

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

Calley (3)

IF THE TRUTH be known, Rusty Calley has done more to get us out of Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia than the most recent three of our Presidents. The redneck lieutenant around whom revolves the greatest military uproar since the Dreyfus affair, may even have done a lot to prevent some wars as yet unfought.

The My Lai massacre, the nature of which nobody has denied, is forcing us all, the military included, to rethink the nature of war in the light of nuclear power.

The Calley crime, the trial which adjudged it, and the extraordinary brouhaha which followed it, has made a national issue of the morality of this particular stinking war. The A-bomb has taken the "w" out of win.

In these wars that cannot be won, and all future wars are going to be like that, we are beginning to be faced with an implacable either-or position. As President Kennedy said, if we use the Big Firecracker "even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth."

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WE ARE FACED with the choice of dropping war altogether, since it no longer can truly serve as an instrument of national policy, and is certainly not doing so in Asia. Or, if wars continue to be recognized, to be declared, to be waged, we must acknowledge that free-fire zones, the destruction of civilian life, devastation of property, and the obscenity of body counts are essential weapons. Humanity, in these kinds of wars, must be ruled off bounds. Chivalry and honor are encumbrances, where victory cannot be had.

Just when this strange new idea was being worked out painfully by the Fort Benning jurors, their Commander-in-Chief jerked the rug and intervened ineptly in the painful process of national soul-searching.



Instead of keeping our mind on perhaps the greatest moral reassessment of our history, Mr. Nixon firmly reminded us that he is running for reelection, and that this datum is more important than the integrity of the military justice system which shone so brightly in that drab Georgia courtroom. The President made it clear that he was going to have the last word. He indicated that word would not be welcomed by the Calley jurors.

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THE WORLD PRESS saw the President's intervention perhaps more clearly than our own pundits. Said the Sunday Times, of London: "That the Calley trial took place is a credit to the United States. But the President has now destroyed what good the trial has done. It is as if he imagines that the collective guilt which perhaps he discerns somewhere in the recesses of the case can be expiated by this act of clemency.

"But to replace incomplete justice with non-justice is not enough. My Lai happened, and someone was responsible for it. The law of war and the laws of America will be thrown into contempt if the consequences of responsibility are permitted to evaporate in the heat of the political moment."

The political moment, and the public clamor to which it was a response, will I think turn out less important than the great decision to accept blame, even if on the lowest level, for the tragic parody of gallantry our fighting men showed at My Lai.

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THE HIGH QUESTION of the moment is how our country is to wage a war we can't afford to win, in a final military sense. Listen to Democrat Congressman John J. Flynt, of Georgia, who in 18 years in office never once opposed a military measure to come before the House. The other day he told his astounded colleagues that he intended to vote against extension of the draft. He said:

"I will not now or ever again vote to start or continue an undeclared war. It is wrong to compound a six-year mistake and send young men halfway around the world to fight in a war we have not the fortitude to win or end . . . The only way I know to end the war is to stop the draft."

Mr. Flynt, like a lot of other people, has been moved by the trial of Calley to the answer of how to fight a nuclear age war you cannot win. The answer is: Don't.