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Editorials

The Pro-Calley Surge of Feeling

THE WHITE HOUSE ANNOUNCEMENT that President Nixon will personally review and decide the case of Lieutenant Calley before any final sentence is carried out has been generally greeted as commendable, not alone by sympathizers of the convicted officer but also by antiwar doves within and outside of Congress.

As commander in chief, it is surely proper and admissible that the President should take final authority and responsibility in this case. Lincoln exercised such authority during the Civil War in order to modify with compassion death sentences by courts martial to sentries convicted of sleeping on duty. A President struggling to disengage a divided nation from a war that has produced such barbarities as My Lai would be unlikely to have Lincoln's example in mind.

AS A POLITICAL LEADER, the President is of course aware that the country appears to be lined up strongly on Calley's side, if the fast-reaction polls are to be believed. Still, we reject the rather bitter suggestions that have been put about that Mr. Nixon is merely playing for popular favor in showing compassion to Calley, first by releasing him from confinement, and second by taking on final jurisdiction of the case.

The impressive fact is, as one of the jurors who convicted the lieutenant has observed, that this case is "tearing the country apart." A President who recognizes that must do something about it, something to assure and assert a judgment the people will respect and respond to.

WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE is an outpouring to public expression about the Army not seen perhaps since General MacArthur arrived in San Francisco in April, 1951 under dismissal from his Korean command.

Right now the public seems to be translating its feeling of revulsion over the Vietnam war into an attitude, not just of sympathy and support for Calley, but even of approbation and folk-heroism. If this reaction is, as his colonel said, a sign of American "concern for fair play," what is to be said of American concern for living up to the Hague and Geneva Conventions? The Army's weekend statement on why it charged and prosecuted Calley noted that these conventions are the "supreme law of the land" and cannot be abandoned at will by the U.S. armed forces. Calley was judged guilty of their breach. Part of the self-examination through which the American people are going in the wake of the Calley judgment ought to be directed toward searching their consciences on how they want their government to conduct war in their name.