

cause is more just . . . but enough is enough. Let's lie low for a few years and get the U.S. to go home."

We're winning the war. We're killing VC, guerrillas, Main Forces, destroying their bases, destroying caches of food and weapons, we're getting more Chieu Hoi (defectors). If people in Washington want to win fast—if they're in a hurry, because of elections or something—they could move five more divisions over here and get the job done faster. But if they're not in such a hurry, we can do the job with what we've got, i.e., including the 9th Division. Pacification hasn't worked anywhere. But the 1st Division is doing one thing: killing guerrillas.

We have long-range programs now to destroy the Phu Loi Battalion. In general, to get the VC provincial battalions: keep probing, searching, harassing the areas where they take their leave, training, and rest their bases. Keep bombing their base areas: we need a sensor that would signal to us when someone had entered that area, so we could bomb it.

You need fast reaction to contact: with air strikes. Even against a squad, or snipers, I'd use an air strike; artillery is no good when they have overhead cover.

DePuy undoubtedly practiced what he preached. As a former small-unit infantry officer, I was especially struck, as I observed in my memo, that:

Even in discussing tactics against small sniper bands in populated areas, he never referred to aggressive, small-unit ground action. A high U.S. official (John Paul Vann), who passed a day recently with DePuy in his command chopper, reported that they spent two hours raking a small grove, which several VC had been seen to enter, with their .50-caliber MG's, returning several times for more ammo, although there was a battalion from the 1st Division in the immediate vicinity with one platoon only a few hundred yards away, never ordered in by DePuy. This official contrasted DePuy's caution (almost "ARVN-like") about risking U.S. casualties in ground action—relying almost entirely upon heavy firepower rather than close combat—with DePuy's personal aggressiveness and courage. (He does sack commanders on the spot; and he monitors the radio set in his chopper and heads immediately toward contact: a new way of commanding a division in combat. DePuy invited me to spend a day with him in his chopper, confirming that he likes to fly at fifty feet or under—"you can't see anything at fifteen hundred"—and commenting that he estimates his chopper has been hit "forty or fifty times.")

As I reread these notes in 1972, I am struck by the correspondence of this peculiarly "American way of war" on the tactical level to the grand strategy of the Nixon Doctrine and "Vietnamization." Both are designed to economize on American infantry casualties; the

## BOMBING AND OTHER CRIMES

"The solution in Vietnam is more bombs, more shells, more napalm . . . till the other side cracks and gives up."—Brigadier General William C. DePuy, Commanding General, U.S. 1st Division, Lai Khe, January 13, 1967

In mid-January, 1967, Brigadier General DePuy, who was about to leave command of the U.S. 1st Division to return to Washington, invited me to lunch at his tent headquarters at Lai Khe in III Corps, the Corps area surrounding Saigon. As chief planner for General Westmoreland before taking command of the Big Red One, DePuy was one of the most experienced officers in Vietnam, and one of the most responsible for the shape and implementation of our military policies there, including the very presence of U.S. combat units, which he had been instrumental in promoting in 1964-65. Since he was now to become the Special Assistant to the Chairman of the JCS for Special Activities—i.e., counterinsurgency and covert operations—the views he would be taking back from his field experience in III Corps seemed of special interest. I passed them on to my boss, Deputy Ambassador William Porter, then in charge of all civil operations in Vietnam.

My notes began with DePuy's remark above, which he had expressed like a slogan. I went on quoting DePuy, as follows:

We're making life unpleasant for the VC . . . at least I think we are. Finally, they'll say "Ho, we're smarter than they are—" [side comment by DePuy: "I don't have much faith in our brainpower, only in our firepower"]—"our

strategy, simply goes one step further, using local or hired troops, rather than Americans, as live bait to attract targets for air and artillery. Whether as field tactic or foreign policy, our way of war now relies on the use of indiscriminate American artillery and airpower that generates innumerable My Lai's as a norm, not as a shocking exceptional case.

My memo went on, "If such an approach is used in the Delta"—and strategically speaking, much of Asia, the area of application of the Nixon Doctrine, is one large Delta—"it will be hard to avoid large civilian casualties."

