

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

Calley

IN THE ANNALS of our kind, what has happened to First Lieutenant William Laws Calley Jr. and what will happen to him, quite possibly marks an important moral watershed.

Like many another person, I've been much perplexed by the trial of the little redneck, the murderous innocent who was accused by his fellow officers of the mass killing of 102 unarmed and unresisting civilians, including women and children. He was found guilty of murdering at least 22.

While granting the validity of the arguments that Calley had been made a scapegoat; that he had merely followed his orders as a good soldier should, that the ghastly episode at My Lai only proved again the desperate moral incongruity of our position in Vietnam — while granting all these things, there still seemed to me something larger, more important, more challenging in the picture.

There was something going on in that courtroom at Fort Benning that was eluding me. There was an unacknowledged presence, a mighty force at work that was carrying ordinary, conventional army officers into strange and unthought of positions.



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ONE DAY recently it came to me. What was brooding over that sterile courtroom was the image which has been pushed deep into the national unconscious: the black cone-shaped curtain of smoke and earth that had devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and forever changed the nature of war. Total winning became a torment instead of a triumph.

Only now, and specifically only at the Calley trial, are we beginning publicly to acknowledge how much war has been changed, how victory has become a hollow and even threatening word, and how refusal to use the decisive nuclear weapon has cheapened armed combat, even to the eyes of professional soldiers.

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WE KNEW the Big Firecracker had changed war, but we chose to put that knowledge away where it could not trouble us. With the Calley trial, the chickens have come home to roost. Those telegrams to the White House, running 100 to one in favor of the lieutenant who liked it out there in Vietnam, were a vast outpouring of indignation. I suggest it was less against injustice to a single officer, than against a terrible decision the six career officers were groping towards.

What these judges were doing, and I can see it clearly now, was moving toward nothing less than a new definition of war, a definition of war that would, among other things, demean somehow the service of every man who took arms for his country since 1945.

Shortly after the bomb fell, we had the Nuremberg trials, in which wholly new concepts of military justice were to be formulated, and applied in future, to the conduct of war between nations.

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WHAT BEGAN to be worked out 26 years later in Fort Benning was prefigured in the remarks made that year before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, by the Chief Prosecutor of German War Criminals, Mr. Robert Jackson:

"Modern civilization," said Jackson, "puts limitless weapons of destruction into the hands of mankind . . . Every recourse to war, to any kind of war, is recourse to measures which by their very nature are criminal. War is inevitably a web of killing, invasion, loss of freedom, and destruction of property.

". . . Human reason demands that the law should not be considered adequate if it punishes only petty crimes of which lesser people are guilty. The law must also reach the men who seize great power and deliberately combine to make use of it to commit an evil which affects every home in the world. The last step in preventing the outbreak of war, which is unavoidable with international lawlessness, is to make statesmen responsible before the law.

"Let me say it quite clearly: This law is here first applied to German aggressors, but it includes, and must do if it is to be of service, the condemnation of aggression by any other nation, not excepting those who now sit here in judgment."

More tomorrow.