

The Effect on the Military

THE DECLINE AND NEAR FALL OF THE U.S. ARMY

By Seymour M. Hersh

The army was saved from "out-and-out ruin," says a prize-winning military reporter, only by the presidential decision to pull it out of Vietnam.

In the course of the first air war over North Vietnam in the mid-1960s, an anonymous U.S. Air Force general composed a little ditty about the extensive civilian control over target selection:

*"I am not allowed to run the train;
the whistle I can't blow.
I am not allowed to say how fast
the railroad trains can go.
I am not allowed to shoot off steam
nor even clang the bell.
But let it jump the goddam tracks
and see who catches hell."*

Well, they've all caught hell—the military who fought the war and the civilians who drew up the strategies and set the limits. A few scattered signs:

- Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird has made it clear that he considers his four-year term in the Pentagon to be politically damaging and has decided to leave the Nixon administration sometime before the 1973 inauguration.

- Former Army Chief of Staff William C. Westmoreland waited embarrassedly for an offer to join the Nixon administration after his term of office was completed last July. He even wrote the White House a letter offering his services. He heard nothing and retired to South Carolina to work on his golf game.

- Westmoreland's replacement, General Creighton W. Abrams, had to suffer through more than three months of congressional inquiry (into the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam) before being confirmed by the Senate.

- During one eighteen-month period thirty-three of the best and the brightest army officers assigned to teach and train cadets at West Point resigned. Most of those who left were captains and majors with battlefield decorations from Vietnam and advanced degrees from first-

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rate universities. Their chances of becoming generals were high.

- West Point cadets, who are assured of free drinks from friendly bartenders during weekend leaves in the Washington area as long as they are in uniform, still come to the capital to visit—but no longer wear their uniforms.

These incidents and vignettes are but the tip of an iceberg—symptoms of the unprecedented decline in morality, integrity, prestige, and self-respect that has befallen the armed forces because of the war in Vietnam. This decline has been marked by excesses and deceptions that have fed upon one another to the point where today they are virtually impossible to untangle as to cause and effect.

In the early 1960s, there were some generals—such as former Marine Corps commandant David M. Shoup—who vigorously objected to the concept of fighting a guerrilla war in Southeast Asia. Some young battlefield advisers also openly expressed their doubts to the few newspaper reporters then in Saigon. But General Shoup



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retired, and by the middle of the 1960s the young advisers had either resigned or become senior officers who had "joined the team" and had begun looking the other way.

Looking the other way became infectious. Concepts



"EVERYTHING'S OKAY—THEY NEVER REACHED THE MIMEOGRAPH MACHINE."
2/1/68

such as search and destroy, pacification, at-random harassment and interdiction fire, and body counts, if not devised, were at least approved and refined by civilian officials working in the White House, Pentagon, and State Department who incredibly never seemed to connect these concepts with the civilian casualties and chaos in Vietnam.

In the ground war, it all culminated in 1968 at My Lai, where American soldiers and officers slaughtered hundreds of Vietnamese civilians and the army refused to recognize what had happened. In the air war, there were the air raids beginning in late 1971 that were flown over North Vietnam in violation of Defense Department orders and then meticulously covered up.

The most grievous casualty of the war has been the U.S. Army itself, which came close to out-and-out ruin in Vietnam in the aftermath of drugs, dissension, and the accumulated loss of self-respect. The army was saved from ruin only by a presidential decision—for political and practical reasons—to pull it out and begin the process of Vietnamization.

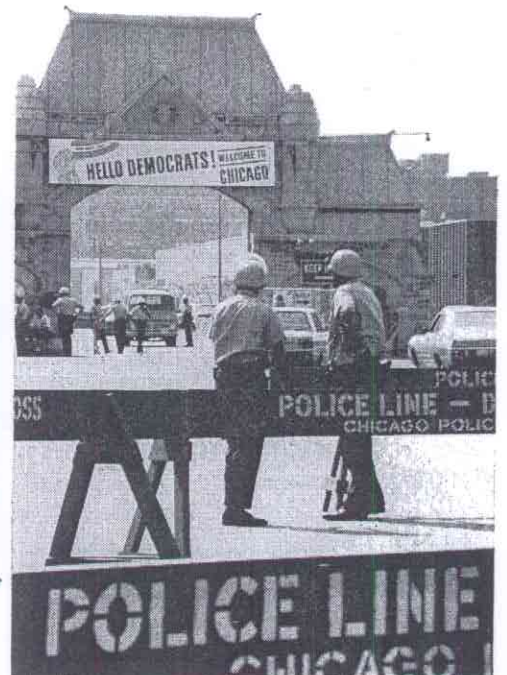


"It became necessary to destroy the town to save it."