When I wrote this memo, I had just returned from ten days of combat observation with an American unit in the Delta. (See the following account, in "War Crimes and My Lai," of incidents in Rach Kien, Long An Province.) My remarks reflected the concern of Ambassador Lodge and Deputy Ambassador Porter about the prospective effects of American troops and firepower in the most densely populated areas of South Vietnam. As in IV Corps to the south, the southern border region of III Corps from which I had just returned was so thickly settled, except for the flooded rice paddies, that a helicopter could scarcely set down on dry land without literally blowing away sections of thatched roofing of huts. Those huts were filled with women and children; some of them, too, were sure to be "blown away" if the choppers used their rockets or machine guns or called in heavier firepower near those homes, i.e., anywhere in the vicinity of tree-lines, canals, or dry land.

During one "sweep" operation in this area, Horst Faas and Peter Arnett, the two most experienced combat reporters in Vietnam, walked with me part of the day. Though the battalion we were with was not from the 1st Division, DePuy's name kept coming up. As we took hostile fire, Faas said: "DePuy would be flying over here himself right now: about fifty feet above the ground." When artillery, called in against a squad of snipers, was slow in arriving, Arnett said, "DePuy would have sacked the artillery commander on the spot." And when various reports came in of VC in thickets or hamlets in the area, one of them commented: "DePuy would have blanketed this place with artillery and bombs, Delta or not."

Now I asked DePuy himself, "Would you use the same tactics in the Delta?" He thought for a moment, then answered:

It's true that in the Delta, you have more population in the area than we usually have in our TAOR; even so, I'd use an air strike, but first I'd send over planes with loudspeakers and leaflets telling the people to get out in the middle of the open fields within five minutes (where I'd pick all of them up, for interrogation), then hit the place. If the VC wouldn't let them leave . . . that wouldn't make the VC too popular.

As I said before: what you need is more bombs, more shells, more napalm. . . .

DePuy left Vietnam shortly afterward, but his tactical principles did not. Brigadier General Julian Ewell, commanding the 9th Division in the Delta, so completely freed his helicopter gunners from restraints against firing on sampans in canals lined on both sides with housing that the Division reported body-count ratios of "friendly" to "enemy" dead unmatched in the history of the war, or perhaps in any war. The count of captured enemy weapons accompanying these "enemy kills" was—as at My Lai—strikingly low, in fact negligible, and the provincial hospitals overflowed with civilian wounded, which were never reported in the Division statistics or in the weekly accounting given to the home audiences on TV. Ewell got another star, and was later assigned to the negotiating team in Paris.

## THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR

Rand's contract with the Department of Defense provided that any public statement or writing of an employee that related to his area of government-supported research must be submitted in advance for review by the Department, not only for "security" (i.e., disclosure of classified information) but for "policy" acceptability. (In other words any speech, article, or book by an official or an employee of a "think-tank" like Rand has been approved as acceptable—line by line—by a Government censor, though this guarantee of "acceptability" is nowhere stamped on the product; it can never be presumed that the text appears as the author originally wrote it, or as he might have written it if it had not been subject to review-censorship. The usual indication of "policy" problems would not be specific complaints or demands for deletion but extremely long delays in "clearance.")

An exception to this requirement for advance approval was spontaneous comments in a seminar discussion, or a transcript of such remarks. The following comment is from such a discussion, a seminar on "Lessons of Vietnam" at the Adlai Stevenson Institute, Chicago, Illinois, in early June, 1968; the transcript of the seminar was subsequently edited by Richard M. Pfeffer and published under the title *No More Vietnams* (New York, 1968). I was responding to a point made by Theodore Draper at the conference; footnotes have been added.

This particular comment of mine was not widely admired back at Rand, which had always derived most of its research funds from the U.S. Air Force. It was made shortly after the U.S. Air Force had destroyed large parts of Huế and Saigon, and the Delta towns of Can Tho and Ben Tre. Ben Tre was the province capital of Kien Hoa Province, of which my friend Tran Ngoc Chau had been the province chief when I first met him in 1965, and which he represented at the time in the National Assembly. It was the town that "had to be destroyed in order to be saved."

