

Vietnam: what is left of  
conscience?

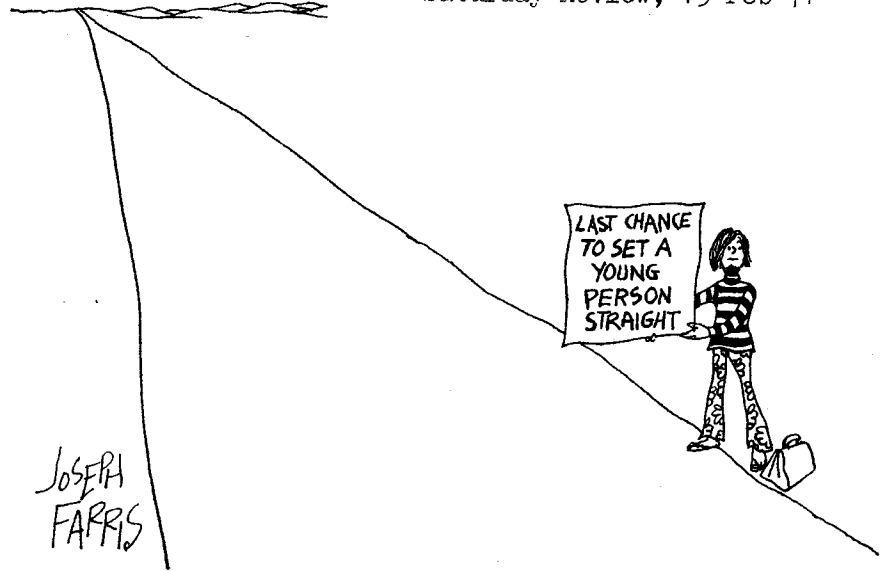
by Bill Moyers

Saturday Review, 13 Feb 71

exercise their civil or political rights. Most of this was socially acceptable—or at least not wholly unacceptable—just as so much of our current violence is socially acceptable: the 50,000 automobile deaths every year; the mortality rate for Negro babies twice that for white; the deaths from cancer induced by cigarettes or by air pollution; the sadism of our penal system and the horrors of our prisons; the violence of the police against what Theodore Parker called the “perishing and dangerous classes of society.”

What we have now is the emergence of violence that is not acceptable either to the Establishment, which is frightened and alarmed, or to the victims of the Establishment, who are no longer submissive and who are numerous and powerful. This is the now familiar “crime in the streets,” or it is the revolt of the young against the economy, the politics, and the wars of the established order, or it is the convulsive reaction of the blacks to a century of injustice. But now, too, official violence is no longer acceptable to its victims—or to their ever more numerous sympathizers: the violence of great corporations and of government itself against the natural resources of the nation; the long drawn-out violence of the white majority against Negroes and other minorities; the violence of the police and the National Guard against the young; the massive and never-ending violence of the military against the peoples of Vietnam and Cambodia. These acts can no longer be absorbed by large segments of our society. It is this new polarization that threatens the body politic and the social fabric much as religious dissent threatened them in the Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

A second consideration is this: The center of gravity has shifted from “obedience” to “enforcement.” This shift in vocabulary is doubtless unconscious but nonetheless revealing. Obedience is the vocabulary of democracy, for it recognizes that the responsibility for the commonwealth is in the people and appeals to the people to recognize and fulfill their responsibility. Enforcement is the language of authority prepared to impose its will on the people. Lincoln knew instinctively that a democracy flourishes when men obey and revere the law; he did not invoke the language of authority. We are no longer confident of the virtue or good will of the people; so it is natural that we fall back on force. The resort to lawless force—by the Weathermen, the Black Panthers, the Ku Klux Klan, the hardhats; by the police in Chicago; by the National Guard at Orangeburg, South Carolina, and Kent, Ohio; or by highway police at Jackson,



Mississippi—is a confession that both the people and their government have lost faith in the law, and that the political and social fabric that has held our society together is unraveling: “By such examples,” said Lincoln at Springfield, “the lawless in spirit are encouraged to become lawless in practice.”

