

Life 12/2/69

In the shadow of Mylai

Horace Champney is 64 and frail, with a white beard, and since the first of July he has come almost daily to make his very personal plea for peace in a niche outside the White House fence near the northwest gate, which is on Pennsylvania Avenue. He is a kindly, tidy Quaker from Yellow Springs, Ohio. He settles himself on the stone foundation which anchors the high iron fence, sets up his peace placards and hands out his messages to those who move along the avenue. He has been there in the heat and the rain and now the cold. He has been joined by students and hippies and Black Panthers and other sorts who find their way to Washington to bring their protest. But they all seem to tire and only Champney endures. He has become a fixture of sorts, familiar—and almost invisible, in time—to White House staff members, police and reporters who come and go through the gate.

Champney's special thing has been a large photograph of a 5- or 6-year-old South Vietnamese girl which he props up beside him. One of his signs demands an end to the war "from the children of Vietnam." The tiny child looks out at the people with huge, soulful eyes, scared but trusting. It is an appealing picture. It always brought an inner tug but it also raised a mild resentment against Champney for "using" the kids.

All that changed last week when the full weight of the Mylai massacre settled on the city. There were not so many who denounced him. More people took his leaflets. Others looked at the child's picture, then at him and then hurriedly glanced away. In microcosm, here on a Washington sidewalk, one could see played out America's shocked reaction to Mylai.

Ironically, nobody in Washington is cer-

tain how to measure the impact of this event. There have been no instant public opinion polls, nor tabulations of the incoming mail. From the Capitol down the full mile of Pennsylvania Avenue most men grope for words, then fall silent. But the heavy knowledge of it hangs there in every congressional office, at every dinner party and cocktail hour.

The President has talked about it but with only a few of his closest advisers. He has talked about it in quiet tones as one who has been the father of small children. Nixon like everyone else is unable to absorb the full dimensions of the horror. But he is also Commander-in-Chief and in the midst of his own shock at the massacre is an awareness of the further tragedy of the shadow cast on all American troops, men he has walked among and praised as the best of the nation. At the White House last week he launched an almost frantic display of normalcy, ending with his planned attendance at the Texas-Arkansas football game Saturday. Some criticized his actions but the longer view was that Nixon, consciously or unconsciously, was reaching for identity with some common things in American life which are wholesome and durable and have not been tainted by the Vietnam war. Yet his actions suggested that he, who had proclaimed even more loudly than most the rightness of that war, had been somehow forced to look at it in a new light.

Up on the hill a staff member of Senator William Fulbright's Foreign Relations Committee sat down to write another plea for a more rapid end to the war. For a moment he pondered using the massacre as a device for focusing the message but then he abandoned the idea. It was too ghastly to exploit. "There is so much real meaning you can't say anything more," he concluded.

The hawks were stunned, some hostile, showing their own wounds. Senator Peter Dominick looked for a target and, following the lead of Vice President Agnew,

implied that the bearers of the news were part of the crime, as if hiding the full details would make it better. The continuing press reports served "no public need to know," Dominick insisted on the Senate floor last week, further suggesting that somehow the story could have been told without "eyewitness statements" and something he called "unverified photographs."

"You think about it," said one of Nixon's staff members, "you refer to it, you talk about it, but in the end you walk away from it." In the White House mess and the back offices they contemplated the contradictory moralities of modern war. "There is a split," said one of the President's close aides. "A hundred are killed like this on the ground and you have a crime. A fighter pilot might do the same thing but it is different." In the end there was always bafflement.

If there was any White House policy, it was to demonstrate both that in the context of the war the killing was an aberration and that the matter must be dealt with fairly and unflinchingly. Those around Nixon saw it in two dimensions. First, the nation had the right and need to know the full scope of the event. Yet there was the legal dimension, too, the problem of providing a fair trial for the accused in the midst of such widespread emotional reaction. And the Administration was angered at the further problem caused by the Army's great delay in reporting the massacre and passing along word to the White House. Defense Secretary Laird first informed the President in a 20-page memo in late August.

Henry Kissinger, the President's assistant for national security affairs and the man most intimately involved in the Vietnam war, was hit even harder than others. He told friends that it was possible for the country to comprehend a case like that of the Green Berets, where spying and counterspying led to man-to-man violence. That sort of thing was daily fare in the news, the literature and the movies. But Mylai was not within the national experience, said Kissinger. Who could understand the psychology of the battlefield or the inside of men's minds at that moment in history? Kissinger, like the others, felt a weird and awesome new element in the national life. To him, as to the others, it had come as a surprise. "Every time we think things are getting better," said a White House man, "something comes along to teach us humility."



Horace Champney, 64, demonstrates in front of the White House. A child psychologist, he has served in Vietnam with a Quaker hospital mission.