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Our Man Hoppe

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In Defense of Walt Rostov



Arthur Hoppe

WALT ROSTOV, President Johnson's top adviser, is suing the producers of "Hearts and Minds," the new Vietnam War documentary, for causing "irreparable damage" to his image.

So, in the interests of justice, I went to see the picture. And he's absolutely right. It makes him look like an idiot.

"Hearts and Minds" is the most powerful propaganda film I ever saw. For the most part the audience sat stunned at the carnage we wrought in that little Asian country. But the movie has its light moments.

The first came when Mr. Rostov was asked how we got into the war in the first place. "Because they were subjected to a military attack from the outside," he snapped irritably. "Are you really asking me this God damn silly question? . . . I didn't really expect to have to go back to this kind of sophomoric stuff, but I'll do it."

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HAVING EXPLAINED that the Vietnamese inside Vietnam were attacked by the Vietnamese outside Vietnam, Mr. Rostov came on later to say that, all in all, it was a swell little war in retrospect and we were "generally right" to have expended \$100 billion and 50,000 American lives so the Vietnamese could go on fighting each other without us.

(Oddly enough, Mr. Rostov doesn't think this latter statement makes him look like an idiot at all. But let's not get into that.)

I can certainly understand, however, why Mr. Rowstov sued. What I can't understand is why all our other leaders in the film didn't. General Westmoreland, for instance, has an air-tight case.

First, there's a moving and beautifully-photographed funeral of a Vietnamese soldier. The wailing widow attempts to throw herself into the grave and the young son sprawls across the coffin, clutching his father's picture and sobbing uncontrollably.

We cut to General Westmoreland, wearing a seersucker jacket and tasteful tie, standing in a sylvan glade. "The Oriental," he explains patiently, "doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient. And as the philosophy of life expresses it, life is not important."

If that doesn't make the General look like an idiot, what does? (He also insisted they film him making that statement twice, to be sure the world got it right, but let's not go into that, either.)

Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson assuredly have cases for their talk of dominoes, tunnels and, in Mr. Johnson's case, how we have to win "the hearts and minds" of the people by bombing the bejabbers out of them. And Mr. Nixon should collect a fortune for the scene depicting him in a white dinner jacket at a White House gala glowingly accepting applause for his Christmas bombing of Hanoi — followed by shots of the ruins of Bach Mai Hospital.

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SO I'M ALL on Mr. Rostov's side. The film makes him and our other leaders involved unquestionably look like idiots. All they have to do to collect is prove malice.

That's easy. They can merely cite the old adage of us newspapermen. "If you really want to get even with some S.O.B. politician," we say maliciously, "quote him accurately."

See also "Westmoreland Urges U.S. Air Raids,"
SFChronicle 14 Mar 75, filed Indochina.