

A War Distorted

The Uncivilized Will Enslave or Destroy Us If We Do Not Fight

By JAMES BURNHAM

Whatever was to happen to William Calley, one result of the first Mylai trial was certain in advance: the United States Army was going to be found Guilty. The Army couldn't win. If Calley had been let off: a whitewash. If he had been (as he has been) condemned: a scapegoat for the higher brass. That's the way the media set it up and, in the courtrooms of our global village, the media, as we all know, are prosecutor, judge and jury.

Surely there is something essentially wrong in the way the Mylai episode is being handled. Of course there was also something very wrong about the episode: Horrible things happened at Mylai, and there seems little doubt that William Calley did at least some of them. But what happened in the Mylai episode is a different matter from what happened and is happening to the Mylai episode—in myriad news dispatches, the hour upon hour of TV shots and radio-TV commentary, the thousands of articles, speeches, sermons, the scores of books, the meetings, conferences and now the seemingly endless—and relentlessly publicized—session of one, two . . . and how many more trials.

One thing most wrong is a distortion so extreme that it brings a total falsification. Objectively viewed, the Mylai episode—however horrible—is a trivial incident within a large and complex whole. That whole includes the torturing and assassination by the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese of an estimated fifty thousand South Vietnamese civilians; it includes thousands of booby traps, set or triggered by children and women as well as men, that mangled young Americans, Australians, Koreans and South Vietnamese; it includes, also, bombings by American aircraft that have killed far more noncombatants than all the Mylais there may have been—as did bombings by American, Russian, British and German aircraft in World War II.

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But besides all the local and immediate combat facts it includes an array of political, social and philosophical facts extending on a global and historic scale. Our intellectuals and verbalists seem to be divorcing themselves from history in order to revel in an obsessed orgy of Guilt.

Horrible and obscene things happen in war, in every war; and in peace, too, and in the course of each individual's life and dying. Human existence bears no resemblance to the projections of sentimentalists and utopians. But to dwell exclusively on the horrors and obscenities is the road not to vision but to madness. Nor is it necessary that everything be brought at all times into the open for everyone to see. Not every diner need keep always in mind the horrors of the slaughterhouse. The civilized man believes that even in a war a line must be drawn somewhere. Under a global searchlight may not always be the best place for drawing it. There is something to be said, often, for the old-fashioned rite of the drum-head court-martial.

It has been generally remarked that this Vietnam conflict is the first TV war, and therefore the first in which war's horrors have entered mass consciousness. We are told that this will make war impossible since the masses, being conscious now of the horrors, will not permit war. Both premise and conclusion are faulty. It is not the war that is being presented on a global screen, but only a cross section of horrors and sensationalized happenings drawn by camera crews and reporters functioning freely on our side of the line. There are no freely ranging crews or screens or networks on the enemy's side. The televised war of horrors exists not for the global village but only for the side that is the more civilized, democratic and technologically advanced.

If the continuous televising of this war is, in fact, leading the audience to renouncing war, this will not at all mean no more war. If civilized men, overcome by war's quota of sensationalist horror, no longer can fight, then they will inevitably be enslaved, or destroyed, by the uncivilized, who can.

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