It has long been our boast—repeated by the President’s Commission on Violence—that notwithstanding our lengthy history of violence we have never had a “revolution,” and that our political system appears to be more stable than those of other nations. Our only real revolution took a sectional pattern and was not called revolution but rebellion; since it was rationalized by high-minded rhetoric, led by honorable men, and fought with gallantry, it speedily took on an aura of respectability, and to this day Southerners who would be outraged by the display of the red flag of rebellion proudly wave the Stars and Bars of rebellion.

Thus, like most of our violence, violence against the Constitution and the Union, and by implication against the blacks who were to be kept in slavery, is socially approved. Where such violence has been dramatic (as in lynching or industrial warfare), it has not been widespread or prolonged; where it has been widespread and prolonged (as in slavery and the persistent humiliation of the Negro), it has not been dramatic. Where its victims were desperate, they were not numerous enough or strong enough to revolt; where they were numerous (never strong), they did not appear to be desperate, and it was easy to ignore their despair. Now this situation is changing. Lawlessness is more pervasive than ever; the sense of outrage against the mal-

practices of those in power is more widespread and articulate; and the divisions in society are both deeper and more diverse, and the response to them more intractable.

One explanation of our current malaise is that it seems to belong to the Old World pattern rather than that of the New. Much of the rhetoric of the conflict between generations is that of class or religious wars—class war on the part of, let us say, Vice President Agnew; religious protest on the part of Professor Charles Reich and those involved in what he calls “the greening of America.” If this is so, it goes far toward explaining some of our current confusion and blundering: the almost convulsive efforts to distract attention from the genuine problems of environment, social injustice, and war, and to fasten it on such phony issues as campus unrest or social permissiveness or pornography. What this implies is ominous: Our society is not prepared, either by history or philosophy, for the kind of lawlessness and violence and alienation that now afflict us.

Why is this so ominous?

Traditionally, our federal system could and did absorb regionalism and particularism, or channel these into political conduits. More accurately than in any other political system, our representatives represent geographical places—a specific Congressional district or a state—and our parties, too, are organized atop and through states. Our system is not designed to absorb or to dissipate such internal animosities as those of class against class, race against race, or generation against generation.

A people confident of progress, with a social philosophy that assumed that  
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## Saturday Review



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## Vietnam: What Is Left of Conscience?

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following guest editorial is by Bill Moyers, who served as White House press secretary under President Johnson until January 1967, when he left that post to become publisher of Long Island's Newsday. Since last April, Mr. Moyers has been traveling around the country gathering material for his new book Listening to America, which will be published next month by Harper Magazine Press.*

**W**e do not yet know the full extent to which the war in Vietnam has affected our moral sensibilities, but we do know enough to be troubled. News of continuing death and destruction appears fleetingly in the press and is quickly forgotten. In a recent national poll, people said they are more concerned with the economy than with the war. When during a television interview reporters finally asked President Nixon a question about the war, he wondered aloud, with a smile, why they had taken so long to bring it up. A consensus has been reached that the war is winding down, at least our active combat role in it; last month when 300 bombers roared over the countryside of Indochina dropping tons of bombs, barely a peep was heard in the land. There was relatively little outrage over the Cambodian invasion until four students were killed by the National Guard at Kent State. Campuses are quiet, I suspect, because the threat of the draft is disappearing. Americans do not seem able to sustain indignation over a situation that does not cost them personally. We do not mind war

as long as we do not have to look at its victims.

A committee of the American Association for the Advancement of Science recently reported that chemical herbicides used by the United States have poisoned some five million acres of South Vietnam—one-eighth of that country; that we have used six pounds of herbicides per Vietnamese, including children; and that the defoliation program, intended to deny food to the Vietcong, often destroyed the crops of the Montagnards, who are supposed to be on our side. Pictures of once fertile mangrove forests look like pictures of the moon. The report was like a rock dropped into a bottomless well. After the first burst of news coverage, hardly anyone paid any attention to it.