—A U. S. Army major, referring to the village of Bentre



War is not healthy for children and other living things



The truly desperate conditions of the army by the end of its large-scale commitment in South Vietnam have never been adequately documented. But in mid-December 1970 one army psychiatrist wrote me a long, credible letter describing what was going on in his base in Vietnam, a facility along the South China Sea coast where GIs pulled out of combat were anxiously waiting for their twelve-month tour to end. The doctor asked that he not be identified and that his letter not be published, at least until his tour of duty was over. He is now out of the army, and here is a major part of his letter:

"The army seems on the verge of collapse. The command structure is rapidly losing control of the troops both in minor aspects and in some very tragic large ones. This collapse is taking place in three distinct and related facets—drugs, disregard for authority, and violence.

"Drug experimentation, abuse, and addiction have reached epidemic proportions . . . There is . . . little or no effective interference with the network of Vietnamese drug suppliers. In this area, all compounds use Vietnamese maids who usually serve as eager sources of drugs. Deaths due to overdose are increasing in incidence.

"Disregard for authority runs the gamut from wearing whatever uniforms and decorations one pleases, to murdering your commanding officer or NCO [noncommissioned officer] if you don't like his attitude. In general, the NCOs and officers are easily and frequently intimidated by enlisted soldiers. I've been told by more than one NCO that you must not correct a soldier about his dress or behavior, etc., unless you are prepared to do physical combat with him. And because weapons of enormous destruction are easily obtained, these threats are too frequently followed through. The attitude over here is that to resolve a difference with someone is to merely 'blow him away' or 'frag him' (referring to a fragmentary grenade)."

The letter cited the following list of "fragging" incidents that took place in or near the writer's units during a two-month period:

Oct. 13—Orderly room and vehicles blown up by grenade (seven injured).

Oct. 19—Sergeant and captain "blown up by grenade."

Nov. 6 or 7—Captain "murdered with multiple stab wounds while asleep" in his quarters.

Dec. 3—Riot with some nonfatal stabbings.

Dec. 11—Grenade thrown in enlisted men's club, injuring eighteen GIs.

"These are only examples and in no way approach the true incidence of such occurrences," the officer wrote. His letter concluded:

"My concern is the army's policy of sweeping such events and trends under the carpet and unwillingness to make changes in its treatment of soldiers, recruitment policies, personnel managers, and in general its inertia as an unwieldy, unresponsive, irresponsible, and headless bureaucracy.

"It is indeed frightening and discouraging to see the army in such a shambles."

By the end of 1970 the shambles were everywhere. Companies were refusing to go on combat patrols. American door-gunners on combat helicopters were photographed kicking South Vietnamese soldiers off their airborne craft. Atrocities were still being committed and still being covered up or ignored. Black market scandals involving American military personnel were still commonplace.

By the end of the American ground involvement, it became clear that much of the slaughter could have been avoided if the military commanders—those men trained in duty and honor at West Point—had refused to tolerate needless abuse of Vietnamese civilians. If the two-star generals had insisted on courts-martial from 1965 on, the army might have responded. If a helicopter door-gunner knew that he could not wantonly fire at civilians without facing possible punishment, he might not have done so.

But the top commanders not only failed to stem the murder, they often joined in it. At least one army general was formally accused of "gook hunting"—purposeless gunning down of Vietnamese—during the war; many others are known to have done it. One brigade commander, a colonel, had a helicopter reserved for him during the early hours every night so he and a few cronies could go hunting.

