

Saturday Review



Editor - Norman Cousins

Publisher - William D. Patterson

Associate Editors

Irving Kolodin • Horace Sutton

Associate Publisher - Richard L. Tobin

Managing Editor
Roland Gelatt

Science Editor
John Lear

Book Review Editor
Rochelle Girson

Travel Editor
David Butwin

Copy Editor
Peter Nichols

Education Editor
James Cass

Poetry Editor
John Ciardi

Art Editor
Katharine Kuh

General Editor
Hallowell Bowser

Layout & Production
Pearl S. Sullivan

Editors-at-Large

Cleveland Amory • Henry Brandon
Harrison Brown • Charles Frankel
Frank G. Jennings • Joseph Wood Krutch
Elmo Roper • Peter Schrag
Theodore C. Sorensen • Paul Woodring

Contributing Editors

Goodman Ace • Hollis Alpert • Jerome Beatty, Jr.
Henry Hewes • Arthur Knight
Martin Levin • Rollene W. Saal
Robert Lewis Shayon • Zena Sutherland
Walter Terry • Margaret R. Weiss
John T. Winterich

The Road to Songmy

I sent them a good boy," said Mrs. Anthony Meadlo, "and they sent home a murderer."

The name of Paul David Meadlo, of New Goshen, Indiana, has figured in the reports of the slaughter of more than 100 Vietnamese civilians (some accounts put the number above 350) by American soldiers at a village named Songmy.

Where did the journey to Songmy begin? Did it begin only after Paul David Meadlo arrived in Vietnam? Or did it start far, far back—back to the first time Paul Meadlo played the game of killing Indians, or cheered when Western movies showed Indians being driven off cliffs? Even in some schoolbooks, the Indians were fit subjects for humiliation and sudden death. They were something less than fully human, and their pain levied no claim on the compassion of children—or even adults.

Long before Paul Meadlo ever saw a Vietnamese, he learned that people of yellow skin were undesirable and therefore inferior. He learned in his history class about the Oriental Exclusion Act, the meaning of which was that people from Asia were less acceptable in the United States than people from Europe. He learned very little about the culture of Asian people but he learned to associate them with all sorts of sinister behavior.

The road to Songmy is long and wide. It is littered with children's toys—toy machine guns, toy flame-throwers, toy dive bombers, toy atom bombs. Standing at the side of the road are parents watching approvingly as the

children turn their murderous play-things on one another. The parents tell themselves that this is what children do in the act of growing up. But the act of growing up is an enlargement of, and not a retreat from, the games that children play. And so the subconscious is smudged at an early age by bloody stains that never fully disappear.

Paul David Meadlo grew up in a little town 10,000 miles away from Vietnam; but the kind of things that were to happen in Songmy came springing to life in his living room where there was an electronic box called television. Hour after hour, the box would be lit up by pictures showing people whose faces were smashed and pulverized, but it was part of an endless and casual routine. Where did the desensitization to human pain and the preciousness of life begin? Did it begin at formal indoctrination sessions in Vietnam, or at point-blank range in front of an electronic tube, spurring its messages about the cheapness of life.

And when the court-martial is held, who will be on trial? Will it be only the soldiers who were face-to-face with the civilians they say they were ordered to kill? The Army now says soldiers should not obey commands that are senseless and inhuman. What well-springs of sense and humaneness are to be found in the orders to destroy whole villages from the air? Is a man in a plane exempt from wrongdoing solely because he does not see the faces of the women and children whose bodies will be shattered by the explosives he rains on them from the sky? How does one define a legitimate

victim of war? What of a frightened mother and her baby who take refuge in a tunnel and are cremated alive by a soldier with a flame-thrower? Does the darkness of the tunnel make them proper candidates for death?

Will the trial summon every American officer who has applied contemptuous terms like "gook," "dink," and "slope" to the Vietnamese people—North and South? Will it ask whether these officers have ever understood the ease and rapidity with which people who are deprived of respect as humans tend to be regarded as sub-human? Have these officers ever comprehended the connection between the casual violence of the tongue and the absolute violence of the trigger finger?

Will the men who conceived and authorized the search-and-destroy missions be on trial? Search-and-destroy quickly became destroy first and search afterward. How far away from unauthorized massacre is authorized search-and-destroy?

Will the trial ask why it was that the United States, which said it was going into Vietnam to insure self-determination, called off the countrywide free elections provided for in the 1954 Geneva Agreements—after which call-off came not just Vietcong terror but the prodigious growth of the National Liberation Front?

Will the trial ask what role the United States played in the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem? Will it ask how it was that political killing and subversion, which had always been regarded as despicable actions perpetrated by our enemies, should have been made into practices acceptable to the United States?

Will there be no one at the trial to explain why the negotiations at Paris were deadlocked over the shape of the table for six weeks—during which time five thousand Americans and Vietnamese were killed? If the men at Paris had been able in advance to see the faces of those who were to die, would this have made them responsible for the dead?

There is a road back from Songmy and Vietnam. It is being traveled today by the American soldiers who gave their Thanksgiving dinners and regular rations to Vietnamese, and who in deed and attitude have made themselves exemplars of a creatively humane presence. There are doctors and teachers and volunteers on this road who comprehend the possibilities and power of regeneration. But their numbers need to be swelled to bursting in order to begin to meet the need.

It is a long road back, not just for the soldiers who were there but for all of us who showed them the way to Songmy.

—N.C.

