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HERB CAEN



Kaleidoscope

WHAT A WEEK, what a world: live infants and dead ones in a black travesty of a "Baby Parade," plane crashes and calla lilies, Ted the Boston Strong-boy roughed up by his own people in his own constituency as Irish cops smile at the camera, spring and baseball and skimpy bathing suits in department store windows But not to feel guilty, guilt-ridden Americans. They are still sunbathing on the beaches of South Vietnam as the red tide inches closer, and tennis was only lately banned in Saigon, artificial capital of the artificial republic, a terminal case kept alive long past its time by transfusions of blood and money. South Vietnam, a freak invented by the mad doctors in Washington, none of whom will admit that a mistake might have been made. When in doubt, close ranks and mouths, or let a platitude drop on the sidewalk, to be circled warily by the fastidious. Hold your nose, here comes Walt Rostow again to suggest sending troops to Vietnam, and can McGeorge Bundy be far behind? Just think, if McBundy sat in a bathtub and opened his veins, he'd freeze to death.

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OPERATION BABYLIFT, and where is Lenny Bruce? You can see him now under the spotlight at Ann's 440, discussing it, stopping now and then to hum a few bars of theme music from "The High and the Mighty." Politicians and babies: they go together like ham and eggs, power and corruption. Right up the old media alley, the President nuzzling an orphan as the windbag TV commentators charge through thickets of cliches, wild bulls of the pompous (only good old Andy Park of Ch. 5 tried to keep some perspective, reminding the viewers of the thousands of children left behind, the thousands dead and wounded, the thousands bombed and napalmed and strafed and corrupted). After a decade, the TV war is winding down — or, more literally, winding up the miles and miles of videotape that recorded the death throes of helpless people. How would you like to die face down in a rice paddy so Lyndon Johnson could go on regarding himself as a real ballsy Texan who wasn't about to be pushed around by no Commie gooks, y'hear?

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SO AT LAST it has come to this, the end of the long journey through lies and duplicity, Ike and Jack, hell no we won't go, a new vocabulary called Pentagonese, Christmas bombings, Cambodian "incursions" and Herr Doktor Kissinger's "moral commitments" that turned out to be not worth the paper they weren't written on. War without heroes, as David Douglas Duncan termed it, a war without even a good song, a good joke or a good story. A war that dirtied everyone who touched it, and now The Sentimental American, direct descendant of The Ugly American, is fondling babies, washing diapers and guilt, and still, with indifferent arrogance, making the same mistake all over again: trying to tell other people how to live and die, fighting to the last Vietnamese.

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SAN FRANCISCO is a long way from Vietnam — San Francisco is a long way from anywhere, fortunately — but it is a city with sound instincts. San Francisco smelled something sour about this "crusade" early in the going. By 1965, there were marches and demonstrations. The first really big one was here, at Kezar in '67, and the ripples were felt in Washington and New York. The driving force came from the young and the hairy and the unwashed, from the rock musicians and the "radical" politicians, from old lefties and bohemians, from the labor guys (not the big names, interestingly) who were not afraid to stand up and be counted — by the FBI and the CIA, as it turns out. The real radicals were the limousine conservatives with their cocktail hour talk of "nuking Hanoi." Why is it they knew so little, these adlepatates with the martini brains, when even the street people could foresee what is now in sight, a unified Vietnam run by Hanoi?

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HO-HO-HO Chi Minh, with the goatlike whiskers on your chin-chin-chinh . . . A sad irony you're not around to take over your wounded nation, though you would be heartsick at the plight of so many of your people. Thieu and Ky, it is useful to remember, fought with the French against their own people, but let us not indulge in recriminations. No blame, no blood baths, no purges. Maybe Gerald Ford, who so loves infants, can find it in his heart to love grownups, too, even those who were right in the first place about the war. Let the boys come home from all over the world, let there be peace, let there be amnesty, let us even forgive Dean Rusk and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and let there be an end to the hawklike croaks of the Reagans and the John Waynes, who love to watch other people fight. From a safe distance. Strange people, these: they've never been bombed (except by booze), never been burned out of their houses by an enemy, never been refugees, and yet they hate those who have suffered through all that while fighting for their own land IN their own land. Why?

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THE BICENTENNIAL year is almost upon us. In our short history, there is much to celebrate, much to lament. Flags, parades and cannon are all very well, but a little silence and humility might go good right now, too.