One badly disillusioned young lieutenant colonel told me of the time, while on a special mission to Vietnam from the Pentagon, that he decided to look up a West Point classmate, who was then a battalion commander in the Mekong Delta. They arranged to meet at 3 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon in the operations center of the battalion. The combat officer was late, but at 3:30 his helicopter landed with the usual racket and, seconds later, the young infantry leader burst into the operations cen-



**"Mother, clap for joy
over your children's corpses**

ter, face flushed with excitement, ran to the cooler, grabbed a beer, took a big swig, and said, "Best hunt we ever had! Bagged three today."

Some military officers and Pentagon officials still insist today that it didn't happen that way in Vietnam. What they really mean is that they didn't see it or didn't want to hear about it.

For example, Robert McNamara straight-facedly told newsmen during a trip to South Vietnam in 1965 that he had been concerned about reports of civilian casualties from the heavy American bombing of South Vietnam but that he had asked many pilots about the reports and none of them knew anything about killing civilians. In earlier visits, as David Halberstam and other journalists have recorded, McNamara often traveled to a village or hamlet outpost where he would stop in front of a young American officer and ask—in the hearing of assorted generals—whether the youth had any complaints. The "no, sir" apparently satisfied him.

Most Americans, despite Mylai and similar disclosures, still can't understand how bad it was—both for the Vietnamese who were being killed and the Americans who were killing them.

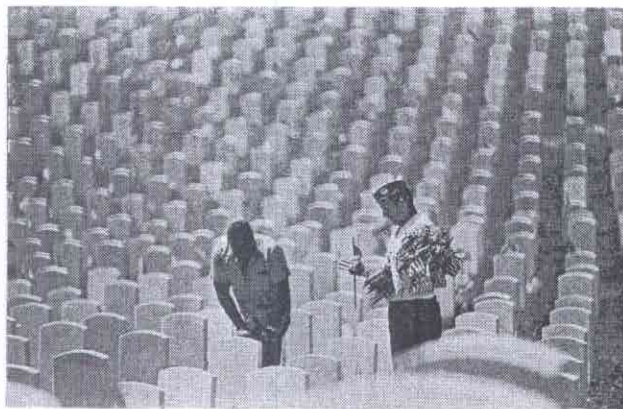
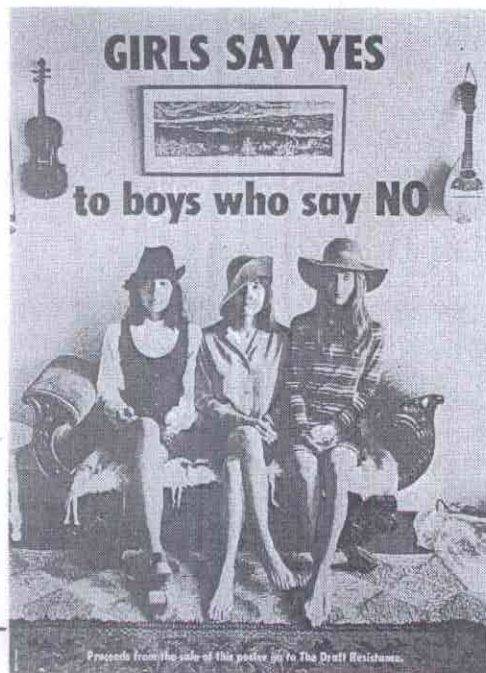
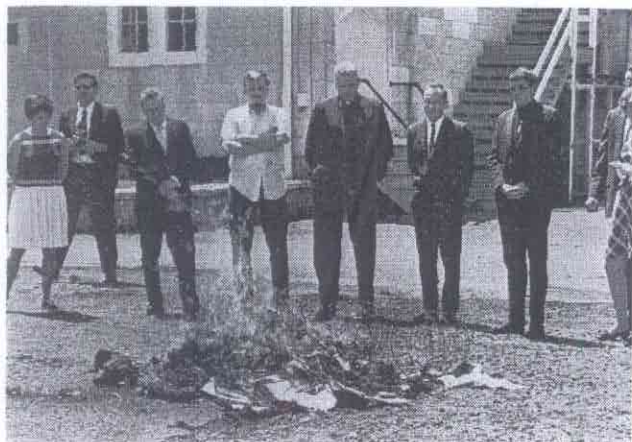
Listen to Mike McCusker, who spent eight years in the marines, two of them in South Vietnam as a combat correspondent with the First Marine Division. His is

but one of hundreds of similar accounts made public in the past few years. It is commonplace. He made the following statement during a "war-crimes" hearing in Washington in late 1970:

"In that position [as a combat correspondent] I saw damn near everything from command to the field. Perhaps an indication of that is an interview with the commanding general of the First Marine Division at the time, who said that Vietnamese society was ignorant and superstitious; the children were raised as thieves and liars; we could do nothing with the old; the children themselves should be taken from their families and indoctrinated all their lives in government camps.

