

American Illusion

By MICHAEL NOVAK

There are many reasons why a tragic sense of life does not come easy to Americans, and why a tragic sense of life is required if we are not to destroy ourselves. Until recently it was so easy not to believe evil of ourselves. Even when we saw the photographs used as evidence in the Calley trial, it was easy to be detached from them. They could not have connection to us.

To begin with, we were a new nation, born on a new continent, a people eager to forget past human history.

"I know America," President Nixon is fond of saying. "And the heart of America is good." For three and a half centuries we have had to believe that about ourselves. That belief has been a necessary pillar of our sense of worth and meaning.

We had to believe that America would be hope. America would be beautiful. America would be "new." What would be newest about it would be the absence of tragedy, the advent of hope. Optimism became the one necessary foundation of the republic. Things must always be looking up.

We see now, after 350 years, that such ideological blinders prevented our ancestors—and ourselves—from recognizing the true history of our nation and its true relation to the rest of the world. Even when our children despair of us, it is not from despair. It is from too much hope. So powerful is the American illusion that our children are absorbed by it, and are full of rage not because their parents preached illusion, but because their parents failed to live up to it.

The new world became hopelessly enmeshed in slavery and its deep psychic corruptions, which would entangle human relations as tragically as ever they had been in "the old world." In aggrandizement, greed, chicanery and exploitation, the men of the new world showed daily that the new history was all too like the old. Enormous

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*"You are the
conscience of the
United States
Army. You are
the conscience of
this country. Your
duty is clear . . .
to find the accused
guilty as charged."*

Capt. Aubrey M. Daniel 3d
Prosecutor in the Calley Trial

advantages of a fresh beginning in a wealthy and beautiful land were all too quickly squandered.

The atom bomb was dropped on cities crowded with men of the yellow race. Torture, assassination, murder, and an unparalleled scorching of the land came to characterize, to an extent not yet explored, American tactics in a war full of dilemmas in Vietnam.

The artificiality of an economy based on advertising causes many men and women of sensitivity muted anguish in their daily work—was it this that in their youth they had in mind as "fulfillment?" Public duty and private escape divide the lives of many.

Had Americans a tragic sense, none of this would be surprising. What is more typical of the human story than such a denouement? Had we a tragic sense, we could perhaps admit military and political defeats, admit that "the heart of America" is not particularly good but ambivalent, admit that our public and private lives are shot through with falsehood and betrayal.

Nothing more common and ordinary than that. It is rather, the pretense of innate goodness that so bitterly divides Americans. Since each must think of himself or herself as good, it becomes necessary to project evil on the others.

Thus middle Americans blame "agitators" and "communists," radicals blame "pigs" and fascists," black militants blame "honkies" and "imperialists," women's lib blames "men," liberals blame "ideologists."

The tragic sense of life suggests that the plague is not in others but in ourselves. It suggests that all things human, given enough time, go badly. And it does not find in such suggestions reason for shock, or crippling feelings of guilt, or dismay, or escape from action. On the contrary, the tragic sense of life differs from pathos precisely because it views humans as agents and actors, not as victims.

The tragic sense of life is a calm acceptance of despair, a firm determination to act well and unflinchingly, and forgiveness in advance for others and for oneself. No one escapes the burden of being fully human—even when each well knows himself to be incompletely human.

Tragedy arises precisely because we are called upon to act today with a wisdom, courage, honesty, and compassion we do not as yet possess. Had our people and our leaders a tragic sense of life, America would be less self-flagellant, more at peace with herself, and far less pretentious among others. Expecting less, we might quietly do more. Less righteous, we might be more honest with ourselves and with each other.

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