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Letters

Amnesty Replies

William F. Buckley Jr. has written (IHT, Jan. 9) that he is resigning from the Advisory Board of Amnesty International because of an "announcement by Amnesty International that it would henceforward devote its resources to a campaign against capital punishment."

It is regrettable to lose such a longstanding and prominent member of the movement. It is more regrettable that his decision to resign on this issue seems to be based upon a number of misconceptions; we would like to correct the most serious of these. For the remainder we shall be writing personally to Mr. Buckley.

Amnesty International has opposed the death penalty without reservation, in all cases, from 1972. The international statute of the movement includes opposition "by all appropriate means (to) the imposition and infliction of death penalties and torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of prisoners or other detained or restricted persons whether or not they have used or advocated violence."

Following Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 7 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and the Geneva Conventions, we oppose torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in all cases, including those where the victim is not a prisoner of conscience. As far as the death

penalty is concerned we consider that it constitutes the ultimate form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. We thus oppose it in all cases, irrespective of the victim's views or the offense for which he or she has been convicted.

The only difference now is that Amnesty International has started a systematic program, launched by an international conference held last December in Stockholm, in order to give the problem of the death penalty the full and serious attention that our international statute requires. This we have already done since 1973 with regard to the problem of torture.

This should serve to clarify that Mr. Buckley's impression that we have only now "come out against capital punishment" is mistaken.

DICK COOSTING,
Deputy Secretary-General,
Amnesty International,
London.

Amnesty Group Pushes Open the Wrong Door

BY WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.

The announcement by Amnesty International that it would henceforward devote its resources to a campaign against capital punishment is received by some of the organization's advisers and supporters with sadness. We are sad at the stupidity of the move, and at the inevitable sectarianization of the amnesty movement.

The Amnesty International idea began simply, and the organization's growth and its support from liberals and conservatives reflected a general consensus among civilized people that dissidents who are not guilty of violent crimes should not be tortured, imprisoned or killed. One would think that such a program would be quite enough to exhaust a budget of any man's compassion for his fellow man.

Men and women who have worked for Amnesty include the most idealistic in this world, protesting inhumanity whether from the left or from the right. Amnesty's reputation for

tendentious compassion arises in part because it is a fact of life that full-time bleeding hearts tend to notice depredations from the right while ignoring depredations from the left—it is a congenital astigmatism. But it is also a matter of the availability of information.

This is Tuesday. How many people were tortured, imprisoned or killed yesterday in mainland China? Not even the most sophisticated Peeping Tom satellite can give us the answer to that question, let alone the brave souls of Amnesty International. But the entire board of directors of Amnesty International can travel to Argentina tomorrow, or to Chile, or to the Philippines, look in the Yellow Pages under "Dissent, Organized," and start assembling their information. Notwithstanding, Amnesty has acquired prestige and, of course, recently was awarded the Nobel Prize. Those of

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us who have, with whatever reservations, encouraged Amnesty are now dismayed by the news. Amnesty has come out against capital punishment.

Now, there are perfectly respectable arguments against capital punishment. The point, of course, is that these arguments are unconnected with the proposition that one should not punish anyone for the crime of expressing himself nonviolently on any question. That is the point of Amnesty: so to speak, its call letters. If someone is guilty of violence—let us say, a hijacker, or a terrorist—then that man does not qualify for the sponsorship of Amnesty. That man is subject to the penalty of the law.

What penalty? A year in prison? Ten years? Life? Execution? These are choices open to societies that are variously chosen. Why is it the business of Amnesty International to insert itself in quarrels over appropriate forms of punishment? Why should it be supposed that persons who give support to Amnesty—whether by writing letters in behalf of its adoptees or by sending money to defray administrative expenses—for the purpose of registering a vote in behalf of freedom of conscience, should automatically sign on in an international drive against capital punishment? What is the nexus?

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has been heavily ideologues for years, recently did everything in its power to stay the execution of Gary Gilmore, even though (a) there was no doubt that he had been extended every civil liberty known to man, (b) he had been fairly tried, (c) the courts had authorized capital punishment, and (d) he had asked to be executed. Why should someone who favors civil liberties understand himself to favor the right of the state to forbid a condemned man from catalyzing the penalty to which he has been legally sentenced?

The decision of Amnesty International to go for the abolition of capital punishment is stupid in the most unforgivable sense of the word. It is a triumph of ideology over compassion. Because, as things are left, those who believe that capital punishment is a legitimate exercise of social authority, but who believe that the punishment of the individual conscience is not, are going to have to suspend their support of an agency that has done so much, and could do so much, to help lonely men and women in every area of the world who have never committed a crime but who suffer for having expressed their opinion.

Now suddenly they find that they are in a common pool, laboring over objects of the compassion of Amnesty International that include the Black Septembrist or Japanese Red Army members sentenced to death.

As a long-time member of the Advisory Board of Amnesty International, I step forward to suggest the nature of the problem. I resign.