"A colonel, in an interview with me, said his job was to kill gooks—except I knew better what to write and [would] put it a different way, such as country, God, duty, and devotion, helping these people, even though both of us knew it was a lie and not worth considering as far as the military was concerned. As a reporter, I could not write of these things, nor could I write of atrocities, nor could I write of the treatment of POWs; I could not write of women fighting with the VC, nor of women and children taken prisoner, nor of harassment and interdiction fire, or even napalm, which was referred to as incender-gel about halfway through my tour.

"My job essentially was to cover things up from the



... Mothers, clap in cheer for peace."

From a song by Trinh Cong Son,
South Vietnam's leading songwriter

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press, to be the PR [public relations] man, and come off with the Marine Corps looking like a shining knight on a white horse. If anything was coming up that would embarrass the Marine Corps, we were to take reporters someplace else and make sure that they didn't know about it. The general trend was to allude in our stories to all Vietnamese as Communists, not only dehumanizing them but indicting them as something that we are programmed to fear and abhor. Every dead Vietnamese was counted as Vietcong, because they would not be dead if they were not Vietcong, whether they were ninety years old or six months old. The body count was any pool of blood, and I used to think perhaps multiplied by seven."

After General Westmoreland instituted the body count as an index to American victories in South Vietnam, GIs suddenly found themselves killing and counting chickens, goats, and other animals and reporting them as confirmed "VC." Some units dug up Buddhist burial mounds and counted the bodies. Not all units engaged in such tactics, of course, but many did.

During a speaking tour of college campuses in 1971 I discovered the quickest way to demonstrate not only the depth of the savagery in Vietnam but also the widespread knowledge of it among the military was to inquire at the outset if any of the students had formerly served as helicopter pilots or door-gunners. I would then single out at random one of those who responded and ask him to tell the audience about "the skids—you know, what you guys would do sometimes with the skids." Without fail, the ex-GI would explain that many helicopter units occasionally would attempt to run down and strike Vietnamese farmers or peasants with the craft's skids—a maneuver that took a lot of skill and one life.

The army, in some sense, was obviously out of control during much of the fighting in Vietnam, and this ultimately amounted to more than just a military matter; it concerned the principle of civilian control of the military. Why did not or could not civilian authorities keep the military in hand? There is a good deal of evidence that civilian officials in the Pentagon and elsewhere simply chose not to make an issue of some abuses, even though they knew about them. For instance, the idealistic young American military advisers who went to South Vietnam in the early 1960s to help the Vietnamese "fight Communism" and learned that government-sup-

ported village chiefs were robbing the American AID program blind were repeatedly told by civilian superiors not to make an issue of it, not to rock the boat. A young U.S. Embassy aide in Saigon who similarly discovered currency abuses and corruption involving senior American military officers and attempted to do something about them was considered a malcontent and troublemaker.