Theodore Draper commented as follows:

"Massive retaliation," that monstrous doctrine of the 1950's, saved us from large-scale intervention in Vietnam in 1954. But its successor, variously known as "limited war," "graduated response," or "flexible response," did not save us from increasingly large-scale intervention in Vietnam since 1961 and especially since 1965. In fact, I think the doctrine of "limited war" as it was worked out in the latter half of the 1950's outside the Government and taken over by the Government in the 1960's must be held partially responsible for pulling us in.

I do not really agree that it was the theory of limited war that encouraged Americans to favor our Vietnam decisions in the 1960's.<sup>1</sup> I think it was something else, some attitudes and expectations associated with the American way of war.

Specifically, there has been in the U.S. since the Second World War a widespread belief in the efficacy and acceptability of aerial bombing, and in particular of bombing of a strategic nature, aimed at the will of the opponent via his industrial and population resources. This belief played a critical, if not decisive, role in getting us into Vietnam, in reassuring us, in giving us confidence to stay in, and then in stimulating escalation while keeping us reassured as to ultimate success.

In 1961, the group of men most in favor of an enlarged intervention, including the sending of ground troops, was headed by Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow. These two pointed, as early as 1961, to the essential problem of stopping infiltration. They took the point of view, rightly or wrongly, that the problem in the South would be insoluble until we were able to stop infiltration from the North, not as it was then but as it could become. It was clearly stated by them that we must go in with the recognition, especially if we were successful in the early stages, that we could anticipate a high level of infiltration, which some-

<sup>1</sup> I have changed my mind on Draper's point; I now think it has a good deal of substance, though the influence of limited-war doctrines on the decisions of civilian policy-makers was not simple—it involved, to a large extent, their battle with military advisers over the need to rely on nuclear weapons. This subject is not discussed in this book, except for some comments in the final essay, pages 292-93.

how would have to be stopped. These people, both privately and publicly, indicated there was only one effective way to stop infiltration—that, of course, was through bombing.

Thus, their recommendation for expanded U.S. involvement in Vietnam rested on the implicit assumptions that bombing would be used against the North when—as was likely—it became necessary, and that it would be effective.<sup>2</sup> Kennedy may or may not have accepted this reasoning or conclusion; the record is not clear. However, given attitudes within the defense bureaucracy and the larger American public, it would have been difficult, even for the President, explicitly to reject this “solution” in advance. Really, no other proposal was ever seriously made for dealing with that essential problem.

In 1965—when we felt ourselves in trouble in Vietnam in a number of ways, especially with regard to the need to demonstrate our commitment—Johnson was not prepared immediately to send troops; but one thing that came easy to an American President was a demonstration by bombing. In other ways as well, bombing was the natural solution to our problems; it was the key ingredient in our policy that was going, one way or another, to make everything turn out all right. And in 1966 and 1967, despite disappointments, these same hopes persisted and sustained our continued and expanded involvement.

Recently, a former Ambassador to the United States from Vietnam [Yu Van Thai] has expressed a plea that, despite his deep pessimism about the prospects today in Vietnam, we should not precipitously withdraw. He said he was against our immediate withdrawal even though he believed life under the Communists would be better than the continuation of this war: which since 1965—not since 1961 or 1964, but since the bombings of 1965 in South Vietnam and since we came in there with our troops—has begun to demolish his society, to turn it into “a vast zoo,” a vast refugee camp. Despite this belief, the Ambassador could not be for ending the war at the cost of a quick and total Communist victory, because he felt that would encourage the North Vietnamese to be doing things in Thailand within five years which *would cause us then to destroy Vietnam totally.*

<sup>2</sup> See *PP*, II, 73-120, especially 97-98.

The calling in of Americans and our subsequent bombing in North and South Vietnam has not brought success; hence the bombing and shelling in the South has gone on long enough to disrupt the society of South Vietnam enormously, and probably permanently. In general, if local governments who call for American aid are in other respects acting effectively, then any bombing we may do need not last very long, and the resulting damage will not be permanent. But if these governments face a strong enemy who can frustrate them and the U.S. and prolong the war, then the damage done by American bombs and artillery can be irrevocable.

