

# The Cry of America

By FRANCIS B. SAYRE Jr.

WASHINGTON — The trial of William Calley is over; now is the trial of the nation. The camera swings from the impassive face of the man who presided over the death of some 22 civilians. Now the glaring light rests upon the people in whose name and by whose power many thousand times that number have died in distant Asia. If at the court-martial the agony pierced the Army, and one of its young lieutenants, now it is ours.

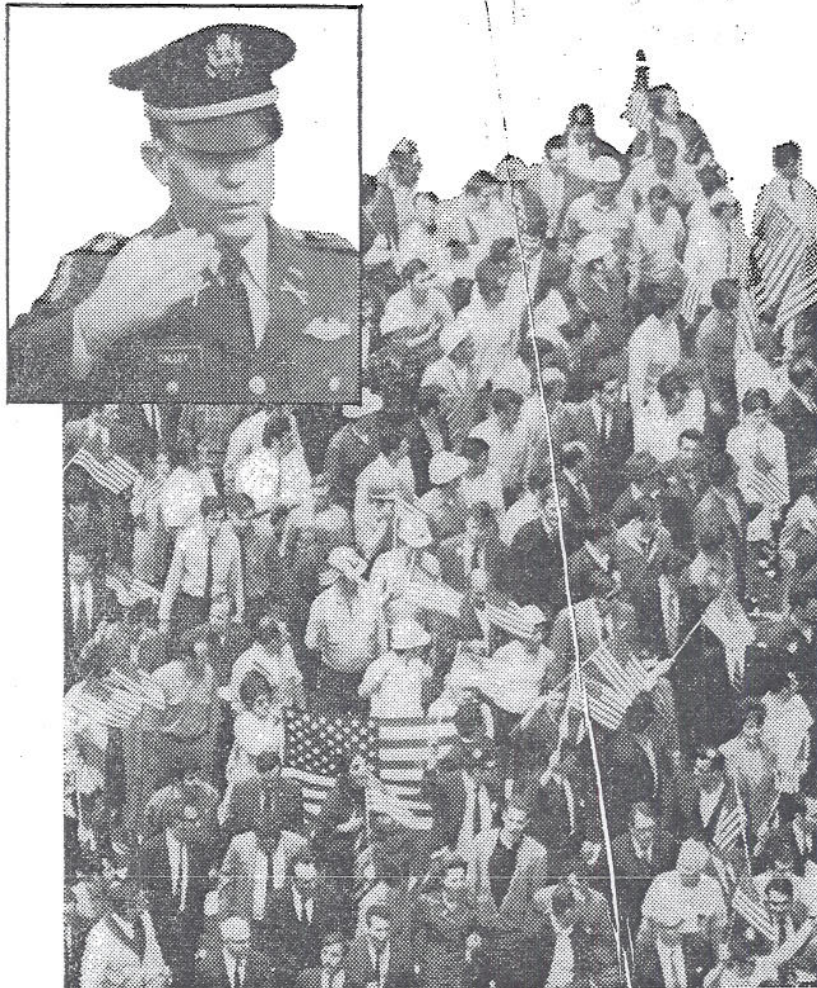
America is mightily distressed. She pours out her unhappiness in telegrams and letters, in protests and angry confusion. The conviction of the young man has touched the raw nerve; it is a moment of paroxysm in the nation's conscience.

The reason is plain, though of course admitted by none. It is simply that Calley is all of us. He is every single citizen in our graceless land. This is why everyone is "up so tight" about this conviction. If one young officer is to be singled out for guilt, who among us is guiltless? Who, whether hawk or dove, military or civilian, is exempt from some share, some obedience or lazy acquiescence, in the faceless slaughter not only of human life but of almost all we have been wont to count as precious in this world.

"Let him go, Mr. President!" our people cry, "Poor Rusty," his family pleads. Thus disguised might the prayer of a penitent be on Good Friday. For behind the shout for leniency is the lurking sense of sin that pervades our whole society. Though addressed to the President on behalf of a soldier, the painful scream is really meant for God, for whose mercy all our people deeply yearn, that He may not hold us to blame for the awful holocaust. On the right and on the left, no one can relish the harsh sentence of the court, for by any moral canon we are guilty too, no less as individuals than as a nation.

Much of the moral confusion that characterizes the present crisis of our conscience stems from the propensity to dodge the true locus of the problem, which is in ourselves. The first instinct is to hold guilt at arm's length, away from oneself. Commence with Calley. Was he guilty of murder or wasn't he? For you (not him) that is an abstract discussion without discomfort.

But now the court finds him guilty on good and sufficient evidence. Well then, you reflect, if he's not innocent, neither is the whole Army. Calley was only part of a system (as who is not?) and therefore only an unwitting victim of an evil machine. Why pick on him?



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Must we not condemn the whole wicked engine of death? That's a righteous and still quite comfortable position which some rather naive citizens—the marching kind—delight in taking.

But then a member of the military jury steps forward and discloses that all six of his colleagues on the Calley court had agreed that there has to be some kind of "higher law" to which even a soldier must be responsible. Mere obedience to orders is no defense. "There are some things that a man of common understanding and common sense would know are wrong," said Maj. Walter Kinard.

This is a proposition from which few would dissent. Indeed, on other occasions we applaud the Army when it acknowledges a superior ethic, as in the case of a conscientious objector, or when it recognizes the humanity of an instrument like the Geneva Convention which may lead to the humiliation of a public trial where the very vocation of a soldier is put to the ordeal.

But with the higher law once admitted begins the agony of moral responsibility. This is when our hearts begin to ache and the discussion starts to hurt. When is a war clean and when dirty? What hypocrisies have dictated that distinction! Why is bombing from the air to be condoned above shooting on the ground? When it is anonymous?

These are the difficult and extremely delicate kinds of moral questions that it is not fair to unload on the President or on a Westmoreland or Calley. They are ours to decide, hard as that may be at a moment in history when the blazes on trees are pretty dim in the moral forest.

But it is quite clear that unless the American people, in the presence of death, can bring themselves to see their own involvement in the sin, they may not expect a resurrection soon, either for William Calley or for the hope God still gives in the world.

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