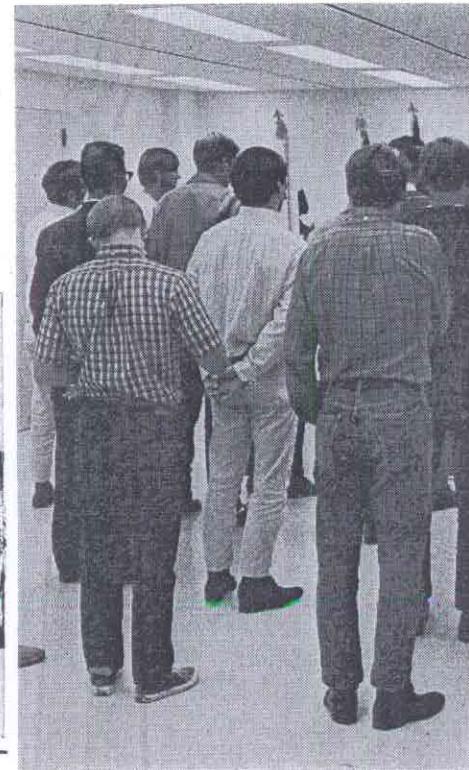
But there is also evidence that high civilian authorities were only dimly, if at all, aware of many of the signs of moral and disciplinary collapse in Vietnam. Some Defense Department officials in Washington were genuinely stunned by the revelations of atrocities at Mylai, for instance. A few have since told me that they had no idea such things went on.

Why not? One reason is that within the military hierarchy much information about the war was relayed only on an ad hoc, "need to know" basis, and, even then, often with reluctance. One young officer assigned to a Joint Chiefs of Staff position in 1966 recalls being taken to see a senior general shortly after arriving in his new post and being told that he was first and foremost an army man and secondarily a member of the Defense Department. Nothing, he was told, was to go upstairs to the third floor—where Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara then had his offices—without prior Joint Chiefs' approval.

Indications are that, in matters of grave strategic importance in Vietnam, civilian overseers of the military either did not know what the military was doing or, knowing, were unable or unwilling to prevent them from doing it. The most recent evidence came forth in Senate Armed Services Committee hearings this fall into the unauthorized air force bombing of North Vietnam.

Under rules laid down by the Defense Department after President Johnson decreed a halt to the bombing

"We urge the President to renew the national commitment to full social justice and . . .



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of North Vietnam in 1968, no bombing was allowed except in retaliation for attacks on reconnaissance aircraft that routinely flew over North Vietnam. But according to Senate witnesses, the air force bombed North Vietnamese targets on more than twenty occasions between November 1971 and March 1972, under the guise of "protective reaction" strikes. The bombings were covered up by doctoring post-strike reports, witnesses said, a deception that took up to three hours each night and involved more than 200 officers and a number of noncommissioned officers.

Yet, two high ranking officers testified before the Senate committee that they could not guarantee that a similar violation of civilian command and control would not take place again. There was also explicit testimony from air force Gen. John D. Lavelle, who was demoted two ranks in connection with the unauthorized bombings, that he had been encouraged to violate the bombing restrictions by numerous high officials, including Defense Secretary

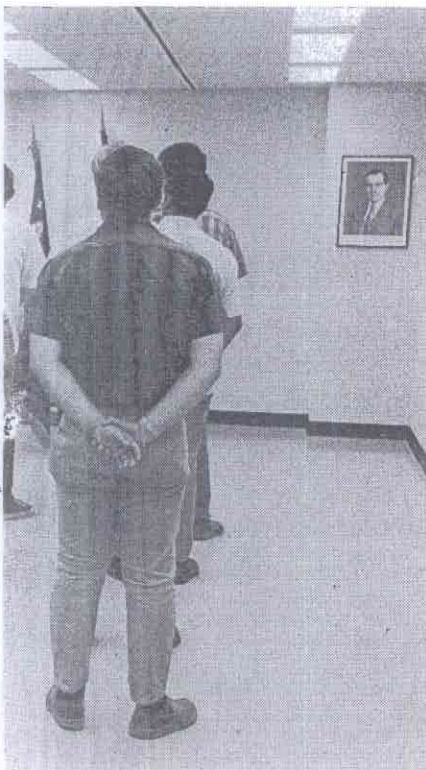
Laird. Later in the hearings General Lavelle told of a top-secret meeting in Hawaii late last year in which his Seventh Air Force representatives were assured that the Joint Chiefs of Staff "would not question" the targets struck in "protective reaction" bombings and also would, "in the advent of adverse publicity," provide full backing.

This and similar testimony prompted Sen. Harold Hughes of Iowa to declare that "I believe that the record developed so far contains evidence of military disregard of explicit orders approved by civilian authorities and of a breakdown . . . in the control and monitoring system."