We are talking here about lessons for us to learn about ourselves, and lessons for *others*—including those who might ask our aid in the future—to learn about us, from our experience in Vietnam and elsewhere.

The lesson which can be drawn here is one the rest of the world, I am sure, has drawn more quickly than Americans have: that, to paraphrase H. Rap Brown, *bombing is as American as cherry pie*. If you invite us in to do your hard fighting for you, then you get bombing and heavy shelling along with our troops. Many of us in Vietnam believed that we were there because we should win, and that we could win, though not by the methods we had been using. “Of course, I am against the kind of bombing we are doing”—I can hear myself, with others, saying this hundreds and hundreds of times.

I protected myself, I am afraid, from perceiving what should have been easily foreseeable—especially easy were I not American and terribly reluctant to realize it—namely, that if you bring in Americans like me, as part of a heavy U.S. *combat* involvement, you are going to get both strategic and widespread tactical bombing and heavy use of artillery<sup>3</sup> along with us, no matter how critical these particular individuals may be of it.

If you ask what will happen in Thailand if we go in militarily and have to face prolonged opposition, the answer is bombing and shelling.

<sup>3</sup> Along with the six million tons of bombs we have dropped on Indochina, we have expended six million tons of artillery shells since 1965 (aside from the shells “harassment and interdiction” shelling lavishly).

If you ask what would have happened if the Dominican Republic had chosen to oppose us, the answer is that the Dominican Republic probably would have been heavily bombed.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, a most ominous lesson is there to be drawn by the people of nations whose leaders might call for U.S. military support: that such a plea—if the national leader knew that the conflict would be long and the U.S. military commitment great—could amount to an act of treachery against his society.

<sup>4</sup> One senior Rand colleague—who has done research in South Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and the Dominican Republic—recalled these propositions two years later. At the time they were made, he had told me he thought them overdrawn and unwarranted; after watching what happened in the months after our invasion of Cambodia, he called me to say he had had to change his position.

### WAR CRIMES AND MY LAI

The Congressional Conference on War and National Responsibility convened in Washington early in 1970. The ten Congressional sponsors and, at their invitation, a group of leading American scholars, jurists, and public figures assembled at the Capitol for two days of intensive deliberation. The following excerpts from the edited transcript of the proceedings have been published under the title *War Crimes and the American Conscience*.<sup>5</sup> These were my oral comments in the discussion and reflected, of course, remarks of other participants; footnotes have been added.

The doctrine that certain military activities [may be criminal only] when they are carried out by only one side has very interesting implications.<sup>6</sup> In Vietnam we have unique possession of air weapons and such measures as defoliation and herbicides, as well as almost exclusive use of many kinds of arms, vehicles, helicopters, and so forth.

Actually, however, the guiding practice of past war crimes prosecutions has been that crime is something that can only be charged against a loser. Perhaps this explains why successive Presidents have felt so intensely anxious not to lose their war in Vietnam. But whatever happens in Vietnam and whatever it is called—defeat or victory—does not change many important realities in the world. It does not change the power of the United States and it does not change the ability of our American President to avoid being put in the dock by any other nation.

It is also a reality, I think, that no American President will look upon himself as a possible perpetrator of war crimes. It could not occur to him, it could not occur to the American people—

<sup>5</sup> *War Crimes and the American Conscience*, ed. Erwin Knoll and Judith Nies McFadden (New York, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> This comment responds to a point by Telford Taylor that presumptively illegal activities that had been carried out by both sides in World War II—in particular, strategic bombing—were not prosecuted by the Allies at Nuremberg.

except to the young—that war crimes are something that can be charged to Americans.

I have misgivings about the use of the word "genocide" in the context of the Vietnam war as it has been conducted up to this point.<sup>7</sup> It may, indeed, be applicable, in a strict sense, to some of our activities in Vietnam, in particular the designation of large, semi-permanent, free-fire zones. Other activities, such as the massive generation of refugees, both deliberate and inadvertent, might warrant the term "sociocide," the violent destruction of a patterned society; still others, the term "ecocide" that has just been introduced [by Arthur Galston].

