

The Moral Consequences

# SLUM LANDLORDS IN EDEN

By Francine du Plessix Gray

"While the minority floundered in self-flagellation," writes the author, "the majority clutched more fiercely than ever to its old myths of American innocence and Edenic perfection."

Shall we ever forget it, the beauty of that pageant? A half-million of us converging on the nation's capital in November of 1969, the largest assemblage of protesters in the nation's history. We wound down Pennsylvania Avenue with all the trappings of a medieval procession, our twelve-foot-wide banners resembling those of a religious feast. Even our singing had a liturgical tone: "All We Are Saying/Is Give Peace a Chance," a stark refrain, sung on five notes as closely spaced as those of a Gregorian chant, repeated with the hypnotic monotony of a rosary. The mall was alive with brotherhood and confidence on that autumn day of the New Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam. The omega signs of the war resisters, the black flags of the anarchists, the stars and stripes of the Veterans for Peace bobbed alongside the Rabelaisian collegiate slogans, "Dick Nixon Before He Dicks You," "Pull Out, Nixon, The Way Your Father Should Have." Over the loudspeaker David Dellinger was telling us for the twentieth time that year that we could close down the country overnight. There was a

self-congratulatory ecstasy in these great expiatory rites of the 1960s, at which we confessed the guilts of our society, which often made us forget that there was another America.

When I returned to my corner of Connecticut, an area still steeped in the rigid conservatism of New England mill towns, three incidents occurred that clarified for me the longings of that other America. The first took place one night when a group of us vigiled on a public green to read the names of the 40,000 Americans who had died in Southeast Asia; several times during the night the electric cable to our loudspeaker was cut by citizens outraged by our lack of patriotism. The second occurred in a neighboring church, where "My country, 'tis of thee" is frequently sung during communion; the parishioners denied an antiwar priest any further pastoral duties because he had prayed for the North Vietnamese dead—as well as the American dead—during the celebration of the Mass. Shortly thereafter, in the same Connecticut county, citizens from eighteen adjoining towns planted "trees for peace" on their village greens and briefly stood in silence, their heads bowed, to honor an antiwar moratorium; within a fortnight sixteen of those trees had been uprooted by Americans who felt that to assert life in this way was subversive. As these incidents followed each other, the message of the counterdemonstrators came to me with increasing clarity: Don't criticize the perfect society; don't speak to us of our sins. Our confessions of war guilt were a blasphemy to the other America, a trampling on myths of innocence and moral perfection deep-seated in the American psyche. The division between the two Americas struck me not so much as political but as cosmological, ethical, religious—as were also most reasons, I believe, for our long presence in Vietnam.

Francine du Plessix Gray is a staff writer for The New Yorker. She is author of *Divine Disobedience: Profiles in Catholic Radicalism and Hawaii: The Sugar-Coated Fortress*.



**"Every time I talk to the brave wife of an American POW . . . I become more deeply committed to end this war."**  
—Richard Nixon, April 7, 1971

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Unlike the Revolution, the Civil War, and our other military conflicts, Vietnam has been ultimately impervious to classical economic and political analysis. This third great crisis of our history has never lent itself readily to materialistic interpretations. Marxists have flailed around, speculating on our lust for Vietnam's deposits of exotic minerals or offshore oil, but the more honest of them have admitted failure. As for the Cold War rationale for our presence in Vietnam as late as 1972, that became obscure after our détente with the Communist powers made the policy of containment virtually irrelevant. So I am increasingly driven to see Vietnam as a tragedy forged by a kind of mythological determinism, by messianic ideals that are at the bedrock of the American psyche, ideals that are uniquely dangerous because their historical origins are of a religious nature. And hence fanatical. For America is the first country ever founded by people who were confident that they were saints, who attempted to re-create a pre-Fall Eden, who saw themselves as exempt from the sins of history.