Faced with a Senate demand for a complete investigation of the incident, however, Defense Secretary Laird decided that what was really needed was more military inspectors general, those officers to whom complaints are theoretically to be directed but—as much of the GI antiwar testimony has shown—never are. Mr. Laird also told newsmen after the Senate hearings that the failure of either the White House or top military officers in Washington to detect the more than twenty unauthorized raids over North Vietnam was solely a military failure, and therefore did not represent a breakdown in, or a threat to, civilian control of the military.

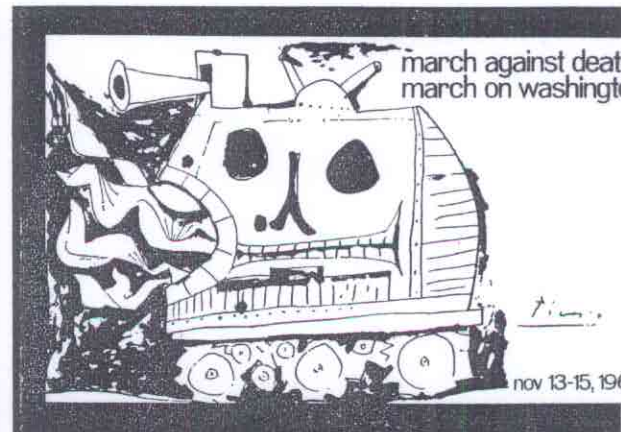
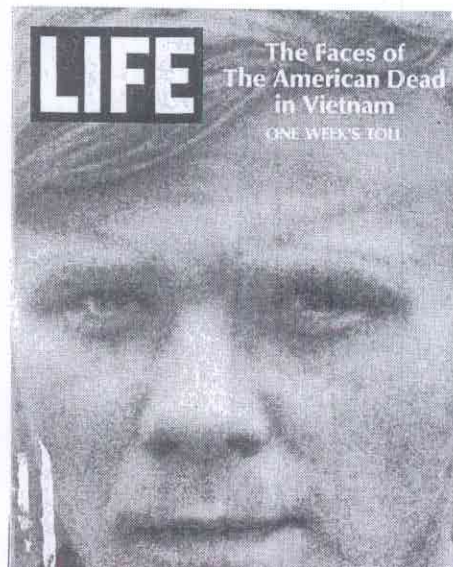
For all the Senate's concern, moreover, it refused to take a stand on the immediate issue in the hearings—the promotion of Gen. Creighton W. Abrams to be Army Chief of Staff. General Abrams was the direct superior of Lavelle at the time the unauthorized raids were taking place and therefore, under all known military codes, was directly responsible. Yet the senators, feeling no pressure from constituents on the issue, voted to confirm Abrams's appointment by a vote of 84 to 2. The command-and-control question raised by the Lavelle affair will probably never be fully explored.

There are numerous other examples of inadequate command and control. For example, last year a House investigating subcommittee demanded that the Defense Department begin an investigation into vicious abuses of the Phoenix Program—designed by American advisers to "help root out the Vietcong infrastructure" by identifying and then "neutralizing" either through imprisonment, assassination, or forced defection those civilians believed, often erroneously, to be guerrillas. The Pentagon simply ignored Congress, despite urgings that "these charges should be either substantiated or repudiated after an im-



... to be aware of increasing charges of repression."

The President's Commission on Campus Unrest



partial and thorough investigation." Today Congress evidently cannot even force the Pentagon to investigate itself.

The military has also ignored congressional instructions to restrain what has been called the "grade gallop"—the vast expansion in the services' high-level officer ranks that has taken place during the Vietnam War. A recent congressional report revealed that, although the services now have 900,000 fewer officers in uniform than at the end of World War II, there are about 5,000 more colonels, lieutenant colonels, navy captains, and commanders. In 1945 the United States had slightly more than 2,000 senior admirals and generals in uniform to lead more than twelve million personnel. As of mid-1971 the armed forces could count 1,330 such top-level officers for 2.7 million then in uniform. The army, with 130,000 fewer men today than it had in 1964, still has 2,800 more colonels, lieutenant colonels, and majors. Its forty-four three-star generals on active duty are more than were in the service at the end of World War II and also more than were serving in 1970, when the service had 300,000 more men. Thirteen per cent of the men in uniform today are officers, more than twice the ratio of twenty-seven years ago. The proportions amount to, in the words of Sen. William Proxmire of Wisconsin, "an outrageous situation."

