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Gooks, Slopes And Vermin

By Tom Wicker

In Winthrop, Mass., last January, fifteen armed men burst into the home of Mr. and Mrs. William Pine, terrorized them and their daughter for what the family said was fifteen minutes, then abruptly left. They were state police plainclothesmen, raiding the wrong house in search of a drug operation.

In Collinsville, Ill., last weekend, armed and abusive men broke into the houses of Herbert Giglotto and Don Askew, pushed their families around and cursed them, damaged their property, put them in fear of their lives, then left without apology or explanation. They were Federal drug agents, acting without warrants and on faulty tips, although both families have been respectable and law-abiding.

The Pines in Massachusetts and the Askews and Giglottos in Illinois rightly compared these intrusions to the actions of the Gestapo in Nazi Germany, and inquired in hurt and wonderment how such things could happen in America.

In Washington, Myles J. Ambrose, the Special Assistant Attorney General in charge of the Office for Drug Abuse Law Enforcement, unwittingly suggested an excellent reason why these things can happen—and do happen more frequently than many people realize or will admit—in America.

"Drug people," Mr. Ambrose said, "are the very vermin of humanity . . . occasionally we must adopt their dress and tactics."

Well, in Vietnam, people fighting on the other side came to be known as "slopes" and "gooks"—such vermin of humanity that it was acceptable and understandable that they should be mowed down at My Lai and in countless free-fire zones, whether they were women, children, civilians or soldiers. They were all gooks. At worst, slaughtering them was a matter of occasionally adopting their tactics.

The crucial connection is that the mentality of conducting a "war on crime" has been developed here in

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America, and it is not much different from the mentality of conducting a "war on Communism" or a "war against aggression" in Southeast Asia. In a war, the other side is despised; in a war, anything goes.

The war on crime has been justified and praised, from the White House on down, just as was the war on Communism. So if constitutional shortcuts, massive applications of force, and frequent lies and deceptions were required merely to gain "peace with honor" in the one war, anything less is not likely to be considered hard-nosed enough for the other. If the American people could be persuaded that a ten-year undeclared war in a distant land against a vaguely defined enemy was necessary to their own security, how much more easily have they been convinced that warlike escalation is vital against the much closer threat of crime.

The difficulty is that the mentality of war requires an enemy. Wars are fought by "we" against "them," by the righteous against the wicked. Of course, if it happens that the wicked are strong, the righteous must occasionally adopt their tactics. Vermin and gooks must be exterminated. If occasionally a hospital is bombed or a child napalmed or an innocent household wrecked and terrorized, the mentality of war is not much abashed. Generals may retire; narcotics agents are suspended; but the war must go on.

Eventually, in the war on crime as in any other war, "we" become indifferent to what happens to "them." This war, too, must be won. Some of "them" must be put to death. Some of "them" must go to jail for life, without hope of release. Some of "them" must be locked up before they have a chance to hurt some of "us." Safeguards that "we" support and even revere in ordinary times must be suspended or limited for the duration—but only for "them." "We" will not be safe until "we" crack down on "them," occasionally adopting their tactics.

"We" may, for instance, break into a doctor's office and steal the psychiatric records of "they," because "they" appear subversive and immoral and may hamper the winning of one of "our" wars—even "our" ability to wage it. At worst, this makes "us" understandable victims of righteous zeal. "We" may have committed excesses but "we"—as that exponent of law and order, Ronald Reagan, said of those involved in the Watergate excesses—"are not criminals at heart." Surely "we" had a duty to wage righteous war.

But it is hard to establish the limit. "We" wiretap "them" because "they" are criminals; so surely "we" must also wiretap "them" to find out if "they" are criminals, or just to make sure that "we" are not being undermined by anyone in the conduct of the war. The line between "we" and "they" blurs easily, and disappears.

So, as the Pines and the Giglottos and the Askews have learned, when "we" make war on "them," eventually "we" will have no more safety than "they." In fact, "we" may even be "they" because, in the mentality of war, anyone can become gook, slope or vermin.