In its origins our myth of Eden was as necessary as it was beautiful. It was the only solace of men undergoing the rude process of implantation in the wilderness, a people small in number, beset by dangers, and in constant terror. Their ecstatic infatuation with rebirth led them to believe that Americans were the "sifted grain" chosen by God to make His work perfect and that an American Adam could thrive free from the sins of the historical Adam. As the colonists founded their first towns, calling them *New Haven*, *New Canaan*, *New Bedford*, their preachers nourished them with visions of America as the new Paradise, the Eden unsullied by the depravity of old Europe. In the words of the Boston Puritan John Cotton, our first settlers had been reoffered "the grand charter given to Adam and his posterity in Paradise." Some have called this wishful erasure of historic time, this obsession with a restored innocence, our doctrine of exceptionalism.

Our myth of Adamic innocence forges that streak of optimism and self-idolatry that is at one pole of the American conscience. It is the watchdog of our national pride, ever ready to spring, at moments of crisis such as Vietnam, upon critics who perceive the sins of the Edenic community. But it is contradicted by an equally

fundamental trait—the pessimism that flows from our founders' somber Calvinist view of man. This perfect society, elected by God to redeem the world, is to be built by men who are so debased by original sin as to be hopelessly imperfectible. In Jonathan Edwards's words, we are "loathsome insects" who are "Useful in Their Destruction Only," ready to grovel in "The Eternity of Hell's Torments." Yet Edwards's pessimistic wrath is constantly laced with the optimistic elitism of America's redemptive, messianic role: "The prelude of that glorious work of God which shall renew the work of mankind will begin in America." Depraved man versus perfect community. How can the debased creature build "the city on the hill"? The town fathers of seventeenth-century Salem gave us the first answer: only by the violence of purification. To create the innocence of the new Eden, the new Adam must clear the land of the infidel as brutally as he clears his mind of history.

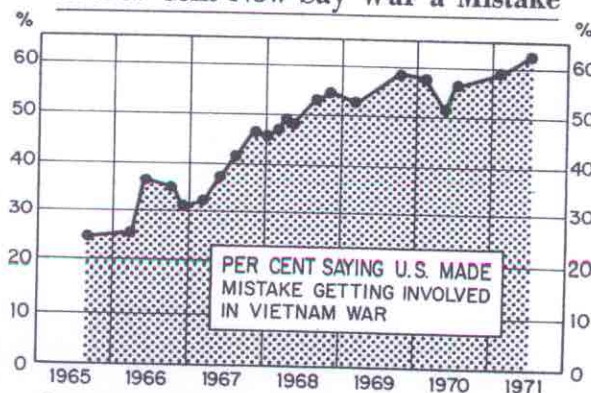
If we tend to overlook the ambivalence of innocence and violence in the American character, it is because we forget that we are as millennialist as we are utopian. Utopians are traditionally rational, optimistic, and pacifist; they hold that men's ills will be cured by the establishment of fastidiously planned societies. Millennialists, on the other hand, are irrational and apocalyptic; they see themselves as divinely ordained elites set above the rest of mankind to save the world; if they often resort to violence, it is because purgative upheavals tend to concur with a search for the impossible purity of an earthly kingdom. The utopian and millennial traditions run like intertwining streams through our history, converging in our moral zealotry and cult of innocence. But it is the millennial, not the utopian, current that has molded our elitism, our antiintellectualism, and that has inspired the acts of violence accompanying our quest for the pure community: the burning of alleged witches and dissident sectarians, the decimation of the Indian heathen, the purges by Joseph McCarthy. In retrospect, few conflicts in recent times seem more millennial in pattern than our intervention in Vietnam. With that irreverence for history that characterizes all communities bent on



### The Gallup Poll

## Disillusionment with Vietnam War Reaches All-Time High

61 Per Cent Now Say War a Mistake



Over the last five and one-half years, public opinion on the Vietnam war has undergone dramatic change. In Aug. 1965, only 21 per cent of Americans believed U.S. involvement in Vietnam to be a mistake. Today, the figure has reached a record 61 per cent.

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perpetual purity, we purged our State Department a generation ago of its best Far Eastern specialists and were driven into Vietnam by the myth that we were the chosen people who would save the world from the forces of monolithic Communism. Once this Armageddon world view was altered, we attempted to vindicate our innocence (we are guiltless, our men have not died in vain) by the perpetuation of a ceremony of blood: "The love of pure appearances is something to exult in," D.H. Lawrence wrote about us, "All Americans give in to it. Look pure . . . The deliberate consciousness of Americans so fair and smooth-spoken, and the under-consciousness so devilish. Destroy! Destroy! Destroy! hums the under-consciousness. Love and produce! Love and produce! Love and produce! cackles the upper-consciousness."