Nevertheless, an indiscriminate use of such terms can blur potentially important distinctions about levels of destructiveness. An escalation of rhetoric can blind us to the fact that Vietnam is not only no more brutal than other wars in the past—and it is absurdly unhistorical to insist that it is—but that the Vietnam War is not as bad as other wars that we may have in the near future. And it is not as bad as it could still become. We must remain able to recognize the possibility of the occurrence of such increases in violence and risk, if we are to act to deter them or reverse them.

Thus, I suspect that because critics of the war in 1966 and 1967 tended to exaggerate the effect of the war on the population of Vietnam—as bad as it was then—they failed to discover that in 1968, even after the Tet and May crises, the war became enormously more destructive than it had ever been before. This increase described to me by participating officials, was a result of changes in our policies that went almost totally unnoticed.

<sup>7</sup> Since these remarks were made, much more has become known about the impact of our bombing in Laos and Cambodia, especially through the efforts of Fred Branaman (for data and reprints, write Project Air War, 1322 18th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036) and of the Air War Study Project of the Center for International Studies, Cornell University, along with the investigations by the Kennedy Subcommittee on Refugees and by Congressman Paul McCloskey in Laos (*Truth and Untruth* [New York, 1972]). The "generation" of refugees and destruction of rural society by bombing appears to have been more deliberate and more abrupt and socially devastating in Laos and Cambodia than in Vietnam; see Fred Branaman, "The Era of the Blue Machine, Laos: 1969—" *Washington Monthly*, July, 1971. Reservations about the strict application of the term "genocide"—as defined by the U.N.—no longer seem justified.

At the time of Tet, with the Vietcong entering the cities for the first time, we dropped the restraints we had previously imposed on the use of helicopter gunships and artillery in populated areas. For a period of several months, almost all of Vietnam became a free-fire zone. Subsequently, the designation of free-fire zones became much more widespread than it had been before. A new generation of helicopter pilots and artillery men came into rural Vietnam beginning in the late spring of 1968, found these new practices that had been instituted because of the back-to-the-wall conditions that surrounded the Tet offensive, and regarded them as normal.

Though the verbal orders have changed somewhat since then, the practices, I am told, have not. Since 1968, the citizens of Vietnam have been under fire in a way that did not apply in 1966 and 1967, although given their flight to the towns and the reduced level of combat, actual casualties are probably less than in 1968. Interrogations of Vietcong prisoners reveal that their greatest miscalculation in launching the Tet offensive was their failure to anticipate the enormous casualties they would sustain. It simply did not occur to them that the United States would be willing to launch firepower as freely as it did in populated areas. The Vietcong felt they would be shielded and protected by the population, but they were not.

In March, 1968, we also came perilously close to a decision that would probably have led to the invasion of North Vietnam. This would have been the likely indirect and ultimate consequence if we had granted the troop increase requested by General William C. Westmoreland. We would then have entered a war incomparably more destructive than anything we have witnessed so far in Vietnam.

The population of South Vietnam has almost surely increased each year in the last five, and the use of the word "genocide" can, therefore, be misleading, even if it is strictly warranted. But if we had invaded North Vietnam and totally unleashed our bombing, the population of neither North Vietnam nor South Vietnam would have increased. In that case, the word "genocide" in its most ominous sense would have come closer to reality.

Finally, if nuclear weapons had been used, as I have been told

was contemplated at high levels in connection with the defense of Khe Sanh, a degree of destructiveness incomparably surpassing anything we have yet seen in Vietnam would have come into play.

Without compromising our protest against the Vietnam War as it has actually evolved, we need to maintain reserves of outrage and resistance, and words and perceptions to trigger them, if we are to prevent tragedies still worse.

I see difficulties, too, in the distinctions we draw between the use of high and low technology. My Lai, after all, was not a question of unrestrained use of advanced technology. It was a question of World War I—if not Civil War—weaponry against people. The use of guns, rifles, small arms, stray bullets, the use of grenades, face-to-face killing—that certainly does not rely upon very advanced technology.

There is a tendency to confine the applicability of the war crimes concept just to such crimes of low technology. The concept, after all, dates from a period of low technology, around the time of World War I, and weaponry that has come into use since then has tended to be excluded.

