The Effect on the Veterans

THE "GOOK SYNDROME" AND "NUMBED WARFARE"

By Robert Jay Lifton

The psychological problems of returning combat veterans could pose a serious threat to this society, says a leading psychiatrist. But even more ominous are the potential effects of "numbed warfare."

Psychologically speaking, there are two ways to kill in war. There is the classical way of reducing one's victims to nonhuman status—to "Huns," or "Communists," or "Gooks," or simply "Enemy"—so that one is merely getting rid of beasts, devils, scum, or threatening obstacles. And there is the more recent method of technological distancing—of being so far removed from one's victim that, psychologically, he does not exist at all. One is merely tending one's machine.

Both ways of killing have been widely practiced by Americans in Vietnam over the past decade, and both have disturbing psychological consequences. During the past two years I have been investigating these consequences—through individual interviews with Vietnam veterans, participation in a "rap-group" program with members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and other professional colleagues, and talking with a great number of other firsthand observers of the war (I have made two personal visits to Vietnam myself).

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The men who fought the long Vietnam ground war were drawn into what I shall call the "gook syndrome." The scapegoated victims of American soldier-survivors of the ground war in Vietnam were not the North Vietnamese or the NLF guerrillas, or even South Vietnamese civilians and soldiers. Rather, they were the "gooks." The word "gook" originated during World War II and came into active use again in the Korean War. It refers most commonly to a brown-skinned or Oriental non-Christian. Linguistically, the origins of the word are unclear (it may come from the Scottish *gowk* [simpleton] or the Middle English *gowke* [*cuckoo*]), but there is no doubt that in common slang it is used to connote sludge, dirt, or slime—polluted liquid filth. Such a dehumanizing term has always been necessary to numb soldiers for widespread killing. It serves to mark the intended victims with a "death taint" (a readiness for slaughter), which contrasts with the immortalizing grandeur of a soldier's own group. But "gook" goes unusually far in imposing that death taint by implying that human beings are inert liquid slime. The consequences have been grotesque, not only for Vietnamese victims, but also for American GIs. Both victims and victimizers have been caught in the "psychic slime" of the gook syndrome.

For instance, in the field the syndrome led to a morbid competition in the body count. As one veteran who witnessed Mylai explained, "[The soldier boasting of a high body count] was sort of saying . . . 'I hate the gooks—in terms that you can actually understand. I hate them a whole lot . . . even more than a whole lot . . . so, wow! I killed one hundred twenty-one of them.' . . . The only way you could determine who hated gooks the most was by how many times you beat them or killed them or raped them or something like that."

Avoiding the gook syndrome while in Vietnam was almost impossible, as one former infantry sergeant made clear in telling of his own conflicts about opposing it: "I really felt sick at myself for not . . . confronting [my men] . . . . And yet [I knew] . . . it wouldn't make any

Robert Jay Lifton is a professor of psychiatry at Yale University and author of Death in Life: The Survivors of Hiroshima. *The material in this article is adapted from his forthcoming book, which he says concerns "the psychological effects of the war on Vietnam veterans and the veterans' transformation away from the warrior ethos." The book is to be published next spring by Simon & Schuster.*

difference. I could . . . punish [my troops] when I caught them [calling the Vietnamese gooks or brutalizing them], and yet the whole military establishment was contrary to what I was doing. . . . The colonels called them gooks, the captain called them gooks, the staff all called them gooks . . . . [The men] took their cue from that, and they considered me some kind of weird freak."