When Col. Robert A. Koob was selected foreman of the court-martial panel for the trial of Sgt. Charles E. Hutto, one of the soldiers at Mylai, he was asked by the chief government prosecutor if an enlisted man should be prosecuted if he shot an unresisting prisoner of war at the order of an officer. Colonel Koob was quoted by *The New York Times* as replying: "Since the time I entered the service, I was taught that a soldier was trained to shoot and kill. Haven't we trained soldiers to be responsive to orders?" Koob was also quoted as saying that "this is not a conventional war. We have to forget propriety."

The problem with the colonel's statement is that nations always "forget propriety" in the waging of war, whether they are sending V-2 rockets into London or dropping an atomic

bomb on Hiroshima. In all wars, men have observed Seneca's proposition: "Deeds that would be punished by loss of life if committed in secret are praised by us when uniformed generals carried them out."

However, there are exceptions: Lieutenant Calley and others *are* on trial for what allegedly happened at Mylai. But even here something seems amiss. What do we learn about ourselves when we realize that for all the outcry over events at Mylai and Kent State the public remains quiet over the bombs that continue to fall indiscriminately—they might as well be labeled "Occupant"—on Indochina? Are we indifferent to the destruction our newspapers are unable to describe? Why is it that men like Calley should bear the brunt of punishment for what has been an official policy of mass and impersonal devastation waged in our name in Vietnam? Are they more guilty than the men who fly the bombers? Than the men who give the orders from Saigon or CINCPAC in Hawaii? Than the men who make the policy in Washington? Than all of us?

I do not know how to deal with the dilemma of such questions. Collective guilt, like a trillion-dollar economy, is of such scope as to stagger my mind. I grew up believing in personal responsibility and individual guilt. Much of the country did, too, which perhaps explains why so many seem so little troubled by the anonymous and abstract manner in which we have destroyed so much of Vietnam in order to save it; in the diffusion of responsibility there is comfort. Perhaps it also explains our willingness to permit the Calleys to be scapegoats through whose sacrifice the rest of us arrive at some atonement. Seeing Calley on television as he is entering or leaving the place of trial, I sometimes find myself wishing the worst for him; the acts of which he stands accused seem so heinous a departure from propriety. But in the next moment, realizing that I have never been in war, have never been asked to kill for society, I am engulfed by sympathy for him, not willing that he alone of all of us should be judged. Perhaps it is these moral doubts to which Colonel Koob unwittingly referred when he said Vietnam is "not a conventional war." Americans have fought brutally in other wars. This is just the first time we have been forced to concede the brutality so frankly and publicly, the first time we have fought with a nagging conscience openly displayed on television, the first time we have acknowledged in such a wholesale way the discrepancy in justice for the individual soldier who kills in our behalf and the anonymous men who from 30,000 feet carry out official policies of

mass destruction, also in our name. We have abandoned propriety before; we have never before doubted the reason for doing so, as we doubt it now.

No wonder our armed forces are being shaken. "The Troubled Army in Vietnam" was the title of a recent cover story in *Newsweek*. But we should not be surprised. War is so total a departure from the traditions of civility men have labored for centuries to achieve, so consuming in its requirement that ordinary men inflict upon one another such extraordinary terror that an army can never again be the same once its troops are denied general confidence that their cause is just. A totalitarian government can march men to war under threat of death; better to take one's chance with an uncertain fate on the battlefield than to die certainly at home by the hand of your own master. But if tyranny can force men to become killers, a democratic government must persuade its citizens that killing in behalf of their government is, in the nature of things, justifiable. Conscription in our kind of society can only work well when sufficient numbers of men believe they would not be asked to kill unless their leaders knew what they were doing. When enlisted men lose confidence in the rationale of the policy and begin to wonder if the killing is worth it, discipline and morale inevitably suffer.

