

Topics: America Is Part of the Body Count

By **FREDERIC MORTON**

I've seen elaborate wreaths by the plaque which commemorates the six million Jewish dead. I've seen dramatic flower arrangements, and streamers with gilt letters proclaiming sorrow. Since my afternoon walks take me past there, on Riverside Promenade at 83d Street, I've gotten used to it. But a couple of weeks ago I came on something different. A simple cardboard leaned against the fence which protects the plaque. And on it somebody had written:

"Twenty members of two families gathered here today to remember the loss of their loved ones and of countless others who died because of the madness of political [sic] leaders. We hope and we have prayed to God here that please, this blackest page in human history should not repeat itself today."

A shaky hand had scrawled the words with a black marker. Late blossoms from a nearby tree were strewn across the plaque. It was the season in which, 25 years ago, American G.I.'s had opened the concentration camps in Germany. But it was also the springtime of Cambodia and Kent State in 1970. A little girl threw a frisbee, and I had to fight the

sudden moisture in my eyes.

I'm not an easy crier. And the crying inside me was not about my two granddaughters, my uncles and my aunts who figure among the number engraved on the plaque. By now there are strong calluses around those hurts. In fact the plaque made me feel fortunate, as usual. My father, who had spent months in Dachau, now read the paper a few blocks downtown. No, something else had me by the throat.

In part the emotion was familiar: I've put my name on the petitions; I've marched the peace marches; I've done the dove-bit in the media; I've come to suspect that the abomination I escaped then may not be much different from the abomination I'm financing with my taxes now. But the anguish on that cardboard plunged me into something sadder still. I wanted to cry about the world's loss of America.

Dream and Mirage

Here is a Goshen going down the drain. The country that had snatched us away from the gas ovens now burns another people elsewhere. The irony seems excruciating—but not just for the likes of me. For hundreds of years victims everywhere could see (and sustain) them-

selves as future Yankees. America was what you could hope for when things became too miserable and murderous, it was the place where the sun shone for sure, chock-full of up for the underdog, in for the outsiders, and ah so full of gleaming dollars for the poor.

And even if much of that was mirage, it was a mirage hallowed, potent, durable, made official by the Lady in the Harbor. It kept on beckoning through its very elusiveness. You got past the immigration officer, you consumed your way toward the sacraments of inner citizenship, toward your boat in the marina, your boy at Harvard. Usually you didn't attain America. No matter how new your Chevy, you just kept on emigrating, up the ladder if no longer across the sea. But that was all right because the trip itself was the core of the faith.

It remained all right for a long time, long enough for the sons to continue the journey when fathers dropped. And suddenly—as sudden as the sight of the cardboard—you are told that this heaven by which you set your sights is of a piece with the hell from which you fled. Hence the fury of the hard-hats. After their long arduous travel they are told,

by some wild-haired princeling much closer to the destination, that they are all wrong-way Corrigan. For want of a better defense against such news, they beat up its messenger.

To Re-Invent America

And I, who fear them, share their shock. Who can escape being shaken by it? Our globe has lost a source of deliverance. Each time another Asian village goes up in flames, another bit of the saving America turns into trash—before the eyes of the whole world. It is an awful thing to know what only our ghettos (and our Thoreaus) have known all along—that the United States can be as monstrous as any giant.

Still the word "hope" is on that wracked cardboard. Still our young do so much clamorous hoping. Our young—far from being blasphemers—really carry on the same strenuous faith that once sailed in steerage. They are not just trying to reach Jerusalem but to right Jerusalem fallen. Even with excesses, they want to re-invent America the Church. If they fail, and if that spire is dust forever, where can any of us go?

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