

The Scapegoat That Got Away



Arthur Hoppe

ONCE upon a time there was a country called Wonderfuland that was the most wonderful country in the world. Its ideals were noble, its motives pure and it was the hope of mankind.

But one day, out of basically noble motives, Wonderfuland got bogged down in a dirty little war far, far away. As it dragged on, few people in Wonderfuland felt very good about it. While they hated to talk about it, they suspected that atrocities were being committed by both sides. And so their frustration and guilt grew.

Now since the dawn of time, men in such situations had selected scapegoats on which to heap their sins. Then, when the scapegoat was sacrificed, it would carry their sins with it — thus cleansing their guilt and refreshing their souls.

So when a young lieutenant was caught committing an atrocity, it seemed Wonderfuland at last had the scapegoat it needed.

He was not too tall, not too bright, not too sensitive, not too articulate and thoroughly guilty. In fact, he went around saying things like lining up and shooting women and babies was "no big deal."

All in all, he seemed an ideal scapegoat whose sacrifice would rid the people of their guilt. So he was tried and convicted. But an odd thing happened.

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THE PEOPLE did not, as is customary, point at the scapegoat, cry, "There's the guilty one, not I," and breathe a sigh of relief. Instead, they made him a national hero.

No one denied his guilt, but they made up all sorts of excuses for him. No one had told him not to kill women and babies, they said. Or a higher-up had ordered him to kill women and babies, they said. And anyway, they said, what's so wrong about killing women and babies? Everyone, they

said, kills women and babies in war. And moreover. . .

Before you knew it, a song glorifying the young lieutenant had sold a million records. Before you knew it, the young lieutenant received \$100,000 for his memoirs. Before you knew it, the President, himself, told the people not to worry, he would save the young lieutenant in the end.

The problem, of course, was that those who hated the war most had to blame the war, not the young lieutenant. While those who patriotically supported the war had to say that the soldiers of Wonderfuland would never do anything wrong. So the country was ironically united at last.

In the end, naturally, the President, who could count votes, gave him a full pardon. Congress, naturally, gave him the Medal of Honor, the highest award a grateful nation could bestow. And the people, naturally, gave him countless ticker tape parades. So, naturally, he was chosen as the President's running mate in the next election and carried the ticket to victory.

Of course, children emulated this new hero, playing a game called, "Kill the Gooks." Of course, the soldiers of Wonderfuland realized that atrocities were now rewarded by fame and fortune. Of course, when the enemy now lined up and shot Wonderfuland prisoners there were no complaints. Of course, the little war grew even rottener. And, of course, Wonderfuland was no longer the hope of mankind.

So it was that the young lieutenant became the first scapegoat in history to make the people feel worse.

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MORAL: The one thing more stupid than sacrificing a scapegoat is to glorify one on high. For, by definition, a scapegoat carries what is worst in the people wherever it goes.