Vietnam has demonstrated that Nietzsche was wrong; a good war does not "hallow every cause." War can defile a cause as it can degrade the men who fight it. Old war movies to the contrary, men who look down the barrel of a gun at another human being, intending his death, want to believe that the irrevocable act they are about to commit has grounds more defensible than the exhortation of politicians. When by intuition, observation, or experience they begin to suspect that the brutality being exacted of them is not only not heroic but futile as well—it will not accomplish what their leaders said it would accomplish, it cannot stay the forces of history—no Congressional resolution or Presidential order can make right to such men what their consciences suggest is wrong. War is the means by which a government can sanction our worse nature, enabling us to do collectively what singly we would abhor. But men have consciences if governments do not, and when the sanction of the state runs out, men remember what they did and what they became under its protection. This is why governments should not expect men lightly to go to war; governments never feel the need for forgiveness, but men do. If Samuel Johnson was correct when he observed that "every man thinks meanly of himself for not hav-

ing been a soldier," governments ought not to require a man to act in such a way that he will think meanly of himself for having been a soldier. "In becoming soldiers," Cromwell's troops petitioned Parliament, "we have not ceased to be citizens."

When men are asked to forget propriety on a scale that challenges the fragile moral values by which they maintain some sanity and some dignity, many things can happen. Some will become more soldier than citizen—as may have happened at Mylai. Some will resist the right of the government to ask of them such an offense to what the Levelers called their "selfe-propriety" and will seek refuge in Canada or elsewhere. Some are never bothered because in handling the impersonal instruments of war—bombs and herbicides—they are never confronted with the particular consequences of their acts, the charred bodies of the victims or the Montagnard family without food. "I could take it," a young veteran told me last summer, "only because I was in the artillery. I never had to worry about who we hit. It might have been Charlie, it might have been somebody else. We never knew who we hit, so pretty soon we just stopped wondering. That was the best way for everybody."

Still others respond by becoming less soldier, less citizen. A Department of Defense task force reported last week that drug abuse among American military personnel in Vietnam has become

a "military problem" for which no effective solution has been found, partly because many enlisted men want so much to get out of the service that they are prepared to risk less than honorable discharge to do so. According to *Newsweek*, since last June "the United States Army . . . has seen the time-honored medal-award system badly tarnished, witnessed large numbers of its troops take to drugs that are prohibited back home, and experienced a measurable decline in discipline and morale."

For a conscripted army, the only thing worse than defeat is the doubt that it should be fighting at all. There is a limit to how much savagery ordinary men in uniform can either absorb or inflict. Sooner or later they will stop wondering, stop caring, or go mad.

At home, we have also experienced "a measurable decline in discipline and morale." We have turned upon each other in spiteful and accusing fashion, which has resulted in violence, division, charges of intimidation and conspiracy, increased surveillance by the state of its citizens, and increased suspicion of the state by the citizen. Most disturbing of all is the ease with which so many tend to suppress their indignation when they are not personally affected by injustice and suffering. Such is what happens when in the name of its ideals a nation has to "forget propriety." Nations cannot abandon civility abroad and remain civilized at home. —BILL MOYERS.

## The Cricket Sound

by Ernest Sandeen

Trucks bull down the highway,  
double wheels bellow, shake the ground.  
Overhead jet-liners howl,  
scream low to housetops

yet the September insect din,  
thin in the grass as time,  
skilled as time, shrills through.

Acres of diminutive telephones  
call us from under grass. They ring,  
ring, wave on wave, harmonize, clash.

Those crowds, those fathers of ours  
have thought of urgent things  
they forgot to tell us. Or they've relented.

Or repented. They ring and ring to us  
from under grass. Even those first  
erect near-men, millions of years  
away, have something frantic to say.

They won't get through our hard noisy heads.  
Already before snow stills the grass  
we are listening as dead to them  
as they ring dead to us.