

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

Calley (2)

WHEN Justice Robert Jackson at Nuremberg in 1945 proclaimed the thesis that the Allied Forces, if ever found guilty of war crimes for which the Nazis were tried, "should be made responsible before the law," he was in fact indulging in splendid hand-washing military rhetoric.

The Nuremberg and later the Tokyo trials were laid on before they happened. They were simply a case of sanctified revenge, in the ancient spirit of war. You tortured your enemy because he had surrendered. The writers who found parallels between Fort Benning and Nuremberg were barking up another tree. There was no hypocrisy at Nuremberg, though curiously the trappings of hypocrisy were observed. Nuremberg was ex post facto law in a most exact sense.

The world has moved a great deal since Nuremberg. The complaisant hypocrisies uttered there are being hammered into fact. War makes no sense any more. It is surprising that the first real word of this has come from Lieutenant William Calley's judges — six career fighting men.

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WHEN CALLEY got life from his peers for mass murder, a new principle was forcing itself out to be stated. As a friend and former officer put it the other day:

"Out of the tug-of-war at Fort Benning a new principle most distasteful to we old line officers was beginning to emerge: A young man trained in the art of killing and embroiled in a frenzied guerrilla complex, must make his own decisions as to who should be murdered or spared, regardless of the orders from his superiors."



If this is true, and I believe it to be the thinking of a great many junior officers who have served in Southeast Asia, then an important thing has been going on. The folly of war is beginning to be accepted by the men who direct it.

We have learned the frightful wisdom that wars you cannot really win must dehumanize everyone concerned. Wars are now firmly based on restraint rather than on unbridled aggression. We all know, or hope, that neither party will use the ultimate weapon. So, in a massive guerrilla war like Southeast Asia, we systematically destroy what supports an army, people and villages, and kill the real enemy by accident or inadvertence.

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WE WALL OURSELVES from our atrocities by describing them in cotton-candy language. Mr. Nixon calls the massacre of children, women and aged non-combatants "this unfortunate incident." Calley is tried for the mass murder of 102 "Oriental human beings." A "free-fire" zone is a place where you can kill anything that moves, combatant or no. What you shoot is called a "target of opportunity." In a search and destroy mission, you destroy a village and its people as coldly as you would raze a condemned building.

When the news about the massacre of civilians at My Lai broke in 1969, Calley told reporters, "----, when they kill our guys, what the hell?" The point of the whole insane procedure is the daily "body count." This is not war. It is aimless butchery — the reason for which no one can define.

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THE POINT of revulsion seems to have been reached by almost everyone, from jingo to peace marcher. One of the most moving utterances to come out of the Calley trial came from one of the judges:

"God knows, we don't murder innocent civilians — infants, women, children. Not American soldiers."

But we do. In the My Lai incident, and the military condemnation of Calley, we face the mushy moral center of our times. Men, in their standards and hence their behavior, have increasingly aped the machines of their creation. Our morality consists in the policies of the organization to which we are affixed. Free will is for the huns. The monster has Frankenstein by the short hairs. The judges at Fort Benning made their gallant try. They asserted some human values in a situation where such had long been uprooted. Slopeheads, and dinks and gooks, they affirmed, were too our brothers. They got crucified for it.

More tomorrow.