

Reflections on Calley

Has the sense of guilt, the guilt of a society in which massacres and killing and body counts have become part of the normal mental equipment, become so strong that it can no longer be contained by the traditional, civilized defense mechanisms (individual defense mechanisms)? Does the sense of guilt turn into its opposite: into the proud, sado-masochistic identification with crime and the criminal?

By HERBERT MARCUSE

LA JOLLA, Calif.—The obscene haste with which a large part of the American people rushed to the support of a man convicted of multiple premeditated murder of men, women and children, the obscene pride with which they even identified themselves with him is one of those rare historical events which reveal a hidden truth.

Behind the television faces of the leaders, behind the tolerant politeness of the debates, behind the radiant happiness of the commercials appear the real people: men and women madly in love with death, violence and destruction.

For this massive rush was not the result of organization, management, machine politics—it was entirely spontaneous: an outburst of the unconscious, the soul. The silent majority has its hero: a convicted war criminal—convicted of killing at close range, smashing the head of a 2-year-old child; a killer in whose defense it was said that he did not feel that he was killing "humans," a killer who did not express regret for his deeds; he only obeyed orders and killed only "dinks" or "gooks" or "V.C." This majority has its hero—it has found its martyr, its Horst Wessel whose name was sung by hundreds of thousands of marching Nazis before they marched into war. "Lieutenant Calley's Battle Hymn Marches On," the record, sold 300,000 copies in three days.

How do Calley's worshippers justify their hero?

• "The act which Calley is accused of was committed in warfare and is thus subject to special consideration." Now Calley was tried and convicted, after long deliberation, by a military tribunal of his peers, of whom it may be assumed that they knew that he acted in war. In fact, he was tried and convicted under the international rules of warfare. The rules of his own army stipulate the duty of disobedience to illegal orders, (a disobedience which, as the hearings showed, was actually practiced by other American soldiers at My Lai).

• "What Calley did was widespread practice." Scores of men have come forth denouncing themselves as having done the same Calley did. Now the fact that one murderer was caught and brought to trial while others were not, does not absolve the one who was brought to trial. On the contrary, the others, having voluntarily confessed, should also be tried. The man who wrote on the windshield of his automobile: "I killed in V.N. Hang me too!" may well have meant it. People madly in love with death, including their own.

• "Everyone knows there are few genuine civilians in Vietnam today." A most revealing statement, which admits that the war is waged against a whole people: genocide.

• "Society is to blame." This is perhaps the only weighty argument. It moves on several levels:

(a) If society alone is to blame, nobody is to blame. For "society" is an abstract which cannot be brought to trial. It is true that this society (and must be) training its young citizens to kill. But this same society

operates under the rule of law, and recognizes rights and duties of the individual. Thus it presupposes individual responsibility, that is to say the ability of the "normal" individual to distinguish between criminal and noncriminal behavior (Calley was declared "normal").

(b) If the argument implies that all individual members of society are to blame, it is blatantly false and only serves to protect those who are responsible.

The reason for the "paroxysm in the nation's conscience" is "simply that Calley is all of us. He is every single citizen in our graceless land," said the Very Rev. Francis B. Sayre Jr. Blatantly false, and a great injustice to the Berrigans, to all those who have, at the risk of their liberty and even their life, openly and actively fought the genocidal war.

To be sure, in a "metaphysical" sense, everyone who partakes of this society is indeed guilty—but the Calley case is not a case study in metaphysics. Within the general framework (restrictive enough) of individual responsibility there are definite gradations which allow attribution of specific responsibility. If it is true that Calley's action was not isolated, but an all but daily occurrence in Vietnam (which would corroborate the findings of the Russell War Crime Tribunal and call for the prosecution of all cases recorded there), then responsibility would rest with the field commanders, and, in the last analysis, with the Supreme Commander of the United States armed forces. However, this would not eliminate the responsibility of the individual agents.

(c) Technical progress in developing the capacity to kill has led to "death in the abstract": killing that does not dirty your hands and clothes, that does not burden you with the agony of the victims—invisible death, dealt by remote controls. But technical perfection does not redeem the guilt of those who violate the rules of civilized warfare.

What does this all add up to? Perhaps Governor Maddox gave it away when he exclaimed at a rally in support of Calley: "Thank God for Lieutenant Calley and thank God for people like you." Blasphemy or religious madness? The convicted war criminal an avatar of Jesus, the Christ? "He has been crucified," shouted a woman, berating the court-martial in a German accent (one wonders?). "Calley killed 100 Communists single-handed. He should get a medal. He should be promoted to general." And a Reverend Lord (!) told a rally: "There was a crucifixion 2,000 years ago of a man named Jesus Christ. I don't think we need another crucifixion of a man named Rusty Calley."

Has the lieutenant taken our sins upon himself, will he redeem our sins? What sins? Could it be the wish to kill, kill without being punished? Has the lieutenant become the national model for a new Super Ego, less exacting than the traditional one, which still preserved a trace of thou shalt not kill?



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The old Super Ego still stuck to the memory of this prohibition even in war. The new Super Ego is up to date. It says: you can kill. No—you can waste and destroy. Calley never used the word "kill." He told a psychiatrist that the military avoided the word "kill" because it "caused a very negative emotional reaction among the men who had been taught the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.'" Instead, Lieutenant Calley employed the word "destroy" or the phrase "waste 'em." A pardon for Calley, who did not kill but only destroyed and wasted 'em would, according to some, be a "constructive step to restore the morale of our armed forces and the public at large."

The mad rush away from individual responsibility, the easy-going effort to vest guilt in anonymity is the desperate reaction against a guilt which threatens to become unbearable. Infantile regression: Billy cannot be punished because Maxie and Charlie and many others did the same thing; they do it daily, and they are not punished. People incapable of the simplest adult logic: if Maxie and Charlie did the same thing, they are equally guilty and Billy is not innocent.

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Has the hysteria also gripped the left, the peace movement which finds in the indictment of Calley an indictment of the war? A strange indictment indeed which regards the war criminal as a scapegoat—scapegoat for anonymous, for other scapegoats? Even Telford Taylor, who spoke so eloquently at the Nuremberg trials, thinks that the sentence may have been too harsh. And Dr. Benjamin Spock thinks that it is unjust to punish one man for the brutality of war.

Compassion. But has it ever occurred to all those understanding and compassionate liberals that clemency for Calley might indeed "strengthen the morale of the army" in killing with a good conscience? Has it ever occurred to them that compassion may be due the men, women and children who are the victims of this "morale"? Once again, we are confronted with that principle of diseased justice which was pronounced at Kent State and which expresses so neatly the perversion of the sense of guilt: "not the murderer but the murdered one is guilty."

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