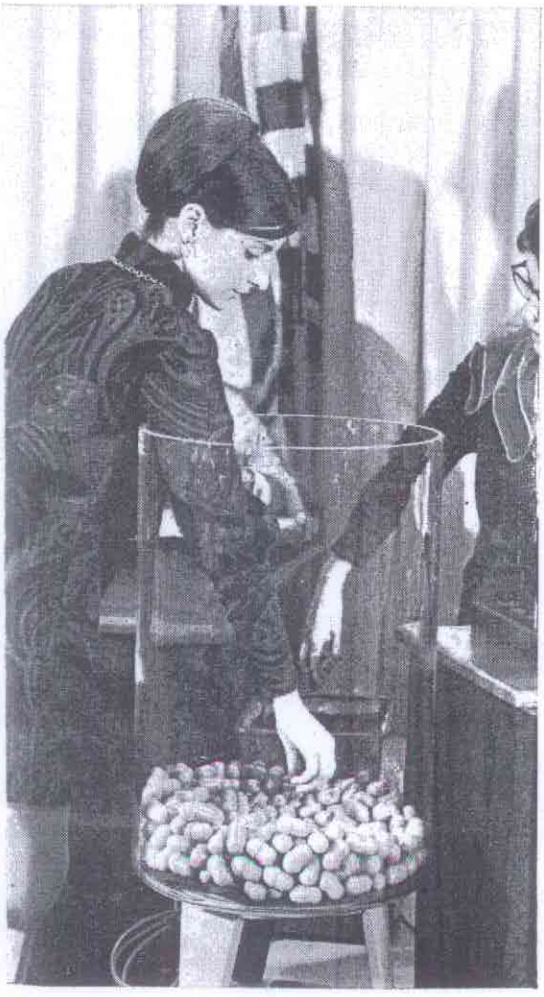
So predominent was the gook syndrome that trying to avoid it made one "abnormal," and even those who consciously fought its dehumanization were inevitably drawn into it. "The ARVNS were famous for stealing anything they could get their hands on. . . . But, like . . . when an ARVN would come over looking for me or something, and one of the Americans would toss him over the barbed-wire fence in a heap, you know . . . I just didn't want to deal with it," explained the same infantry sergeant. ". . . It didn't matter whether I reported it because [no one cared]. They were ARVNS; they were subhuman. . . . What could I do? I couldn't deal with . . . that level of being human to them [all the time] because I would have gone insane. So I just had to . . . sort of find a dead space and put it all there."

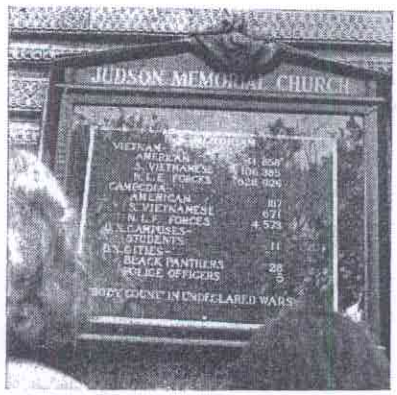
Maintaining that "dead space," creating that psychic numbing, meant, of course, ceasing to feel the humanity of the Vietnamese. And, at some level, it also meant colluding in their victimization. Attempting to break out of the gook syndrome, to form genuine friendships with Vietnamese, could end bitterly for everyone, as the sergeant learned in the course of a close and caring friendship with a middle-aged Vietnamese woman and her daughter. He spoke of how "one morning they came in and said, '*Mama-san* is gone. The VC got her last night because she associated with the Americans.' . . . I found myself thinking, why the hell don't I just leave well enough alone . . . just function as a military idiot and [not get] into trouble. . . . Why try to make these people . . . see that Americans are good? . . . They're caught in the middle, and [you're] helping them get caught in the middle . . . . They're just going to get crushed . . . . It's better to leave them alone."

The gook syndrome, then, became an essential part of the collective psychological adaptation of Americans to the inverse moral universe of Vietnam. To rebel against it was to risk severe psychic or physical repercussions and possibly to endanger one's own life and the lives of others. As one man summed up the situation during a rap group, "Every time you'd start to feel human, you'd get screwed."

Despite everything, however, more humane feelings toward Vietnamese did persist. Such feelings could be kept alive by involvements with families or by various encounters with the suffering of individual Vietnamese. Children could play a particularly great part in resensitizing experiences. Veterans recalled their shock at seeing American trucks barreling through villages and running over children in the road. These are what I call images of ultimate transgression, of ultimate "mismatch"—the helpless young, whom adults are supposed to nurture and protect, cruelly destroyed by all-powerful but totally unfeeling American machines.

