



Joseph Kraft

Post 10/9/69

## Casual Willingness to Lie Important Lesson of Berets

BEFORE THE CASE of the Green Berets sinks into the forgotten past, there is a lesson to be drawn. What is important about the case is not the casual use of violence which has attracted so much attention.

The important thing is the casual willingness of government to cover up, to hide the truth, to lie. And the disposition to dissemble — far more than all the stuff about the military-industrial complex and American imperialism — explains why it has been, and remains, so very hard for this country to extricate itself from Vietnam.

In its final denouement, the Green Berets case emerges as a giant whitewash. The decision to dismiss charges drew an official veil of secrecy over what looked like an act of premeditated murder effected by eight American soldiers against a man vaguely suspected of being an enemy agent.

On the way to that cover-up, there were lies galore. In an effort to conceal what they had actually done from Gen. Creighton Abrams, the commanding officer in Vietnam, the Green Berets at one point seem to have elaborated a complete cock-and-bull story.

Gen. Abrams and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker did not divulge the truth as they understood it. The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Richard Helms, did — privately, but not for the record. The Secretary of the Army, Stanley Resor, actively tampered with the truth when he said that he had made the decision to

dismiss charges entirely on his own authority.

THE WHITE HOUSE lied when its spokesman, Ron Ziegler, first declared that President Nixon had nothing to do with the decision. For in the end it developed that the ultimate author of the cover-up, the man who ordered the charges dismissed, was the President himself.

The same tangled skein of deception and falsehood has engrossed the Vietnam effort at every level. At the highest level, Presidents from Truman through Nixon have wanted to forfend against another country going Communist during their term of office. But they have not been prepared to avow such crudely political objectives. So they have tricked out defense of Vietnam in the clothing of self-determination and free choice.

The military services and the bureaucracy, at the bottom level, have not been able to achieve that objective. But failure is not in the lexicon of standard operating procedure. So the services have done their specialties and then claimed that these actions were in tune with presidential purposes. Thus the Air Force and Navy misrepresented the impact of their bombing, the Army misrepresented the significance of enemy losses, and civilians misrepresented the results of pacification.

It is typical that one hapless pacifier, former Ambassador Robert Komer, said of a particularly rosy report: "I was asked to show progress. I wasn't asked to show the dark side."

Between the President and the bureaucracy come the most interesting cases of all — the cases of the presidential advisers. From Dean Acheson through Henry Kissinger, almost all the high-level aides have come to know that presidential purposes were not being served by the actions of the services and the bureaucracy in Vietnam.

BUT ALMOST all high-level assistants — and quintessentially former Secretary of State Dean Rusk — have preferred loyalty to the President over loyalty to the truth. They have shown their mettle in backing to the hilt positions they doubted rather than in raising doubts about the President they served.

The upshot has been deception on the grand scale — an assertion of constant progress in Vietnam. And with that claim ceaselessly pressed, it has been virtually impossible for anybody to turn around, to come off it.

The serious question now is whether President Nixon and his chief advisers can get the country out of the war. They are not party to the mistakes of the past; it is not yet Mr. Nixon's war. But the Nixon administration has been making its own mistakes. To strike a deal, it has to change its mind and redesign its strategy. But will an administration willing to lie so casually in the affair of the Green Berets have the courage to face up to its own shortcomings?