

The Road to Songmy

66 T 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 playthings 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, spurting 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 wellsprings 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 calloff 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. the study of man have long suspected.

Perhaps the most important task facing us today is the regeneration of our environment and institutional structures such as school, government, church, etc. With increasing sophistication has come the recognition that institutions are not sacrosanct and that they have but one purpose and function-to serve as a framework for the actualization of human potential. It is possible to evaluate both the institution and the contribution of the institution by asking this question: "To what extent does the function of the institution foster the realization of human potential?"

Experimental groups consistently have found that the more a person's environment can be involved in the process of realizing potential, the greater the gains. It is understandable why scientists concerned with the study of personality have been reluctant to consider the importance of here-and-now inputs in relation to personality functioning. To do so would open a Pandora's box of possibilities and complex forces that until fairly recently were considered to be the exclusive domain of the social scientist. Many scientists and professionals, particularly psychotherapists, feel they have acquired a certain familiarity with the topography of "intra-psychic forces" and are reluctant to admit the reality of additional complex factors in the functioning of the personality.

It is significant that an increasing number of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers now realize that over and beyond keeping up with de-, velopments in their respective fields, the best way to acquire additional professional competence is through group experiences designed for personal growth and that focus on the unfolding of individual possibilities. From this group of aware professionals and others came much of the initial support and interest in Esalen Institute and similar "Growth Centers" later referred to as the Human Potentialities Movement.

Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, was organized in 1962 by Michael Murphy and his partner, Dick Price. Under their imaginative management the institute experienced a phenomenal growth, established a branch in San Francisco, and is now famous for its seminars and weekend experiences offered by pioneering professionals. Since 1962 more than 100,000 persons have enrolled for one of these activities.

The past three years have seen a rapid mushrooming of Growth Centers. There are more than fifty such organizations ranging from Esalen and Kairos Institutes in California to Oasis in Chicago and Aureon Institute in



"I may be going way out on a limb, but I predict a lousy olive crop and a Punic war."

New York. The experiences offered at these Growth Centers are based on several hypotheses: 1) that the average healthy person functions at a fraction of his capacity; 2) that man's most exciting life-long adventure is actualizing his potential; 3) that the group environment is one of the best settings in which to achieve growth; and 4) that personality growth can be achieved by anyone willing to invest himself in this process.

Human potentialities is rapidly emerging as a discrete field of scientific inquiry. Exploring the human potential can become the meeting ground for a wide range of disciplines, offering a dynamic synthesis for seemingly divergent areas of research. It is possible that the field of human potentialities offers an answer to the long search for a synthesizing and organizing principle which will unify the sciences. The explosive growth of the Human Potentialities Movement is indicative of a growing public interest. Although there exist a considerable number of methods-all designed to tap human potential-work on assessment or evaluation of these methods has in most instances not progressed beyond field testing and informal feedback of results. The need for research in the area of human potentialities has never been more pressing. The National Center for the Exploration of Human Potential in La Jolla, California, has recently been organized for this purpose. A nonprofit organization, the center will act as a clearing house of information for current and past approaches that have been successful in fostering personal growth. One of the main purposes of the center will be to conduct and coordinate basic and applied research concerning the expansion of human potential.

Among the many fascinating questions posed by researchers are some of the following: What is the relationship of body-rhythms, biorhythms, and the expansion of sensory awareness to the uncovering of human potential? What are the applications of methods and approaches from other cultures such as yoga techniques, Sufi methods, types of meditation, etc.? What is the role of ecstasy and play vis-à-vis the realizing of human possibilities? The exploration of these and similar questions can help us create a society truly devoted to the full development of human capacities - particularly the capacities for love, joy, creativity, spiritual experiencing. This is the challenge and promise of our lifetime.