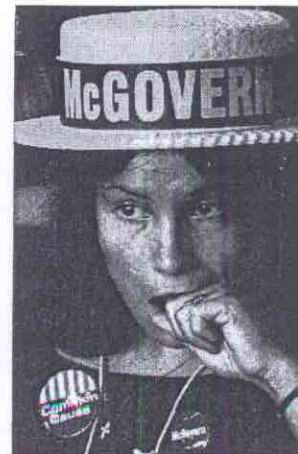
In one of the most terrifying parables ever written about our duality of innocence and violence—Hawthorne's "The Gentle Boy"—a Quaker child is stoned to death by a band of Puritan children who will not forgive him for being of a dissident sect, for defiling their community of saints. The greatest nineteenth-century American novelists recognized our lust for purity and attacked the myth of the American Adam and the New World Eden. James Fenimore Cooper saw this Adam for what he was, a projection of the European imagination upon the New World, a creature to get rid of as soon as possible so that Americans might gain humility. And, unless *Moby Dick* is just a great story about whaling, it can be said that Melville viewed the *Pequod's* striving for earthly paradise as sacrilegious. Ishmael alone was saved because he had been converted by a heathen to the acceptance of his identity with the historical Adam—whose salvation is not of this world.

Myths are dangerous enough; perverted myths are devastating. What our prophetic novelists also sensed is that throughout the nineteenth century our ideal of moral perfection was being detached from its earlier context of faith and attached to ideals of material progress and political superiority. The colonial vision of a God-chosen people was secularized and perverted into the vision of an Anglo-Saxon nation superior in its national customs and material might. "The American Constitution is a wonderful provision for the intelligence, sagacity, energy, restlessness and indomitable will of such a race as the Anglo Saxon." This from a *Harper's Magazine* editorial of 1846, the year after the phrase "Manifest Destiny" was coined. The editorial went on to exalt us as "a race in which intensest home feelings combine with a love of enterprise and colonisation, a race that fears no

thing, claims everything within reach, and believes in a destiny of incomparable and immeasurable grandeur." As H. Richard Niebuhr put it, Manifest Destiny envisioned "a kingdom of the Anglo-Saxon race which was destined to bring light to men by means of lamps manufactured in America." Manifest Destiny crystallized in the years after the Texan revolt, when the possibilities for territorial expansion combined with the millennial ideal of America's redemptive mission. Ethical ambiguities arose when our ancient desire to promote virtue in the world was united with the new reality of our power. Moral perfection was equated with material might; the arrogance of innocence was inextricably joined to the arrogance of force. If our sense of Manifest Destiny seems more tenacious and spiraling than France's *mission civilisatrice* or England's White Man's Burden, it may be because its historical origins were of a fanatical religious nature. As we entered into the arena of global politics in this century, scoring one success after another, our redeemer complex was suffused with a new aspiration for the honor of invincibility. Nixon: "I shall not be the first American President to preside over an American defeat."

Recently, while walking past the parking lot of my country store, I saw two interesting bumper stickers: one a bright-hued American flag adorned with the slogan, "These Colors Don't Run"; the other a Y-shaped peace symbol with the printed comment, "The Footprint of America's Chickens."

Have we ever witnessed such a proliferation of idolatrous symbols as in the past six years of dissent over Vietnam? The defensive jingoisms, "I'm Proud To Be an American," "Love It or Leave It," were accompanied by the extraordinary proliferation of American flags—jeweled flags in the lapels of matrons, flags on blue jeans, flags on cupcakes, flags on car windows, flags flying from almost every house in our heartland. This country has always tended, at times of crisis, to divide into polarities of rigid self-righteousness and apocalyptic guilt. It is as if, at such times, the primeval tension of the Puritan mind, the dilemma of the debased creature chosen to build a city on the hill, reveals its most flagrant contradictions. The decades preceding the Civil War saw such a cleav-



age. While Daniel Webster and other supporters of the status quo were saying that the best thing to do about slavery was "to stop talking about it," the Abolitionist Theodore Weld was fulminating that the nation could be saved from its sins only by "repentance, immediate, profound, proclaimed abroad, wide as our infamy and damning guilt."

