

Songmy: The Larger Question

President Nixon has said just about everything that could reasonably be expected of him, at this stage, about the tragedy at Songmy: What occurred was "certainly a massacre, and under no circumstances was it justified"; Americans will never condone atrocities against civilians; the Government will do everything possible to bring all facts to light and punish the guilty.

These things may be obvious but they needed to be said by the Commander-in-Chief himself, not merely in his behalf by the White House press secretary. Mr. Nixon said them forthrightly without wasting words. However, the President could have been more forthcoming not about the administration of justice in this specific case but about exploring the possible implications of Songmy for future American military policy.

Mr. Nixon indicated that he would consider setting up a civilian investigatory commission only if the machinery of military justice proved inadequate "in bringing this incident completely before the public." But the functions of a civilian commission—or a blue-ribbon committee of Congress—would surely go far beyond the specifics of Songmy or the culpability of individuals for that catastrophe.

The President is right to avoid any retroactive change of procedure that might prejudice the rights of the individual defendants in the Songmy military trials. But the military court will not be competent to deal with the vastly broader question of whether it is possible to insure against such tragedies in a civil

war—and what the implications of this may be for future American commitments in Asia or elsewhere.

The trials of the Songmy defendants may not even answer satisfactorily the question that not haunts millions of Americans: was Songmy an "isolated incident," as Mr. Nixon believes, or were there other Songmys? The American people and the armed forces themselves have a tremendous stake in seeing that point established by independent, civilian investigation. Such an investigation need not be launched until the Army has completed its own probe of Songmy. In any event, a commission or committee would withhold its findings and recommendations until after the Songmy trials.

What is important is that the broader, longer-run questions raised by the Songmy massacre be dealt with—for the sake of the Army and for the sake of the country as a whole.

Operation Phoenix

To the Editor:

In reporting on the Songmy massacre, all the media, including The Times, have been quick to point out that the enemy has been guilty of even worse atrocities. We are reminded that for years it has been Vietcong policy to kill village chiefs and other officials connected with the Saigon regime. The most dramatic instance of this policy was the slaughter of some 2,300 civilians in Hue when occupied by the Vietcong.

These victims, we are told by our press, were not selected at random, but rather were persons presumed to be connected with the Saigon regime. We rightly label this event an atrocity. But what are we to make of Operation Phoenix that our Government has been carrying out for the past two years and about which it proudly boasts? Operation Phoenix is designed to root out the Vietcong infrastructure by "eliminating" its members. According to statistics provided by our own Government, some 18,000 civilians in the Vietcong infrastructure were killed in 1968 and more than 13,000 this year.

Apparently, when the Vietcong attempts to destroy the Saigon regime's infrastructure by murdering civilians it is committing atrocities. But when we murder civilians employed by the Vietcong we are merely carrying out "pacification." It should be clear to all that Operation Phoenix, which is official policy of our Government, is as much an atrocity as the murder of 2,300 civilians in Hue. And, indeed, how is blame to be fixed for atrocities? Must Lieut. William Calley purge us of Operation Phoenix as well?

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New York, Dec. 3, 1969