

Manner of Speaking

John Ciardi

Cases of Conscience

A MORAL ALPHABET: Individual A is found guilty of having massacred individuals B-through-W, twenty-two in all, including men, women, children, and babes in arms. The original charges against A cited 102 counts of murder. The jury was eager to disbelieve the charges. "I am assured," said one juror, "that every member of the jury was hoping against hope that we could find something somehow that would allow us to find [A] innocent." It was in that frame of mind that the jury sifted the original charges down to twenty-two counts of murder on which the evidence permitted no doubt.

Having found A guilty on those twenty-two counts, the jury was then required to sentence him, as directed by law, to either death or life imprisonment. After further lengthy deliberation the jury decided on life imprisonment. That sentence goes automatically to a board of review that can reduce but not increase it. Even if the board of review does not reduce the sentence, A will be eligible for parole in ten years. The jury had, in effect, sentenced A to a bit less than six months on each proven count of murder.

Such are the facts. The reaction to them by a 200-million-character alphabet known as the U.S.A. still fills the public press.

The President of the United States released A from prison pending an appeal and announced that he would himself decide the final sentence after the various appeals had run their course.

The Vice President, recoining a phrase, scoffed at the verdict as a case of "oversimplified extremism."

Senator Herman E. Talmadge of Georgia, who described himself, a bit curiously, as "a former combat veteran," found himself "saddened to think that one could fight for his country and then be convicted for apparently carrying out his orders." [Moral question a): Is combat service grounds for dismissing murder charges?]

Veterans organizations (and others) have launched various drives to gather petitions for clemency, to raise funds for A's appeals, to demonstrate in the streets, and to protest injustice by urging veterans to return their combat decorations to the White House.

State legislatures have passed resolutions condemning the verdict.

One state Governor directed that flags be flown at half-mast.

Various veterans have come forward to announce that their wartime actions made them as guilty as A and that they, too, should be tried. One retired general declared that he had once given a "no prisoners" order (meaning "shoot them if they surrender"). [Moral question b): Is the refusal to take prisoners in a combat situation in which no men can be spared to guard them analogous to the act of herding civilians into a ditch and there gunning them down?] Air Force veterans have cited the fact that they bombed civilian population. [Moral question c): In an age in which wars are won and lost on the production line, is a civilian who manufactures a shell less an enemy than the soldier who fires it? d): If non-producing civilians are killed by the bombs aimed at disrupting war production, whose responsibility is it for not having evacuated them to safer areas? e): Is such bombing, in any case, analogous to the act of rounding up and shooting presumably allied civilians? f): It is possible that B-through-W were being forced to shelter the enemy at night, as they were forced to submit to our forces by day, but in that case what is their guilt, and who is authorized to decide it and to kill them for it?] A former special forces officer came forward to confess that he had, on CIA orders, murdered something called "a triple agent." [Moral question g): Can any governmental organization be so far above legal scrutiny that it can order a man's death without trial and shut off inquiry in the name of national security? Particularly when the circumstances make it readily possible to hold the suspected agent incommunicado until such time as he can pose no threat?]

All such claims of equal guilt are, of course, protestations of innocence. "We did what A did," these claimants declare, "and since we have not been found guilty, A cannot be found guilty."

In all this clamor, moreover, B-through-W (plus eighty other corpses not reducible to the alphabet of legal certainty) seem to have disappeared from the public discussion in which there remains only A as the victim of some monstrous injustice, X.

X, the moralist-observer is forced to conclude, is not in the evidence, which leaves no question of A's guilt. He has

been found, beyond a reasonable doubt, to be a mass murderer, and in the light of such a finding he has been dealt with leniently. How then could millions of Americans, including holders of our highest elective offices, be moved to rage against the wrong done to A? What X in the national character is the source of that rage?

The moralist-observer does not have all the answers to this last question. He thinks of Nuremberg first. The United States formalized a moral and legal position there in dealing with the Nazi genocides, and it insisted that its position asserted principles necessary to civilization. Since the Nazis were foreigners and recent enemies, we were content to be civilized while they were hanged. When, however, one of our own brave boys acts the role of the genocide, our deep-seated xenophobia rises between us and our declared moral principles. From the President on down, the clamorous seem to be saying that A did not murder people but only a ditchful of gooks. Why raise complicated and disturbing questions about a bunch of gooks, slopes, slants, fuzzies, and suchlike monkeys?

Except that the questions will not be put down. We are nationally committed to winning the friendship of exactly those underdeveloped nations whose people we still think of as gooks in the reflexes of our xenophobia. Can it fail to occur, even to the clamorous, that in brushing aside gook corpses as an irrelevancy we have demonstrated to the late-colonial peoples that they can never trust an American to think of them as human beings?

X, it begins to appear, is not only rage but self-rage. It is the rage of a people caught in complexities they can neither face nor evade. The ship's captain who was a deacon at home and a devil among far natives is a figure from our history. So is the brave boy Marine at his tricks among the banana republics. In the past we have conspired to sweep such figures under the carpet. Now one such figure has emerged to confront us, and it will not be swept under. A's obvious guilt summons us to a confrontation that would require us to confess our hypocrisy, but the clamorous lack the moral resources for such a confrontation.

It is in this moral squeeze that we must look for X. X is the self-anger of a people that has failed its own declaration of faith. It is the blind anger with which we reject the agony of a self-appraisal we do not dare because we have substituted self-inflating slogans for morals, and because we have not been able to find leaders capable of summoning the national conscience to its own best possibilities.