But Vietnam aggravated this tension between self-idolatry and masochistic contrition to an unprecedented degree. It exaggerated—to a much greater extent than our fratricidal Civil War—our ancient self-image of a God-chosen people who can do no wrong. It heightened our inclination to sacralize the symbols of civil authority. The very obscurity of this war's motives incited the majority to clutch more fiercely than ever to its old myths of American innocence and Edenic perfection, while the minority floundered in self-flagellation. And yet those who hooted and jeered at our rites of expiation, who uprooted the trees of life on our village greens, are anything but our enemies. Their increasing idolization of the flag, their desperate retreat into the shelter of patriotic symbols, was caused by their nebulous sense that there was something drastically wrong with the war. Duped by leaders who promised them a quick and glorious victory, and who made criticism of their policies difficult through the most extensive program of government lying in our history, they turned their anger toward a surrogate enemy: the protesters, attackers of American innocence and perfection.

While one America plastered jeweled flags onto its lapels, the other America burned the flag or refused to salute it. At the opposite pole of a nation split asunder by Vietnam are the excesses of the Left. The SDS adopted the spelling, "Amerika." Various radicals asserted that we are living under a regime as repressive as that of Nazi Germany. The Youth Against War and Fascism marched outside the Danbury Jail screaming, "Free the Poor, Jail the Rich," and then (for lack of impact) turned around and tried this one: "Kill the Rich, Free the Poor." Many deplorers of the radicals' fragmentary tactics—the Sidney Hooks and Irving Howes—have traced the Right's self-idolatry to the Left's apocalyptic arrogance. They have failed to see that both sides had a common source of national unease; that the blind patriotism of the Right has

been incited by an administration rhetoric more divisive, jingoistic, and self-adulatory than any in memory.

At a Congressional hearing held shortly after the disclosures of the Mylai massacres, I heard an American doctor testify about some tortures of North Vietnamese prisoners committed by the South Vietnamese with the tacit approval of American advisers. According to Dr. Gordon Livingstone, the use of crank telephones to apply electric shocks to the prisoners' bodies was jokingly referred to by one American adviser as "The Bell Telephone Hour."

The disclosure of Mylai, the further unmasking of atrocities that it triggered, and the trial of Lieutenant Calley composed some of the most horrifying and fascinating moral moments of the Vietnam war. Under proper leadership these events could have helped Americans to admit their capacity for evil. With Nixon's outrageous preverdict depreciation of Calley's guilt and his rapid interference with a life sentence imposed by the due process of military law, we stood revealed as slum landlords on the remains of our Eden. Mylai could have led us to reflect on the earlier atrocities committed under our flag and so shamefully omitted from—or deified in—our children's history books: the slaughter of hundreds of Sioux women and children at Wounded Knee, the massacre of Filipino civilians during the Spanish-American War, the tragedy of Hiroshima. Mylai was also a rare opportunity for Americans to reflect on the principles of accountability that the United States evolved at the German and Japanese war trials, guidelines by which we sentenced to death hundreds of Japanese and Germans. But lurking in our myth of American exceptionalism is the notion that we are immune from the very laws we impose upon others.

If anything was revealed by Mylai, it was our strong streak of Calvinist pessimism. The Harris polls taken in the wake of the disclosures showed that the majority of Americans held to the ancient fatalisms that war has always been hell, that man is, by nature, too corrupt to improve war's conditions, that there is no redemption in sight from its horrors. Mylai exposed us as victims of



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the increasingly impersonal technicism of the style of warfare evolved in Vietnam; it was "just another job to be done" with "American know-how." But a still more awesome finding of the polls was that the main thrust of Americans' anger was not directed at Calley's actions or at the bureaucracy of guilt. It was directed at the media for having revealed the massacres. We simply did not want to know. The disclosures of Mylai had perhaps come too late. Our apathy revealed a numbing of conscience that has also grown to pervade our attitude toward domestic corruption.

