

Letters to the Editor

Civilians in War: Spare or Destroy?

To the Editor:

In his April 26 letter Maj. Gen. John H. Cushman denies that we wage war upon civilians. Our efforts, he indicates, are aimed at protecting "the innocent."

The general would appear to be the victim of his own sincere self-deception. The exception that legally justifies a violation of the rules of "humanity" in warfare is "military necessity"—and in the frustrating fight against Vietnam guerrillas or in other forms of modern warfare, purposeful destruction of civilians invariably becomes the final "necessity."

The bombing of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Dresden and Tokyo in the closing days of World War II may have been the most total and complete acts of warfare ever perpetrated. Their essential purpose was the killing of "innocent civilians."

Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War during World War II, writing in the February 1947 issue of Harper's Magazine, described "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," admittedly a "decision that brought death to over a hundred thousand Japanese," as "deliberate, premeditated" and for the purpose of producing "exactly the kind of shock" it did. Mr. Stimson said: "The ultimate responsibility for the recommendation to the President rested upon me, and I have no desire to veil it. . . . I felt that to extract a genuine surrender from the Emperor and his military advisers, they must be administered a tremendous shock which would carry convincing proof of our power to destroy the Empire."

Here is no talk of munitions factories as primary targets; here is the candid description of the bomb as a

"psychological weapon," the recognition that its great value came from its terrorization of civilians: "The experience of what an atomic bomb will actually do to a community, plus the dread of many more."

What General Cushman apparently does not appreciate is the fact that a military directive not to kill civilians is in reality merely an instruction to avoid certain methods of killing.

Captain Medina perhaps unwittingly put the matter in perspective in his Calley case testimony when he said that he was sick at heart and horrified when he saw the corpses of the Mylai civilians—and he found himself hoping against hope that this carnage had been done by American artillery.

A. FRANK REEL

New York, April 27, 1971

The writer was defense attorney for General Yamashita.

To the Editor:

Burke Marshall can, of course, speak for himself as to the meaning of his comments (Op-Ed April 10), but Maj. Gen. John H. Cushman's letter (April 26) misses the point of the question of war waged against civilians in Vietnam. Since missing the point has become an endemic intellectual failure in modern America, the difference here is worth pointing out.

General Cushman insists that American soldiers have orders not to kill civilians and that most American soldiers obey them. This surely must be so, despite the incidents epitomized by Lieutenant Calley. The point, however, is that this is a war which is by definition waged against civilians. Obviously U.S. troops meet North Viet-

namese troops, and one can agree that the Vietcong constitute troops. Nevertheless, the whole tenor of the war, a war against indigenous guerrillas, from the bombing to the defoliation to the creation of a million refugees to the insistence on every soldier's part that women and children can be and often are deadly antagonists, indicates that the war as such is directed against the mass of people and hence against civilians.

To say that individual soldiers are instructed not to slaughter individual noncombatants, while undoubtedly true, avoids the reality. One might add that incidents such as Mylai grow directly from these facts, no matter how much decent military men may regret them.

DAVID NEVIN

Alexandria, Va., April 27, 1971

To the Editor:

No wonder there is a credibility gap. May I quote from the April 26 issue of The Times:

News story quoting a former U.S. helicopter gunner: ". . . the order came back over the radio, 'Shoot them.' And so the helicopter made a sweep over a bridge . . . raking it with bullets and killing thirty or forty unarmed villagers."

Letter from Maj. Gen. John H. Cushman, U.S. Army: "Mr. Marshall says that 'our war in Indochina is based on killing civilians.' I must tell you that I know as to my own experience that this monstrous statement is simply not true."

It seems to me that the credibility lies with the man at the "front" and not with the Saigon generals or President Nixon.

D. GRAHAM JEMMETT

New York, April 26, 1971