

Weinberger Conquers Oxford

The Oxford Union is a debating society at the renowned British university. In an infamous 1933 case, it voted 275-to-153 for the motion, "This house will under no circumstances fight for King and country." In 1984, members debated the idea "that there is no moral difference between the foreign policies of the US and USSR." The "for" speaker was E. P. Thompson, a noted Marxist. Opposing him was Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger. Weinberger was an underdog; Europe's Left was in an uproar over deployment of US nuclear weapons, US policy in Central America, and more. Weinberger, however, spoke of a clash of ideas, noting the basic difference between a free society and a totalitarian one. His eloquent defense of US policy clearly won the argument and, to the shock of many, the Union's vote—271-232.

It does seem to me that, if we are to debate the moralities of the two systems, we should look at Soviet definitions and our definitions. ... The Soviet definition has always been that moral policy is what advances the Soviet state, that moral policy is what helps the cause of communism.

Brezhnev said it many times and, indeed, it is part of the litany. It is a moral system which turns the definition of the word "moral" upside down, as far as we are concerned.

Our view of morality is basically that policy is moral if it advances certain basic principles and rights. ... And some of our ... basic principles, of course, are that all of our power and all of the power of government springs from the consent of the governed, that all of our policies—foreign and domestic—must be supported by the people.

If not, then the policies have to be changed until they are supported by a majority of the people.

In order to secure that informed consent of the governed, we have the utmost freedom of speech and press and religion, as Mr. Thompson has quite properly and generously acknowledged, and we have all of the other human and civil rights that are guaranteed by our Constitution. And, guided by these principles, our foreign policy not only reflects but actually is based upon our political system. ...

The foreign policy of any country ... cannot stand alone as a separate entity. It has to be based upon the mores and morals and the principles of the political system which gives it life.

And I think, therefore, that all of this has to be taken as very substantially at contrasted variance with the Soviet policy, where the policy is made by one or, at best, a very few men.

That policy never has any chance to be challenged or vindicated by public discussion. ...

That's why the Soviet system, as we have heard many times tonight, cannot possibly stand, cannot possibly tolerate or accept the first glimmerings of freedom of association or freedom of speech. ...

Now, we've heard a fair amount tonight about the American troops who have been here 39 years. We indeed have a very large number of people at home who would be perfectly delighted with the suggestion that they be brought back, and would welcome it. ...

The troops who are here—by invitation of NATO, and by invitation of the host country, and who have been here a very

"Oxford Union Speech"

Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of Defense
University of Oxford, England
Feb. 27, 1984

Find the full text on the
Air Force Magazine's website
www.airforce-magazine.com
"Keeper File"

long time—are here for a very specific purpose of trying to ... join with people to protect and preserve their own freedoms, because they have been invited by the regularly chosen, legitimate governments of these countries to do that.

There's quite a difference between that and the Warsaw Pact troops, who are there because they are imposed on those countries. ...

The Warsaw Pact is held together with force, with intimidation, and with threat, and the Soviet troops don't leave. ...

We think you can't have a moral foreign policy if the people cannot control it, if the people cannot change it. ...

Now, who among the Soviets voted that they should invade Afghanistan? Maybe one, maybe five, men in the Kremlin. Who has the ability to change that and bring them home? Maybe one, maybe five, men in the Kremlin. Nobody else. And that is, I think, the height of immorality. ...

If our people disapprove of [US foreign policy], if our people think that we are making the error that you think we are making, something can be done about it, and that cannot be done in the Soviet Union, and that I think is the significant difference in morality.

The ability of people to participate in and control their own government and their own foreign policy is, I think, the highest form of morality. ...

Mr. Thompson ... said that we aren't really discussing how it would be for people to live in the Soviet Union, and we aren't really discussing internal conditions in the Soviet Union.

It seems to me we are. We have to, because it is those conditions which give rise to a foreign policy. ... And if it cannot be changed, it cannot possibly be considered moral. ...

Mr. Thompson again said in his very eloquent talk: "What is this quarrel all about?"

It's really very simple. The quarrel is all about freedom—individual, human, personal freedom—and whether or not we are allowed to exercise it. ... That's what it's all about. It's all about personal freedom. ■