NEW YORK POST, OCTOBER 10.

Washington, (WP). FBI agents have established that the Watergate bugging incident stemmed from a massive campaign of political spying and sabotage conducted on behalf of President Nixon's reelection and directed by officials of the White House and the Committee for the Reelection of the President.

Law enforcement sources said that the campaign included forging letters and distributing them under the candidates' letterheads; leaking false and manufactured items to the press; throwing campaign schedules into disarray; seizing confidential campaign files, and investigating the lives of dozens of Democratic campaign workers . . . .

Can we forget the scandals caused, just decades ago, by General Vaughan's deep freeze, by Sherman Adams's vicuña coat, by Richard Nixon's pathetic cocker spaniel? But is it any wonder, after ten years of administrations that have lied to us systematically about the origins of a war, about the "democratic" nature of the client state on whose behalf we are waging it, about bombings, about casualties, about the treatment of our prisoners, about the course of American withdrawal, that such a blatant espionage scandal as the Watergate incident fails to make any impact on our nation's conscience? Our dual numbness to human atrocities and to the lies that enable these atrocities to persist leads us to be equally numb to every other area of corruption and deceit in our nation. We seem to grow increasingly jaded with each new revelation: the ITT scandal, the wheat scandal, the army's illegal surveillance of hundreds of thousands of civilians, General Lavelle's disobedience of the chiefs of staff. Our constant exposure to the lying that has systematically poured out of Washington in the past ten years—along with the abrogations of our civil liberties—has had effects similar to an organism's increasing tolerance to a drug.

Some years ago SDS had an idiotic slogan that went, "Bring the war home." The irony is that our government has brought the war home in a way SDS never could. It has treated its people as an enemy, surveilling us, dividing us, breeding self-hate and provocateurs among us as systematically as it has lied. Perhaps the most terrifying impact of the Vietnam War on America is that we shall get increasingly used to being manipulated, that we shall fail to expect truth and freedom, and that, in a vindication of Orwell's prophecies, we shall even cease to desire them. In such an eventuality the moral of American history would be that the community steeped in

the myth of its moral perfection is the one that adjusts most easily to docile acceptance of evil.

Which leads me to worry about what Vietnam has done to our children.

Over the past years, covering the trials of political dissenters, I have seen young Americans turn out in droves to honor the defendants' acts of moral witness. I have repeatedly stood in courthouse elevators filled with middle-aged civil servants who mutter, teeth clenched, "Those kids, those goddamn kids . . ." "If I had one of those sixteen-year-old longhairs under my roof, I'd kill him."

We have often been satirized by older nations for seeking our innocence in a cult of our children. It is part of our Edenic need for renaissance, for the eternal perpetuation of the new, that has led us to indulge so ardently in the adulation of youth. That was the reason behind the Big Hollywood Dream Machine, the pioneering of plastic surgery, the suicide of movie stars at the threshold of middle age. And yet there was an ambivalence in our adulation. Hating ourselves for losing our own youth, we nursed a combination of love and envious resentment for our children. Vietnam exacerbated a new hatred of youth, as it exacerbated all divisions among us.

It had always struck me, at the large peace demonstrations of the 1960s, that these liturgies of penance were being enacted mostly by the young, as if only the innocent young were capable of communal guilt. In the past decade a vast moral movement among our children led them to question the growing American myth of power. They were the first generation to fully reap the fruits of our mid-century global might, and they hated the taste. The parents were enraged not only because their children disavowed the ideals of material success, went to Maine to cultivate potatoes or paint houses upon graduation from Harvard, or joined religious sects in their quest for a new purity. Their parents were equally frightened because the young questioned primeval American myths: They saw no Eden in America; they refused the equation of national power and moral perfection; and, therefore, on the issue of Vietnam they were ready to accept their nation's defeat, and even desired it.