This legal emphasis on low-technology war crimes tends to absolve our use of high-technology weapons—such as B-52's, carrier aircraft, helicopter gunships, CBU bombs—which are our main implements of death, in the Vietnam War specifically. These products are, in fact, regarded very highly by our culture—Western culture in general but, above all, American culture. To condemn the unrestrained use of complex, highly developed technologies is to defy some of our proudest national values. It will be difficult, politically, to extend the notion of "crimes against humanity" to include Anglo-American wartime triumphs of firepower against civilians, as in Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and now the free-fire zones of South Vietnam. Yet it would be shocking and perverse to condemn only rape and murder in wartime while continuing to tolerate the strategic bombing of noncombatants.

Furthermore, to define atrocities in terms of perpetrators who "looked upon the faces of their victims"—another aspect of current usage—is to say that only those who can see the faces of

their victims are, in fact, war criminals. One aspect of such a definition—not, I suspect, a coincidental one—is that it excludes almost everyone above the rank of captain. Only the lowest-ranking soldiers in a war, and not too many of them, ever see the faces of their victims. To depart from that rule—to hold accountable, for instance, the majors who fly in airplanes, let alone the people who command them or who plan their missions—is to lead, of course, to the highest ranks of the military and above that to the highest civilians in the Government. But that, too, is a direction in which we must go....

Who is it that we're talking to? Who is it that we want to hear us? Whose behavior would we like to change? We have raised questions of obedience and responsibility—whose sense of these matters would we like most to affect? Could it be that of soldiers in the field, in the chaos of battle, whose moral choices are made under enormous pressures and under fear of death? This is a worthwhile aim, but it cannot be our main objective, I would think.

The attitudes and behavior I would most like to change are those of my former colleagues in the U.S. Government. I speak not as a researcher but from experience as a former official of the Defense Department and the State Department in Washington and Vietnam—experience that makes me a possible defendant in a future war crimes trial. Some ten years ago I read the transcript of the Nuremberg trials, and that left me with the sense of what an exhibit in a war crimes trial looks like. As I was working in the Department of Defense, I did in some cases have a feeling while reading documents late at night that I was looking at future exhibits. Indeed, if we are to believe published accounts of contingency plans that have been prepared, for example, for war in Central Europe (such as might arise over Berlin), there even exist in locked safes in Washington right now documents that could very aptly be described as plans for escalatory genocide.

Such alleged plans reflect decisions by civilian officials which, I suggest, should be subjected in the future to more conscientious review. It is not unusual for officials to ask, as they draw up such plans: Are these prudent? Are these mistaken? But it is most un-

usual—almost unknown—for them to ask as well: Does the United States have a right to do such things? And if not, do these officials have a duty to participate or a duty to resist?

A way of causing such questions to be asked in the future is to recognize, protect, reward, and encourage those individuals who might indeed apply such judgments, discuss them with their colleagues, and act on them.

Notice that in the massacre at My Lai and in other such military incidents there were individuals who, despite apparent risk to their lives, did resist the atrocities or at least fail to cooperate. It is a terrible shame—one that I share as a former official—that I know of no civilian official in the Government who has acted comparably in any area of the Vietnam involvement.

Individual acts of initiative and courage cannot, of course, bear the burden of preventing catastrophes like Vietnam. Institutional and political changes are essential. Yet even if these changes do occur, I believe that we cannot avoid much, much worse crimes and horrors than we have seen in the past unless many individuals within the Government do assume greater risks and a greater sense of responsibility than has been shown in the past decade. Congress should reduce its tolerance of secrecy by the Executive, if only to protect its own need to know the facts. It should act to protect the right of dissent in general and, above all, the right of newspapermen to comment and to report truthfully.

Finally, I would strongly endorse the suggestion that selective conscientious objection be recognized in the draft law. The absence of such legislation has resulted in the imprisonment of young people who have chosen to act more responsibly, more conscientiously, than any other Americans I know.

### My Lai

As a peacetime Marine in the 1950's, I was spared the need to confront the possibility that the enemies I was being trained to kill for my country might turn out to be women, children, and babies. I was surrounded then by people who had been in World War II and Korea, and I was trained on war stories of jungle fighting on isolated Pacific islands. These are the myths

that have affected the attitudes of this generation of Americans toward violence. Vietnam, of course, has raised questions which this mythic history did not force us to confront—questions about who we are and what we are trying to do and what is permissible to us.