The extraordinary duality of the soldiers' feelings toward Vietnamese children was epitomized in all its absurdity at Mylai. Describing a scene right after the slaughter, one veteran spoke of a few small Vietnamese children still left running about. The same men who had just done the shooting "were giving the kids food—you





"All your private property is Target for your enemy And your enemy is We." — **Jefferson Airplane, from "We Can Be Together"**

know, just like nothing ever happened. I could connect the kids with the people in the village," he went on. "I could even . . . actually wonder . . . if it was [this kid's] mother and father . . . his sister or brother that were killed in the village. And I don't think it ever—well, maybe it did—[but] I don't think it ever popped into anybody else's mind."

For some, sexual encounters could contribute to overcoming the gook syndrome. One veteran, for example, told of his efforts to build mutually sensitive and considerate relationships with several Vietnamese women only to find that exploitative elements, deceptions, and shame were inescapable. Drawn to the women but feeling no possibility of a valid, human tie, he eventually solved the dilemma by frequenting massage parlors. There he found that the relationships had at least a certain simplicity and integrity: "I'd pay my money, and I'd get the steam bath, the massage, the sex, and that would be it. And what happened was open. The kind of exchange it was—was *that* exchange—and it was called what it was, and there [was] something very refreshing about it. . . . It began to seem to me as if that was the only kind of sex I could have in Vietnam . . . [and as if that] was the only honest thing I did [while I was there]."

This veteran's "solution"—open, unvarnished sex, unencumbered by any other kind of relationship or commitment—was neither original nor ideal. Nor did it fully exculpate him, either objectively or in his own eyes, from the sense of sexual exploitation. But it did have a significant psychological value for him. It enabled him to preserve, through sex, an island of sensitivity that contributed to his responsiveness to Vietnamese suffering. It played a part in his capacity to look out from his Saigon rooftop at the random American artillery fire exploding on the outskirts of the city and express to a friend his rage and his awareness that "there are *people* out there." The cry was impotent, just as the sex was tainted and incomplete. Yet the very struggle to relate his erotic impulses to human concerns gave him something of fundamental importance to build upon in dealing with the emerging residue of his gook syndrome later on.

Whether or not they struggle to rid themselves of the gook syndrome—in effect, to "rehumanize" themselves—most returning veterans do not have such a reservoir of encounters, realizations, and feelings toward the Vietnamese to draw upon. In rap groups men could chuckle together in recalling such things as a sign in a small Vietnamese outpost, "Car Wash and Get Screwed," but they were uneasy about the mixture of exploitation, nostalgia, and absurdity involved in the recollection. Their sense of absurdity, mockery, and self-mockery, however, was crucial in the struggles of these antiwar veterans to

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"If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation, the United States of America, acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world."

