

S.L.A. Marshall: On the Nature of War

By S. L. A. MARSHALL

BIRMINGHAM, Mich.—My attention has been drawn to an essay opposite your editorial page wherein Burke Marshall, acting as judge, jury and prosecutor, convicts all Americans of the crime at Mylai toward mitigating what was triggered by the direct action of one lieutenant.

Burke Marshall I do not know and we are not related. It so happens that the individuals who called his statement to my attention confused him with my brother, Burt Marshall, scholar, former diplomat and a wartime soldier whose judgments I wholly respect. Hence my concern. In our family we hold with the thoughts of Spinoza, "I have labored carefully not to mock, lament and execrate the actions of men; I have labored to understand them," and that is why I undertake this reply.

An echo of that cadence needs to be sounded in our day and land if only because the ideas put forward by Burke Marshall have been expressed by other public men and aired in many editorials.

Though it has been said many times that it is noxious to indict a whole people, that is not the point at issue. Rather, I deprecate the attempt to build a case by dogmatic assertion irrespective of the facts of the matter, hysteria being no substitute for history. The war's unpopularity is no justification for perverting truth simply to work on the national emotion.

These things were said in the essay:

"We know, or at least we should know, that our war in Indochina is based on the killing of civilians."

"We know, or at least we should know, that the number of civilians that we are responsible for having killed or disabled, or made parentless, or made childless, is far greater proportionately, or maybe absolutely, than in any other war."

These are the words of a man never in military service or near a war zone, according to "Who's Who's. Yet he would put all skepticism to flight, his tone implying that anyone who disagrees is imbecilic. "We know, or at least we should know."

My reply is that in three tours of active duty in the combat zone in Vietnam where my task was the analysis of operations, I saw no war based on the killing of civilians. To the contrary, in more than 40 engagements of varying size I saw hundreds of young Americans take desperate risks, some of them paying with their own lives, to avoid killing civilians.

As in every war I have known since France in 1918, I was impressed by the decency and humanity of our average combat hand and I would say he has less vice than they who from some secure spot willfully slander him.

The second proposition is a manifest absurdity. Open bombing of North Vietnam was never permitted. Operations in Southeast Asia offer no parallel to the total fire bombings of Dresden, Hamburg or Tokyo, the atomic holocausts or the later saturation bombing of North Korea. That far worse horrors and larger sacrifice of life attend the going war is a tale circulated mainly by those who oppose it and think any deception holy that may help stop it. Yet an appeal to reason can hardly be based on false assumptions.

I would like to see the war ended, but not at the cost of defaming every American who does his duty honorably and shaming every home that would take pride in him, and certainly not at the price of demeaning every standard and value prized by our people until recently.

If there is any logic in Mr. Marshall's contention that we are all as a people accountable for Mylai and commonly share the guilt, then by extension of that argument there is no sawdust trail to the altar where our sins may be washed white except

scrapping the Army, Navy and Air Force and letting come what may. Pulling out of Vietnam would not be expiation; it isn't final enough.

Fundamentally, it is not man's inhumanity to man in Indochina that agonizes Mr. Marshall but war itself, that it refuses to be gentled and cannot be run off like a sporting exercise such as ice hockey in which only the players get banged about. Since wishing is not going to change it, his brooding about the Fort Benning verdict like his lament that Nuremberg was all in vain seems to me not so much misleading as wholly irrelevant.

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