Often disjointedly, sometimes brutishly, our children tried to drag us out of our Eden, tried to make us moral by bringing us the adulthood of self-criticism. Until then our narcissistic self-adulation had suspended us in a kind of retarded adolescence, in what Kierkegaard referred to as the "aesthetic," "pre-moral" stage of human growth. We not only refused to follow our children into adulthood, we hated them for what they did; we tried to kill them for it. Our myths of innocence and perfection threatened, we responded with violence: Chicago, Kent State, Jackson State. The last bloody episode in the movie *Joe*, in which the father kills his own dissident child by mistake, was never outrageous to me; it was lugubriously true. We sent our young to be killed in Vietnam, where they were supposed to redeem the image of our moral

purity, and then brutalized those here who tried to stop the killing. Like desert tribesmen putting their scapegoats in the desert for a rite of purification, we left our children in Asia to expiate the abstraction of our honor, while at home—in courtrooms, jails, and in the bloodied streets of demonstrations—they preserved the little true honor and true innocence the country had left.

Like the young of America, George McGovern has been overwhelmingly concerned with criticizing the consequences of our colossal power. Although I am writing before Election Day, I venture that his defeat will show the degree to which Vietnam heightened the nation's self-idolatry, made us increasingly defensive to criticism, and fragmented the forces needed for a mass-based progressive movement. McGovern criticized the entire thrust of American messianism. Like the young, he criticized the nation's moral values, not just the ethics of the opposite party. Like the young, he threatened the country with the maturity of self-criticism, with the end of our myth of innocence. McGovern was trying to demythologize our cults of Americanism and point to a new transnational morality that would allow American priests to pray, unharassed, for the dead of North Vietnam.

To a greater extent than any candidate in decades, George McGovern tried to infuse into our global role some of the prophetic dimension of his Christian heritage, which teaches the redeeming power of guilt and

penance. But the majority of this nation hated him for recalling its failures. McGovern talked about saving lives rather than saving face, and we urged upon him our mythology of "honor." He warned us of self-idolatry, and the administration accused him of indulging in "self-hate" for America. He warned us of the potential dangers of our colossal power, and Nixon's entourage accused him of hoisting "the white flag of surrender."

It is increasingly clear that Nixon's and Kissinger's tactic was to endorse in *theory* a goal—the stability of a non-Communist South Vietnam—which they knew they could not achieve in *practice*. The cornerstone of their policy was the obscene rationale of the "decent interval": The United States must choreograph its eventual departure from Vietnam—thousands of lives lost in the process—in such a way that it does not *appear* to abandon the Saigon regime, thus absolving us of guilt in the tragedy. This search for a false and abstract purity has been but a new modulation of our traditional obsession with American innocence. It is based on myths of moral perfection as theologically antiquated as they are symbolically false. Our hunt for honor in Vietnam, as our historic search for purity, is well summed up by D. H. Lawrence's description of Ahab's crew, "monomaniacs of the idea . . . searching for the white abstract evil." That white, abstract evil is the myth of American innocence, and it can only be perpetuated with the concomitant of all false innocence: violence □

## Speculative Consequences

# FOUR "WHAT IFS" FOR VIETNAM

By Herman Kahn

"To abandon South Vietnam at the present moment," writes Herman Kahn, "is to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory." Among the consequences of a too hasty withdrawal, he continues, might be a Ronald Reagan-Creighton Abrams ticket in 1976 and the possibility that Hanoi might win in a ceasefire what it has lost on the battlefield.

These post-election days of 1972 would seem an appropriate time to consider the consequences of America's involvement in Southeast Asia. We are now far enough removed from the origins of our involvement to be able to take in the whole scene from a distant perspective,

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and the fog of campaign rhetoric no longer obscures the strategic horizons. I propose to attempt to illuminate the consequences by outlining four different Vietnam scenarios, each of them predicated on divergent courses of action taken by the United States. They are: First, what would have happened if the United States had not escalated its commitment in Vietnam in 1965? Second, what would happen if the United States precipitously and unilaterally withdrew from Vietnam? Third, what are the likely consequences of a cease-fire? And fourth, what would it take to achieve a "victory" in Vietnam?

*What would have happened if the United States had not escalated its commitment in Vietnam in 1965?*

It is possible that Vietnam will prove to be the last pivotal battle in the Cold War, the battle that confirms the success of our containment policy and ushers in an era of stability. This hypothesis is not provable in any final sense, but I will argue that it is a perfectly defensible one. In order to make that case, I would like to recall another time when the world faced the need to contain an aggressive

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