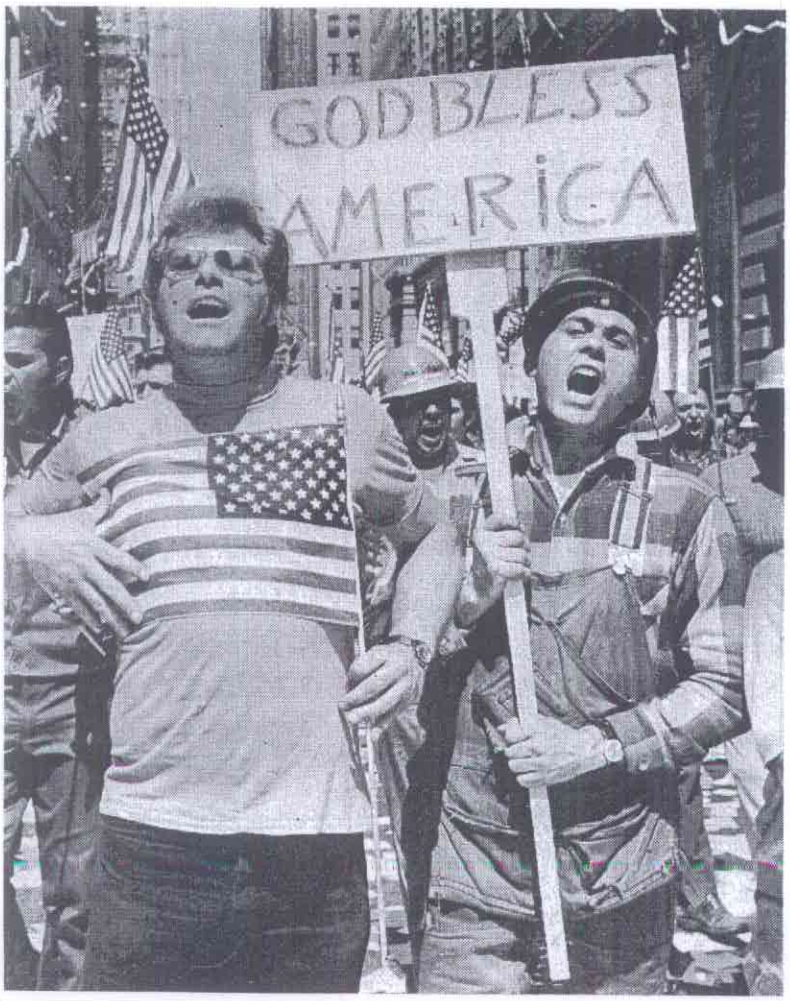
—Richard Nixon, on the eve of the Cambodian incursion

develop an energizing or animating relationship to the guilt associated with the denial of Vietnamese humanity —to the guilt buried beneath the word "gook" in some "dead space" of psychic numbness.

Sometimes a seemingly unremarkable memory could reflect many levels of abuse tied to the gook syndrome. One man spoke with a curiously gentle bitterness of "the atrocity that was there in daily life. . . . [American vehicles] going through the village at forty miles an hour, kicking up a cloud of dust when the *mama-san* just got through sweeping off the front porch." Compared with other American transgressions, this one seems very innocuous, but the image persisted for the storyteller because it symbolized the abuse of weak and helpless Vietnamese by blindly rampaging and numbed American power and technology—a brutal intrusion that destroyed orderly existence and spread only filth. The image might also have been a "screen memory"—a memory that is a mild substitution for, but still representative of, a much more painful event that can neither be consciously faced nor completely dispelled from the unconscious mind.

Significantly, the "rehumanizing" process among veterans in rap groups seemed considerably easier in relationship to former "enemies." Much was made of the fact that the NLF and North Vietnamese—as opposed to the South Vietnamese—were "fighting for something." Attitudes concerning the NLF and North Vietnamese often reflected respect for them as courageous and determined fighters, as men who "had a lot of balls." By becoming national revolutionaries, whether through joining the North or the NLF, men and women ceased to qualify as "death-tainted gooks."

Since, in a fundamental way, the Vietnam War epitomizes a worldwide struggle (mostly on the part of nonwhite peoples) against victimization, antiwar veterans, by however circuitous a route, thus become part of a significant late-twentieth-century pattern of "defections" from the ranks of former victimizers in favor of some form of struggle *against* victimization. The antiwar veterans may also make direct psychological contact with the American version of the Third World psychological struggle: the rejection of victimization here, first by blacks, and then by other groups abused by this society.



Among the vast majority of returning GIs, however, the gook syndrome is not even confronted. It continues to serve the defensive psychological functions of justifying the killing in Vietnam and of avoiding confrontation with guilt. Such is the case with hawkish veterans who continue to insist, "We should have killed all the gooks." For such men the gook syndrome may simply be transferred to other groups when these men come into contact with the vast reservoir of victimizing imagery available in American society. Clearly, there is a parallel between a "gook" syndrome and a "nigger" syndrome. Today there may be hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans who, unable to find viable modes of human reconnection, are at least tempted to seek that reconnection by creating new—or re-creating old—victims. In this and many other ways the Vietnam War could do a great deal more than it already has to tear America apart.

