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On the Change in the World Power Situation

Twenty years ago the philosopher Ernesto Grassi in an epilogue to the German edition of "The Americans", a study of the psychology of nations by Geoffrey Gorer, the British anthropologist, had this to say: "The former emigrants have risen to the position of foremost world power and are now faced with political tasks calling for tradition and historicism. The accomplishment of these tasks will stamp new features on the American character."

In retrospect and especially under the impress of recent happenings it may be questioned whether the USA has kept its position as the foremost world power and whether this US position is still the decisive factor on the political and economic world stage.

After the events in Vietnam few people will feel able to answer these question with an unqualified "yes". The USA has not just lost a battle, quitted a campaign — it has been worsted in more than a peripheral "overseas" war. The Americans' self-confidence has taken a knock, their faith in their mission, severely shaken already in the preceding decade, has crumbled, they have lost face, and the final chapter in Vietnam has added new features to the image of the "Ugly American".

The Americans' self-criticism has been harsh, in part indeed

almost cruelly astringent: While Grassi twenty years ago spoke of the "accomplishment of political tasks" in the context of the power situation in the world, Americans today are asking themselves whether the commitment in South-east Asia should in fact have been a political task for the USA at all! A nation which is about to commemorate its bicentenary, which is in the act of appealing for tradition and historicism, faces an agonizing reappraisal of its contemporary history. Even though the wounds may heal, the scars will for ever remain a painful reminder and arouse bitter feelings.

These feelings concern the European allies of the USA who dissociated themselves so clearly from the Pacific role of their senior partner and chose to accompany his political-military engagement in South-east Asia with moralizing comments. That at least is how many an American sees it and why many an American is now seeking consolation from a new "America first" attitude.

There have been times in America's history when it abruptly abandoned a global role inspired by missionary zeal and conviction for isolationism, of turning its back on a wicked and ungrateful international community and making its way back to its own values and the glorification of a "splendid isolation" intend-

ed to radiate forces for the internal expansion of America.

Isolation and protectionism are twins! When trying to judge on what course the USA will now embark in its international trade policy, Europeans will be well advised to reflect how great is the effect of psychological factors on US economic policy in regard to the outside world. They ought not to be oblivious of the shift of power which has followed recent developments, the shift between the focal points of the decision-making process in regard to foreign policy — including external economic affairs — from the President to Congress. No-one should underrate the potential repercussions of a shift of power and authority on the international economy; the impetus for the practical pursuit of a liberal trade policy, for the removal of tariff and other barriers, came from the President. To understand clearly how the situation has changed, one must think back to the Trade Expansion Act and the authorities it bestowed on the President and to the Kennedy Round which the then President inaugurated with the actual and moral support of his surviving predecessors.

The change in the US world power position, and the position of the US President who personifies it, confronts the world with a new situation.

Günther Jantzen