The first point I would like to raise about My Lai is this: If there were no My Lai's, no face-to-face killing of women and children by small arms, would the civilians of South Vietnam really know the difference? As you may have noticed, the South Vietnamese civilians, let alone their leadership, did not really raise much protest about My Lai or even show much interest in it. First of all, they are used to such operations in that area—particularly by Koreans, the allies we brought to Vietnam.

Moreover, it is hard for the South Vietnamese to get very excited about killings committed in that particular way, knowing that nearly all of the enormous number of civilian deaths are caused by high explosives from our planes and artillery. They have come to expect these deaths, the killing of women and children from a distance, as a part of the American way of war.

The question remains, how did this particular face-to-face massacre come about? Is it the nature of this war? Is it inevitable in this sort of war? These questions have all been raised. I would suggest that it is in the nature of this war and to be expected. This is a major reason, I have concluded, that the war in which I participated is one we should not have been fighting. But the cause, I would suggest, is not so much strategic or tactical in any objective sense, but psychological, in terms of the pressures that this war puts on those who participate in it. These pressures lead daily to smaller, unrecorded atrocities, but sooner or later they were likely to produce a My Lai.

The first thing to be mentioned is the frustration to both planners and soldiers of fighting in a war where nothing seems to work, where the rules either don't exist or obviously don't apply, and where they are confronted by impotence and failure day after day. My Lai had to be destroyed not because its occupants posed any threat, but because there was a felt need to destroy some village like it.

I saw that kind of frustration and the effects of it very vividly



toward the close of my two years in Vietnam. I saw it develop in a short period—only ten days—in a particular battalion which had been fighting for some months in the jungles of War Zone C where there were no villages. Now the same battalion was exposed to the conditions of the Delta, in Rach Kien district of Long An province, surrounded by villages and surrounded by water—in fact immersed in water constantly, which added to the frustration. The men preferred the dry jungle fighting.

As days went on in which the men were fired at by invisible snipers, losing casualties at a considerable rate but never having the satisfaction of a body to add to their statistics or to give them evidence that they were having an effect, they grew increasingly angry. The only body they encountered in this ten-day period was that of an eighteen-year-old girl killed by a stray artillery shell; she had come from Saigon to spend the day with her parents, and she was cooking for them when their house was hit. (Some AID funds I had with me for such occasions went toward her funeral.)

At this point I took a very odd photograph of a soldier furiously bayoneting a canteen. His lieutenant had just asked for permission to burn an empty house that we had come to and were searching. Because it had this canteen in it and a picture of someone in a uniform that was not familiar to our troops, they assumed it was a Vietcong house and asked for permission to burn it. Permission was denied. There was much swearing and stamping around, and the soldiers took the offending canteen and punched it full of holes. Their desire to burn the house was in part the result of frustration and in part reflected the fact that they honestly didn't know what might work. They had the feeling that at least if they burned the houses, something would happen, their presence would have been marked. Perhaps the Vietcong would be discouraged from operating in that area, though there were many houses, thousands in the area, and unless you burned them all, the Vietcong would still have shelter.

A week later I was on a patrol that burned every house it came to. I assumed the orders had been changed. When I returned to the battalion headquarters, I asked the operations officer why he had changed orders, but he denied they had been changed. I

said, "You can see the smoke over there, can't you?" Pillars of smoke were rising. He replied, "Sure, I see that smoke. I called the company commander and asked him what the smoke was and he said they were burning the thatch off bunkers." I said, "They were burning every house they came to." He said he would do something about it. Within ten days this battalion had moved to a state of mind where lieutenants and captains were burning houses in violation of higher orders and lying about it.

The understanding of My Lai has been distorted in some accounts I have read by the suggestion that something like this probably happens all the time. This may be true, on a smaller scale, of the Koreans, but is not really quite true of our troops. My Lai was beyond the bounds of permissible behavior, and that is recognizable by virtually every soldier in Vietnam. They know it was wrong: No shots had been fired at the soldiers, no enemy troops were in the village, nobody was armed. The men who were at My Lai knew there were aspects out of the ordinary. That is why they tried to hide the event, talked about it to no one, discussed it very little even among themselves.