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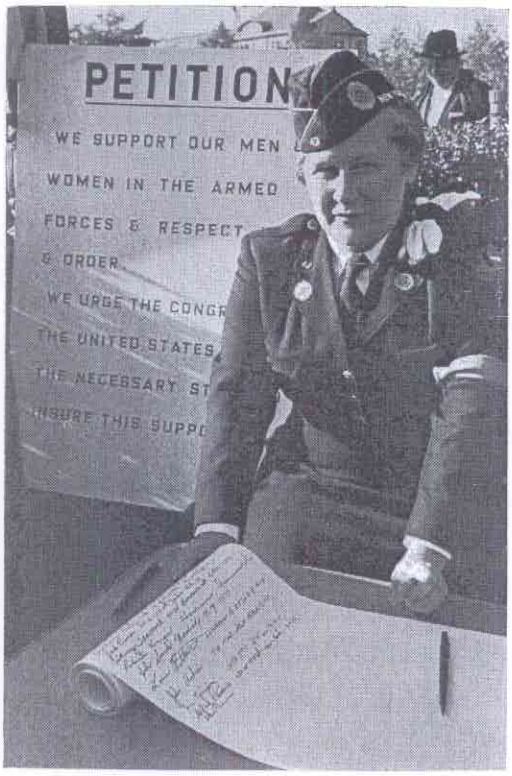
Even more grave consequences may emerge from the shift in Vietnam away from the filth of counterinsurgency warfare on the ground to "clean" forms of technological warfare conducted mostly from the air or by means of highly automated air-and-ground combinations. The aim of this technological, or "numbed," warfare has been well stated by one observer as "replacing men who won't fight with machines that will." And while this possibility is undoubtedly considered fortunate by American military authorities, it must be viewed as ominous for mankind.

Valuable accounts of technological warfare have been provided by Fred Branfman, a former refugee worker in Laos who now heads Project Air War, a Washington anti-war group. Branfman spent four years in Laos and interviewed both American pilots and Laotian victims of U. S. air raids. In his book *Voices From the Plain of Jars: Life Under an Air War* and in a series of articles, Branfman says that, "if . . . Mylai was the symbol of American ground intervention [and of face-to-face slaughter] during the 1960s, the Plain [of Jars] is the symbol of the automated war of the 1970s." On the Plain of Jars, where fifty thousand people formerly thrived, the result of heavy American bombing was, according to Branfman, that "an entire society [was] wiped off the face of the earth and no one in [America even] knew about it."

Numbed warfare is conducted within a self-enclosed system. The fighter's only psychological contacts are with military superiors or peers and with his equipment. Lacking any relationship with his victims, the numbed warrior receives from them very little of the "feedback" that could permit at least one layer of his mind to perceive those victims as humans. He does not, therefore, require a dehumanizing "gook syndrome" since, psychologically speaking, no one is there to be rendered into a "gook."

Those who bomb need not feel the searing inner conflicts of the former ground troops. With their targets in Laos, for example, chosen for them by the American ambassador or the CIA, and with their victims beyond the range of the eye, the bombers have strictly a technical job. "Look, we're just bus drivers" was the way one pilot explained himself to Branfman. "Men are freed from the hatred, doubts, greed or rationalizations that killing usually entails," Branfman concludes. "Conscience and morality are irrelevant. One does not set out to kill and therefore, psychologically, one does not."

The essence of numbed warfare, then, is the near total separation of the act of killing from the *idea* of killing. As such, numbed warfare is perhaps the most malignant expression of the broad cultural gap between our technology and our feelings. One might assume, as Branfman does, that "the issue of guilt becomes meaningless." But I believe it is more accurate to say that numbed warfare makes guilt more readily avoidable. To call forth guilt,



"There have been Mylais in every war Now for the first time in history we have tried a soldier for performing his duty."

—Herbert Rainwater, National Commander of the VFW

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to deal with it and animate one's relationship to it, requires a concerted effort at reconnecting the act and idea of killing.