There is no great mystery, finally, about the reason for the decline of military prestige and integrity that has taken place during the Vietnam War. Simply put, the armed forces have been waging a losing battle since the early 1960s and were never permitted to tell the truth about it. In recent years, no one—in the government or elsewhere—even wanted to hear the truth.

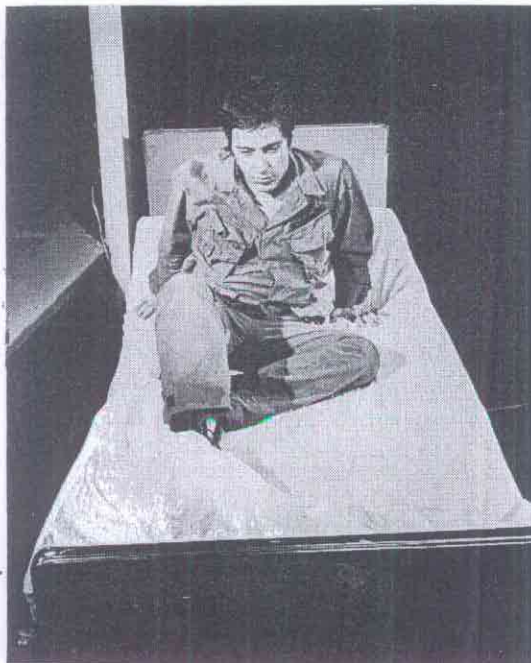
Thus, the bombing of North Vietnam was always said to be successful in cutting off the supply of enemy men and material to the South. Major ground engagements in the South always resulted in enemy defeats and slaughters. The light was always at the end of the tunnel. By the time a competent army officer rose to be colonel, he was supposed to be not only a sure-handed tactician but also an accomplished dissembler.

There is no evidence yet that the armed forces have begun attacking the real problem left over from Vietnam—the decline in military morality and integrity. In trying to pick up the pieces, the army has apparently decided that the quickest solution is the all-volunteer army. Aided by increased pay, lower man-power needs, no Vietnam combat duty, and soft-sell recruiting, the army may find itself manned completely by volunteers by late next year. But the dangers of an all-volunteer army are immense. Why is it that the first recent war in which the top ranks of the army were completely staffed by professional officers was such a debacle? In World War I and World War II and Korea there were mobilizations that brought in thousands of top army officers from outside to take over battalions, brigades, and headquarters. In Vietnam, however, the war was led by the World War II and postwar graduating classes of West Point and The Citadel. And it was these senior officers who remained so silent throughout the war and who praise it still.

Much of the bad news—that is, much of the truth—

**"In this administration, we are
Vietnamizing the search for peace."**

—Richard Nixon, November 3, 1969



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about Vietnam came from the "grunts", the GI draftees, who saw and told. But they will not be in the new all-professional army.

The army is bound to improve after Vietnam—any change can only be for the better. Already its top leadership has ordered twenty-five senior generals to retire and has promoted a two-star general over scores of his superiors to serve as Vice Chief of Staff. But any significant improvement cannot take place in a vacuum—with no one demanding answers to the questions and doubts left by the military performance in Vietnam.

Thus, barely a ripple was caused by a report last June that the army's own investigation into the Mylai incident had concluded that the top two generals involved were responsible for no less than forty-three acts of omission


or commission. Similarly, no cries for investigation were raised by a news magazine's report a few months later that one long-term army pacification program in the Mekong Delta may have led to 5,000 or more civilian deaths. Even the navy bombing of the French Ministry in Hanoi during the Paris peace talks last month failed to provoke much protest.

If there is a lesson in Vietnam, the armed forces seem to have learned it—they delay investigations, ignore issues of morality and public responsibility, and assume the citizenry doesn't care about the truth or won't insist on it.

Vietnam has brought on a frightening public-be-damned attitude on the part of the military bureaucracy—and the public deserves it. □



**TELL IT
TO HANOI**



Young Americans
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