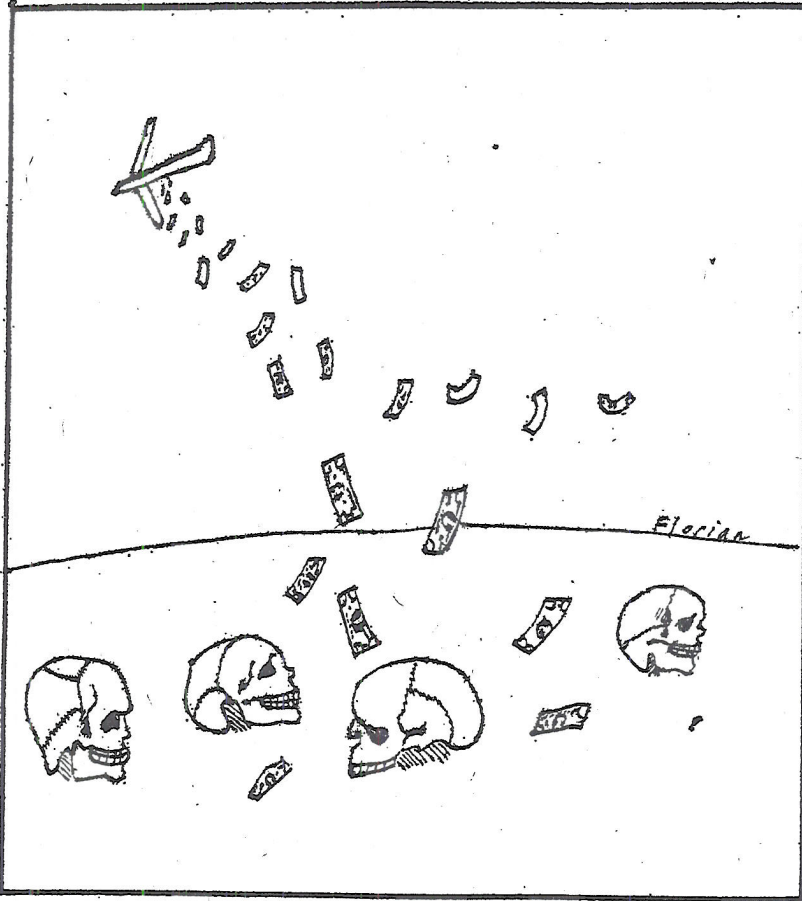


# Bereavement and a Pilgrimage



By Robert C. Ransom

BRONXVILLE, N. Y.—When my oldest son, Mike, was killed in Vietnam nearly six years ago I never thought I would visit the now-bleak coastal plains between Quang Ngai and My Lai where he died. Last month I did.

This was a difficult pilgrimage for me because I had long since concluded that his life was wasted by his own Government in a war that his fellow countrymen want only to forget. I had reluctantly come to believe he died for a cause that had brought only discredit and shame to the United States. It was my hope that in going to Vietnam I might find some consolation for his loss if there was evidence that his sacrifice had somehow served the Vietnamese people.

I wanted to find the honor promised by our Government when we signed the Paris agreement in January, 1973. Sadly, it must be said that none is to be found. The very use of the word when applied to the conduct of the Government of Nguyen Van Thieu is a mockery.

Nor is there any peace in Vietnam. At night we lay awake listening to the sound of the guns and rockets. Responsible sources said at the time that there had been at least 119,849 casualties since the "cease-fire."

As a lawyer I welcomed the opportunity to join four other Americans in a trip to assess the prospects for peace in Vietnam. I had heard much about abuses of the legal and judicial system there, but I would not have believed it had I not seen for myself what can only be called a total police state.

President Thieu's palace is a fortress surrounded by army tents, pillboxes with antiaircraft guns, and helicopter pads. On every block in Saigon we encountered policemen and paramilitary forces equipped with United States M-16 rifles and sidearms.

We were overwhelmed with the personal impact of talking with people who had actually suffered torture and the brutality of prison life. The palpable presence of terror was everywhere—in the sure knowledge of these people that any apparent opposition to the Government, or the indication of a desire for peace, would be met with reprisals against members of their families, even young children, in the form of seizure and subjection to the inhuman incarceration so prevalent.

One of our group attended a Saigon military court where defendants were tried without benefit of counsel, given five-minute hearings, and in every case convicted of "political" crimes.

Particularly disturbing was the realization that many of the people who

spoke with us, at considerable risk to their own freedom and safety, believed that once we were made aware of the facts of daily existence in South Vietnam we would be able to do something about them.

In separating fact from myth, we knew that 80 per cent of the costs of the Thieu Government were borne by American taxpayers. Just how much of the money was used for humanitarian aid to the people was one of the myths. Unfortunately, we saw little evidence that American money was being used for anything but support of the Thieu military regime.

When I was in the northern part of the country, where my son had been, I visited an encampment in which 750 families lived who were supposed to have been resettled as part of the "return-to-village" program. They lived under appalling conditions behind barbed wire. They had not received their allotments of money and tin roofing to build new homes; they did not have their promised allowances of rice; and they were not permitted out into the fields to grow the rice, on which their lives depended. With horror, I observed a family of six, near starvation, eating a meal of chopped banana stalks just to fill their stomachs.

I visited a small primitive hospital that serviced many of the more than 100,000 civilian amputees. Nowhere did I see a sign of sophisticated American medical assistance. Instead, a small group of dedicated, privately supported workers were making valiant efforts under impossible conditions.

We heard and noted that even the food supplies paid for by the United States did not reach the intended beneficiaries because of the ever-present graft and corruption at all levels of the civilian and military bureaucracy.

The fact is that the American presence now, as before, remains a disaster, not only as a result of the wartime devastation, defoliation and displacement of people, but as a continuing financial presence that maintains a Government of military officers that clings to power no matter what the cost to peace, freedom and democratic principles.

I wish every member of Congress, before they vote more funds for President Thieu, could share my experience. The Paris peace agreement was supposed to guarantee the right of self-determination to the Vietnamese people through democratic liberties and elections. It was supposed to provide the honor in my son's death.

It is doing neither.

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