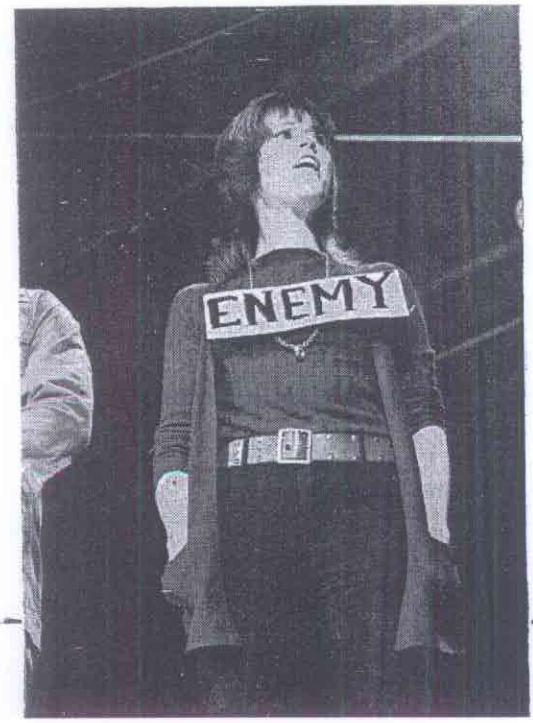
A significant minority of Vietnam veterans have made precisely that effort. A former Marine Corps pilot, Jon Floyd, described his experience in the air war at the Winter Soldier Investigation of early 1971, the first and largest public inquiry into war crimes sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. As a pilot, said Floyd, "you see flak at night. That's about as close to war as [you] get . . . . You go out, fly your mission, you come back to your air-conditioned hootch and drink beer or whatever. . . . You don't realize at the time, I don't think, what you're doing. It dawned on me, I think, when we got reports of thirteen-year-old NVA soldiers coming across and being captured . . . that most probably [young girls were driving] most of these trucks that we were destroying up north."

The impersonal war that protects participants from guilt can become personal with the breakthrough of images of one's victims as sympathetic human beings—in Floyd's case images of them as dedicated young women and thirteen-year-old boys. But such psychic breakthroughs are all too rare, for the technological warrior's strongest psychic connections are not to the object of the technological war—the human enemy—but to the *process* of the war, to a set of self-enclosed imperatives in which the human enemy need never figure in any active sense. Psychological guilt and conflict are blocked out in part by the pilot's preoccupation with technical skill and performance. "When you go down in Laos, you don't face a very bright future," one air force officer explained.

Viet-Nam

Proud people whose ravished children
Speak the beggar's tongue,
Whose girls whore the invader,
Whose men salute the rapist,
At night, hunt the rabid beast . . . .

—Robert C. Hahn, in "Winning Hearts and Minds: War Poems by Vietnam Veterans"



"So you need motivation to bomb a place like Laos—this turns out to be mainly professional pride . . . . You become a part of the machine as you really do it. Guys who fly keep their professionality. That's why, as we phase down here, the air force will want to bomb . . . . I haven't bombed now for three months, and I really feel out of shape. The key is to be able to bomb without really thinking about it, automatically, to take evasive action . . . instinctively . . . . To be able to do this, you have to be flying every day."

In addition to a "professional imperative," there is also what Ralph Lapp, the atomic scientist and writer, has called the "technological imperative"—the strongly felt impulse to make active use of any technology that is available. The systematic destruction of Laotian villages on the Plain of Jars, as Branfman points out, dates from the November 1968 bombing halt over North Vietnam. There was no special activity of Pathet Lao forces or any other strategic reason for a bombing escalation, but Branfman reports the American ambassador to Laos as having said, "You gotta understand, Fred—we had all those planes coming into Laos. What could we do? We had to bomb villages."

