

An American Nightmare

Reports of the deliberate, methodical killing of hundreds of civilians—men, women and children—by American troops in a Vietnamese village last year are so shocking, so contrary to principles for which this country has always stood, as to be beyond belief. Yet the evidence mounts daily that something horrible did take place.

Congress must waste no time in launching a thorough, public investigation of this sordid affair, as proposed by Senator Goodell and others. The fact that North Vietnam and the Vietcong have been guilty of barbaric conduct provides no excuse for any foot-dragging or cover-up by American authorities. The United States public must know—and face—the long-suppressed facts about what may turn out to have been one of this nation's most ignoble hours. If the reports are sustained, those responsible must be brought speedily to justice. It must be made absolutely clear that America does not condone such conduct, war or no war.

At the same time, the United States should take a hard look at other aspects of the conduct of the war in Vietnam that have long disturbed many Americans and foreign friends. The face-to-face shooting of civilians in a village street is not far removed morally, if at all, from the indiscriminate shelling or bombing of civilians from a distance, as happens regularly in the "free fire zones."

More than two years ago, three respected American civilian volunteers in Vietnam resigned, calling the war "an overwhelming atrocity." They cited the destruction of villages and the deaths of "innocent victims of United States bombing, strafing and shelling." It is a measure of the moral callousness engendered by this mass destruction that South Vietnamese officials have attributed their slowness in investigating the Songmy incident to the fact that reports of heavy civilian casualties have become routine.

More recently, the aborted Green Beret murder trial and the documented story by Daniel Lang of the kidnapping, rape and murder of a Vietnamese girl by an American patrol have thrown cruel light on other aspects of a war that has become an American nightmare.

Recognizing that war is always brutal and ugly, but also remembering their own shocked disapproval of German and Japanese atrocities in World War II, Americans must face up frankly to what has become a severe test of conscience.