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An American Tragedy

The life and death of John Paul Vann, for years a near-legendary military and civilian adviser in Vietnam, symbolized the idealistic hopes and tragic failure of the American intervention in Vietnam.

Mr. Vann was a true believer in a cause he served with exceptional dedication, courage and skill. From the beginning of his first tour in South Vietnam as a military adviser in 1962, he perceived as few others did the essential political nature of the struggle for South Vietnam. His blunt criticisms of South Vietnamese corruption and American blunders, especially the use of indiscriminate mass fire-power, only aroused the resentment of a myopic bureaucracy which, to its everlasting discredit, hounded him unheeded into early resignation from the Army.

After his return to Vietnam as a civilian adviser, Mr. Vann's unorthodox views on how the war should be conducted began to win acceptance, especially following the 1968 Tet offensive which he, almost alone among American officials, had accurately predicted. To him and a few others like him must go a large measure of credit for such successes as President Nixon's Vietnamization program had achieved before the new Communist offensive this year.

In the end, John Paul Vann fell victim to the very forces against which he had valiantly but vainly struggled for a decade. He died bravely, striving to rally wavering troops. In his last few days, the man who had so wisely warned against indiscriminate slaughter was himself calling in B-52 strikes close to the besieged city of Kontum, helping to direct a massive aerial assault of the kind that has destroyed as much of South Vietnam—as well as the North—in an effort to save it.

The bombing may yet buy a little more time for President Thieu—and President Nixon. But it can never produce the free, secure and prosperous South Vietnam for which Mr. Vann and so many other well-intentioned Americans have given the last measure of devotion.

The fruits of American involvement there are more accurately portrayed in the haunting picture that appeared on front pages of newspapers across the nation on the day of Mr. Vann's death—the picture of a frightened, whimpering child fleeing naked down a bomb-scarred road, her clothes burned off by American napalm, dropped from American-built planes, flown by American-trained pilots. The napalming of South Vietnamese civilians and troops by South Vietnamese fliers was, of course, a horrible mistake. But that is the tragic story of this

whole terrible war, a reality that the American people and their leaders in the White House and Congress must finally confront.