



## The Public Uprising In the Calley Case

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THE UPSURGE of popular sympathy for Lieutenant William Calley teaches a salutary lesson about public opinion. For the wave of feeling is not some extraneous thing worked up by the media.

On the contrary, it was a spontaneous expression of an outlook bred in the bone of the country. And it shows that public opinion, far from being easily subject to manipulation by the media, is a mystery that passes understanding.

The role of the media in the Calley case is, for once, not altogether in doubt. The My Lai massacre for which Calley was tried was made known to the world through a group of independent journalists. Wire services, television and the papers amplified their findings in abundant and grisly detail.

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COVERAGE OF THE courtmartial itself was extensive. While much time and space were given to the contentions of the defense, Calley certainly did not come off as a hero. About the best any of us in the media could say for him was that he was being singled out for a wrong done by many others as well.

Public reaction to the verdict and sentencing, however, had nothing to do with what the media was saying. It was a kind of tribal reflex to the stimulus of the dramatic event.

The emphasis was not upon guilt or innocence or even on whether Calley had been made a scapegoat. The central fact was that Calley was one of ours. He had killed some of theirs. There was a war on

and it was essential to hold our side together.

Thus a woman at Ft. Benning shouted after the sentence was pronounced: "He's been crucified. Lieutenant Calley killed 100 Communists single handedly. He should get a medal. He should be promoted to major-general."

Another wired the court at Ft. Benning: "Battles are lost by cowards and deserters. Mistakes are made by hundreds. Lieutenant Calley is guilty only of being a soldier."

In not so different vein the commander of the American Legion cabled the President to "Exercise executive clemency" in the "interests of the morale and future effectiveness of our armed forces."

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THIS KIND OF response should surprise nobody. For the United States is a powerful country precisely because its citizens are knit together by the strongest bonds of community. Fellow feeling of Americans for one another generates a group spirit, a climate of thought.

It is something vague and inchoate, easier to feel than to describe. But it sets limits on what is possible and what is not. And it is the hard core of public opinion.

Powerful men and groups can work on this core of opinion. But the fact is that public opinion is created by the slow unconscious thought of great masses of men. It derives from sources too numerous and obscure to measure. It moves in ways that defy prediction. It is an unknown god, and the best way to deal with it is to show a measure of caution.