

One Man's Bitter Porridge

By Ronald L. Ridenhour

TEMPE, Ariz.—When I wrote the letters that eventually led to the public revelation of the My Lai massacre, I hoped for many things. Chief among them was that it would show the American people and their Government that the policies of force abroad and deception at home were not only antithetical to the principles of a democratic society but low, mean, stupid, brutal and self-destructive as well.

When news of the massacre finally came into public view, horror and disbelief swept the country. The worst accusations of America's young, who had been filling the streets in ever-increasing numbers for the previous four years, seemed confirmed.

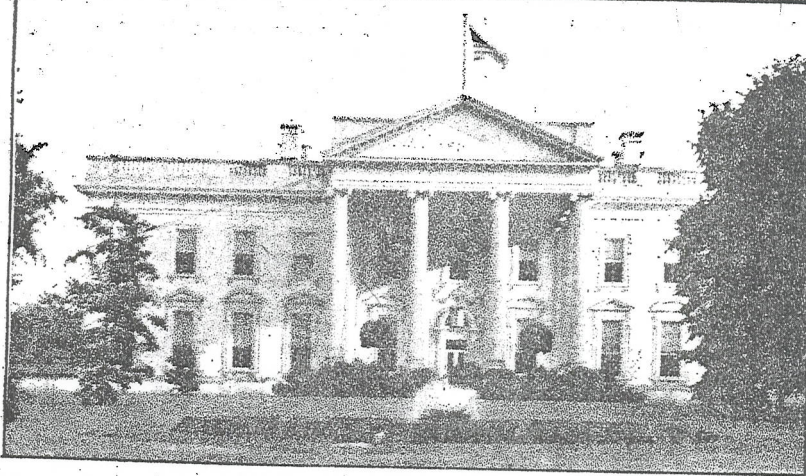
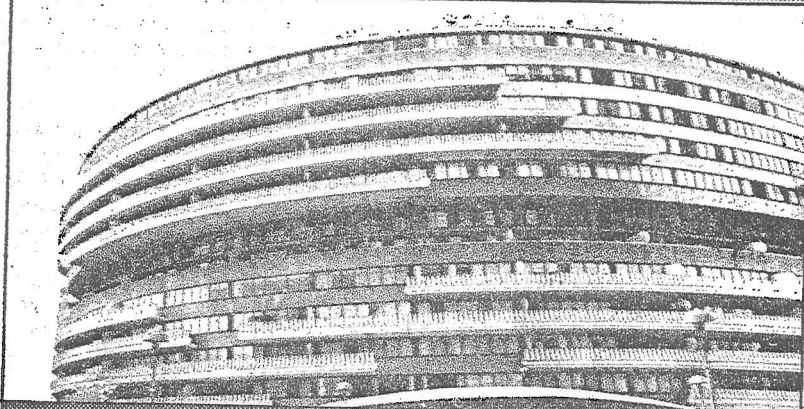
The question most often put to me was not why had they done it, but why had I done it. In a word, justice. It was a simple appeal to justice. I was younger and more foolish then. When people asked me those questions, implying some ulterior motive, judging me through the prisms of their personal inclinations, and suggesting that justice just wasn't good enough, as reasons go, I began to look not for another answer, but for a more articulate way of expressing the one I had.

It did not seem unreasonable to look to men like President Nixon and Mr. Agnew for leadership. They spoke often of justice, almost always of honor. These were not just fine words. They lived. They breathed. They were the flesh and blood of American political tradition, embodied daily in the policies of the Nixon Administration and the support given them by the American people. Or so Mr. Nixon and his Vice President said.

I returned to My Lai and stood by the infamous ditch. An old Vietnamese woman stood there too. She told how she had crawled across the bodies of her neighbors to escape the bullets of my friends; how her own Government refused to recognize the tragedy there; how her Government and mine continued to isolate the My Lai survivors not only from contact with the outside world, but also withholding the barest forms of relief—using always force and the threat of force to do so.

I found the U.S. Army lying about its casualties to the American press—and therefore to the American people—about one of the last battles in which U.S. troops were directly involved. The Army's reports cut casualties by perhaps as much as half. It was not a matter of a few men or even a few dozen. Well over a hundred casualties were lied about for just one battle.

During the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, American officers orches-



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trated the disaster by remote control while the Pentagon and the State Department did everything they could to prevent the press from reporting the debacle accurately, going so far in at least one instance as to assault two journalists, bind them with rope and hold them prisoner.

The press said the South Vietnamese were getting clobbered. Mr. Nixon answered those reports with tales of glowing success. When the nation's press did not follow his lead of fabricating success from whole cloth the President unleashed Mr. Agnew to renew his assaults on journalism. American reporters told the truth about Laos. Mr. Nixon did everything he could to keep them from it. It was as simple as that.

Beyond that there were the facts of heroin among American soldiers and the massive corruption in the South Vietnamese Government that supplied their habits. These facts were known in some considerable detail by an American Embassy under the constant direction of the White House to do everything necessary to prevent the American public from discovering either. It meant covering up a wide range of corrupt activities by many, many of the highest officers of the South Vietnamese Government and military, the theft of hundreds of millions of tax dollars, and the attempted surreptitious return of 100,000 new American junkies.

Back in America there was the spectacle of Lieutenant Calley getting twenty years while the men who gave him his orders and covered up the crimes got off or rich or both. Later a special report on My Lai, the Peers Commission Report, containing evidence that could have brought many men besides Calley to grief, including several general officers, was denied the American public even though undertaken in their name. It was covered up to hide criminal activity among privileged, powerful military men.

And now we have the Medusa of Watergate; the firing of Special Prosecutor Cox, the resignations of Messrs. Richardson and Ruckelshaus, and the moral chaos of a people who have too long allowed themselves to be manipulated into accepting the Nixonian sophistry that whatever is expedient is necessary; whatever is necessary for the protection of Richard Nixon is legal; whatever is legal is both moral and ethical.

Mr. Nixon has made a bitter porridge of that justice I set out so long ago to find, spilling it in moral hollows of America. It is too bad.

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