But if My Lai was still exceptional, it was separated only by a very fine distinction from incidents that occur regularly and that are regarded as permissible. A few shots from the village, a few uniforms found in a hut, a measure of resistance, would have removed any question about what happened at My Lai. We operate on the principle that any action is permissible against an "enemy"—even if he is a thirteen-year-old boy who is carrying a rifle—or even, when we come to strategic bombing, against anyone whose death might inconvenience a foe.

I am reminded of the occasion of my first sight of an alleged enemy in Vietnam. I was flying over the Plain of Reeds with a pilot who had a deserved reputation for daring and acuity; he could spot foxholes and bunkers and what-not from a great height, long before I would have seen them. At one point in the flight he told me over the intercom, "There is a VC down there." At his suggestion, I had brought a weapon with me, in case we were shot down. As soon as he spoke, I drew my pistol. He pulled out his M-16 rifle and went into a dive. I looked down and saw two men in black pajamas on the ground, apparently

running away from a boat nearby. I noticed that they were not armed, and mentioned this to the pilot. He said he assumed they had left their weapons in the boat. He came down again, firing the M-16 from the moving plane at fairly close range, fifty to one hundred feet. This maneuver we repeated for the next twelve or fourteen minutes. While we were coming down at the men, they would lie on the ground; when we moved off, they would get up and run. We would come down again, dive at them, and fire the rifle. Finally he pulled off, without hitting them, and I asked, "Does this happen often?" "All the time," he said. "Do you ever hit anyone in this way?" I asked, and he replied, "Not very often. It's hard to hit anybody from a plane with an M-16, but it scares the shit out of them. They will be pretty scared VC tonight."<sup>8</sup>

I asked him how he knew they were VC, and he answered, "There's nothing but VC in the Plain of Reeds." The Plain of Reeds was a free-fire zone, which meant we had condemned to death all those who might be found in it. I was later told that there were almost two thousand fishermen in the area who continued to fish during our attacks.

This game, this hunt, is something that goes on daily in almost every province of Vietnam. I am sure the Vietcong will come out of this war with great pride in the fact that they confronted American machines and survived. I came out of that plane ride with a strong sense of unease.

<sup>8</sup> As the plane dove and swung about in tight loops centered on the running men below, I relived the feelings of herding stray cattle with a pickup truck on the plains of Wyoming, twenty years earlier. Senator George McGovern brought back both memories, unnervingly, in a conversation we had during the spring of 1971. He told me that he had gone to the White House to raise doubts, as a former bombardier, about our bombing in North Vietnam, soon after it began. Apparently to demonstrate his own skepticism about military claims and values, President Johnson had assured him, irrelevantly, that he controlled all designations of targets himself. Then he said, "Anyway, there's lot of things the military could be doing that they don't even think about. For instance, I tell them how we hunt rabbits in Texas. We take a shotgun up in a little plane. . . . Now, we've got lots of little planes in Vietnam, and those VC's are just like rabbits; they crawl around. . . ."

## MURDER IN LAOS

In each of the twenty-five years of this war, Americans who wished to oppose our role or to tell the truth about it to their countrymen have had to contradict their President. This is the main reason, I have come to think, why opposition to the war has not become broad or durable enough to end it.

Each of the last five Presidents has lied to the public about our involvement in Indochina and where it was likely to go, and always in reassuring, credible ways that made active opposition to his policy seem unnecessary or hopeless. This Presidential deceit has gone through three phases. The first, which lasted over three Presidents from 1946 through 1964, emphasized the theme: "It's not our war; and we won't get in." The next phase, under Johnson, was: "We're winning." Then the current one: "The war is being ended." Each of these assurances has been plausible at the time, much more so than interpretations that contradicted it. Each was what most people wanted to believe, and did believe; each, coming from the President, served to allay concern, to defuse and deter resistance. None has ever been true. The war has always been ours; we have never been winning it; it has never been ending.

So it was, at the time of our invasion of Laos, when the following paper was written. So it is now. By the time this book is published,