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LIFE GUEST PRIVILEGE



'I note an appalling, indeed frightening, deterioration in our national standards of morality and law'

Arthur Goldberg writes about the Green Berets

The dropping of murder charges in the now famous Green Beret case has almost everywhere evoked a widespread sense of relief.

I must confess that I find this reaction—and, even more, the powerful political clamor against prosecution which preceded the dropping of charges—profoundly disturbing. In them I note an appalling, indeed frightening, deterioration in our national standards of morality and law.

Two comments are necessary by way of preface. First, what I say must not be construed as reflecting adversely upon the soldiers who were charged with murder, or as a judgment upon the facts of the case. Although the eight men will now not have their day in court, the old principle that persons accused of crime are presumed innocent until found guilty still lies at the heart of our legal system. The charges that were levied against the Berets were only charges. They were not evidence. Still less were they a finding of guilt.

Second, I do not have access to information which would enable me to judge whether the national security would indeed have been jeopardized by disclosures which might have resulted had the case been brought to trial. Nor, in fact, do I have any quarrel with the general proposition that considerations of national security may sometimes justify a decision by the authorities not to prosecute a particular set of charges.

What does alarm me is the way we have responded as a nation to the grave allegation that one or more of our uniformed soldiers executed without trial a foreign national whom they had in their complete control, because they suspected him to be a double agent.

Few of our people, and even fewer of our leaders, have manifested any sense of outrage that such an execution without trial might have occurred, or might have been ordered by American officers. Indeed, General Creighton Abrams, our commander in Vietnam and a brave and forthright soldier who knows the rules of war, has come under sharp public criticism

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for having insisted on their applicability in this case—to the point of ordering that murder charges be brought.

Of course war is hell. I suppose there has never been a war in which troops under the stress of battle have not committed acts of savagery which they would not think of performing under other circumstances. And I recognize that a counter-guerrilla war in the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam is peculiarly prone to instances of misconduct of this kind.

But the Green Beret incident, as alleged, does not involve lapses of discipline under battlefield conditions. The charge was that a South Vietnamese agent in our employ and control was simply executed—rather than being detained, or tried, or turned over to the South Vietnamese for trial. No civilized nation can permit individual members of its armed forces to take this kind of action on their own initiative. Down that road lies anarchy.

Article 106 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice provides that alleged spies caught behind our lines and not in uniform may be punished by death—but not before trial and conviction by an appropriate tribunal. Articles 93 and 118 of the Code make it a crime for an American serviceman to murder or even to practice cruelty toward "any person subject to his orders." The Geneva Conventions to which we subscribe impose similar restrictions.

At the end of World War II we participated in war crimes trials at Nuremberg and elsewhere in which enemy military personnel who mistreated prisoners under their control were prosecuted, convicted and punished. We sentenced General Yamashita, the "Tiger of Malaya," to death not for his own acts but for his failure to control the conduct of troops under his jurisdiction. We treated as war criminals those German generals who had executed uniformed soldiers and agents whom the Office of Strategic Services had sent into occupied Europe to train partisans, gather intelligence and commit sabotage—despite the generals' defense that Hitler had ordered them to do so. Under international law, as we applied it, an order such as

Hitler's was an unlawful one, and therefore not entitled to obedience.

I take great pride in this nation's historic fidelity to the rules which govern civilized societies even when they are at war. Traditionally we have never allowed expedience to justify departures from these rules. In August of 1776, when our nation's very ability to survive was in doubt, the Continental Congress provided that alien spies were to be executed only according to the law and usage of nations, and on the sentence of a general court martial. The rule was followed from the bleak days at Valley Forge to the end of the war.

In 1942, when our struggle against the Axis powers was at its most desperate, the United States Supreme Court interrupted its summer recess for the first time in 22 years to reconvene and review the procedural protections being afforded eight Nazi saboteurs in civilian garb who had been landed in this country by submarine.

Has the time now come, after all these years, to adopt a lower standard of conduct?

The war in Vietnam is a tragic war, marked by events which no human being can applaud. Whether or not the national interests assertedly at stake there warrant our participation in it—at such sacrifice in lives, treasure and morality—the situation in Vietnam cannot justify us as a nation now, for the first time in our history, to tolerate—more, to legitimate—the cold-blooded murder of individuals wholly under the control of our troops. We may jail spies or prosecute them. But individual American soldiers may not take it upon themselves, away from the battlefield, to serve as prosecutor, judge and executioner. That is utterly unacceptable—now, as it was in 1776.

If the price of the war in Vietnam includes our coming to tolerate or applaud this sort of moral breakdown, it is one I am not willing to pay. Nor should any civilized nation. As a great patriot, Tom Paine, once said:

He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression, for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself.