. For them, the Munich lesson needs to be put at the top of the educational list.

And for those who are fundamentally more anti-American than anti-war—as indeed for those who are just plain pro-Arab—asking the difference between Vietnam and Israel is not really a question, it's a sneer. For them, Israel is automatically "imperialistic"—as it is for Daniel Berrigan—because every American action and ally are automatically imperialistic. Most of them don't really want to know about the critical differences between Israel and Vietnam because they don't want their simple, dehumanized, ivory-tower abstractions to be confused by facts.