One begins to understand the ease and extent of psychic numbing induced in such technological warfare when one contrasts the desensitized pronouncements of technological warriors in Laos with the descriptions of the air war given by refugees from the bombing. An American USAID official in Vientiane told Branfman, "Sure, some of the villages get bombed; there's no other way to fight a war out here, for God's sake . . . . All refugees talk about the bombing. They don't like [it]. But even if you found an example in which it was proven conclusively that houses were bombed, so what?" But a Laotian refugee-survivor, putting the matter differently, reminds us of what really happens to people under the bombs: "This village woman was a person of good character . . . . Why did she have to die so pitifully? She died in the middle of the forest beside the cow she tended . . . in misfortune with unsurpassed sadness . . . . The airplanes truly killed the people at a time when we knew nothing about what was going on. They came to do this, why? When you see this, how do you feel about your own brothers and sisters and relatives? Would you not be angry and concerned? Compare our hearts to yours. And what are we to do?"

The ultimate removal of psychic connections between the victimizer and the victimized is, of course, promised by the "automated battlefield." While as yet far from perfected, the automated battlefield has enormous significance for the changing psychology of war. The intent is to create an all-embracing system of electronic circuitry, which, in the words of one observer, will render the area of fighting "a manless, foolproof, giant lethal pinball machine, out of which no living thing could ever escape." On the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, for instance, there has been a project known as "Igloo White," in which acoustic and seismic sensors—devices highly sensitive to

sound and vibrations—have been placed in long spears that have been flung from high-speed aircraft and stuck into the ground in series. Radio-connected microphones, dropped near the spears by parachute, record information from the sensors and transmit it to a surveillance plane flying in the area, which in turn relays the signals to a ground-control station. After being fed into a computer, the information is evaluated by "skilled target analysts," who decide whether it suggests enemy forces, friendly troops, trucks, animals, or whatever. If the decision is enemy troops, an air strike is set in motion. "War has gone electronic. Laos has been bugged" is one commentator's sardonic summary of the arrangement. The only awareness of "the enemy" comes from electronic "blips" on a screen. Again there is little need for the gook syndrome, since that syndrome requires the "psychological work" of turning a human enemy into a human victim. Here, from the beginning, the enemy is nothing but "blips," and, in the words of the same commentator, "A blip is worse than a gook."

Electronic war not only suggests the elimination, as completely as possible, of the human element of war (and even of a distinguishable battlefield); it also suggests that man's psychological relationship to war—the numbing process itself—will be automated. As Paul Dickson and John Rothchild have written in the *Washington Monthly*: "The Lieutenant Calleys of war will be left home—if a drone helicopter is ordered by a computer to strike at a sensor post being passed by children and water buffaloes, it means there has been *an error in information, not in law or conscience*—a court martial cannot try a manless helicopter, nor can a chain of command be easily recognized in a more modern form of organization where only machines can be held responsible for their own actions."

Such an event would certainly be slaughter, but it could not be called an "atrocity." It would not even be referred to as a "false alarm," since, as a military spokesman made clear when testifying at Senate committee hearings on the automated battlefields, that phrase "has been stricken from the vocabulary." Rather, the incident would be "a nontargetable activation." There would be no blood or death for anybody—except the people caught or "picked up by" the circuitry. With warriors (like everyone else) watching their war on television, whatever lingering sense of cause and effect in war remains, whatever connection between victimizer and victim still exists, will disappear.

"Nobody," as Dixon and Rothchild point out, "will be able to tell what or who has been killed, or why the computer ordered the bombs dropped . . . ." We will arrive at an ultimate expression of what the Japanese scholar Maruyama Masao, in his extensive studies of Japan's World War II involvement, first called "the system of non-responsibility." Yet for many of our military planners this is the "vision" of the future. Consider what strikes me as a military man's macabre version of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream": "I see battlefields or combat areas that are under 24-hour real or near-real . . . surveillance of all types. I see battlefields on which we can destroy anything we can locate through instant communications and the almost instantaneous application of highly lethal fire power . . . . Hundreds of years were required to achieve the mobility of the armored division. A little over two decades later we had the airmobile division. With cooperative effort, no more than 10 years should separate us from the Automated Battlefield." The most important difference between this "dream" of Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the man most closely identified with the American military effort in Vietnam, and that of Martin Luther King is that Westmoreland's is more realistic and closer to realization. □