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## Observer: *The Green Berets and a Question of Style*

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, Aug. 20—The allegation is made that the Green Berets, acting on authority of the C.I.A., executed a Vietnamese national without due process of law. The dead man is said to have been a double agent and, therefore, fair game for frontier justice under the rules of electronic-war and spying.

One dozes off at night on literary narcotics compounded of these ingredients, and the sensibility, except perhaps among moral quibblers, remains untouched by it. Twenty-five years of experience with the code of the nuclear superstate thickens the carapace around a man's sensibilities.

### Without Due Process

War, after all, implies killing without due process, even of the disinterested. General Eisenhower undoubtedly spoke for the multitude when, a few years back, he defended the bombing of North Vietnamese targets which had resulted in killing civilians by noting that in warfare the deaths of some noncombatants were inevitable.

Why then should we be outraged if now and then an occa-

sional spy working to kill our men is summarily liquidated? The answer is that most of us are not. In fact, tales of the liquidation of such fellows, whether in nonfiction or film, are a staple of the book and entertainment industry.

### The Lack of Style

The case of the Green Berets, however, is something else entirely. If the public gags on it, it is not because of the killing but because of the style in which the killing was done. Style may not be everything, but in America it counts for a great deal. You do not campaign in Bill Blass Bells if you want to be elected President, and you do not kill people in the Mafia manner if you want to be a hero.

The accounts from Saigon—and there is still no "official" account from the Government—do not suggest James Bond giving Odd Job his comeuppance so much as an old-fashioned Mafia execution of the sort perfected by Lepke and Pittsburgh Phil in Brooklyn during the 1930's.

A stool pigeon is seen talking to the wrong people. Not to the cops in this case, but to

the North Vietnamese. The report goes up to Mr. Big, in this case not someone highly placed in the "family" but someone with rank in the C.I.A.

### Getting the Contract

The "contract" is issued from above. "Terminate with extreme prejudice"—bureaucrat-ese meaning that the big boys want the stoolie "hit." The Green Berets "interrogate" him. The body is stuffed into a weighted sack and dumped in deep water.

Clearly, this sort of thing will not do and it will not be surprising if this account of the affair, which has been leaked out by various mysterious Saigon "sources," is vigorously challenged by both C.I.A. and the Green Berets before the affair is closed.

As it stands, it violates every rule in the style book. A counterespionage agent ferreting out and killing a treacherous enemy is one thing; a deliberate execution aping the Mafia technique is something else. We are too accustomed, when the same technique is used in North Jersey or Philadelphia, to calling it murder.

We have all heard tales

about the C.I.A., and we accept the fact that it is a really tough outfit, but still it is part of our Government, and really now, if our Government has to be tough, can it not do better than emulate the odious style of the Mafia?

Indeed, if it cannot, why not contract this branch of the work out to the Mafia? At least when the Mafia does a job its executioners escape without exposure.

### Violating the Style Book

In any case, contracting the job to the Green Berets violates every canon of style. We want the Green Berets to be hero-soldiers, the quintessence of the American warrior spirit. Who would gladly see his son enlist if he suspected he were going to be trained by Fast-Finger Eddie in the art of making a "hit"?

That he will be trained to kill—that, we as a people, have learned to accept. We still insist, however, that he be trained to do it in socially acceptable style and not like some ill-mannered hoodlum.

Later, perhaps, we may overcome this squeamishness, as our carapaces continue to thicken.