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The New York Review Abroad

Fifty Years of

International Reportage

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Edited by Robert B. Silvers

With Prologues by Ian Buruma

The New York Review of Books

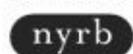
The New York Review Abroad

Fifty Years of International Reportage

EDITED BY
Robert B. Silvers

PROLOGUES BY
Ian Buruma

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

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A Note from the Editor

OVER THE LAST fifty years, many of the writers of these reports set to clarify some corner of history they thought was misunderstood, particularly the ways people were being treated and mistreated by governments and by their neighbors. In some cases they took considerable risks in order to observe and understand baffling violence. How much we owe them and how grateful we are to all of them.

—Robert B. Silvers

Report from Vietnam I. The Home Program

Mary McCarthy

Mary McCarthy traveled in Vietnam after Operation Rolling Thunder began in 1965, and before the Tet Offensive of 1968. Rolling Thunder (along with Operation Arc Light and Operation Commando Hunt) was a terrifying bombing assault on North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia that laid a toxic trail of devastation for several years. The US mission was to stop North Vietnamese support of the Vietcong, Communist guerrillas operating in the South. The mission failed.

In 1968, during the Tet, or Chinese New Year holiday, the Vietcong managed to attack dozens of cities in South Vietnam. Vietcong guerrillas even penetrated the US embassy in Saigon. Their mission was to spark a national uprising in the South. This, too, failed, at least in a military sense. Politically, it was the beginning of the end of the US war in Indochina.

In 1967, General Westmoreland still promised a victory against the Communists by the end of the year. The South was showered not just in weaponry, but fine American cars, refrigerators, rock-and-roll records, ice cream, hot dogs, Coca Cola, TV sets, garden sprinklers, and dollars. Meanwhile, the bombing rolled and thundered on and on and on.

—Ian Buruma

I CONFESS THAT when I went to Vietnam early in February I was looking for material damaging to the American interest and that I found it, though often by accident or in the process of being briefed by an official. Finding it is no job; the Americans do not dissemble what they are up to. They do not seem to feel the need, except through verbiage; e.g., napalm has become “Incinderjell,” which makes it sound like Jello. And defoliants are referred to as weed-killers—something you use in your driveway. The resort to euphemism denotes, no doubt, a guilty conscience or—the same thing nowadays—a twinge in the public-relations nerve. Yet what is most surprising to a new arrival in Saigon is the general unawareness, almost innocence, of how what “we” are doing could look to an outsider.

At the airport in Bangkok, the war greeted the Air France passengers in the form of a strong smell of gasoline, which made us sniff as we breakfasted at a long table, like a delegation, with the Air France flag planted in the middle. Outside, huge Esso tanks were visible behind lattice screens, where US bombers, factory-new, were aligned as if in a salesroom. On the field itself, a few yards from our Caravelle, US cargo planes were warming up for takeoff; US helicopters flitted about among the swallows, while US military trucks made deliveries. The openness of the thing was amazing (the fact that the US was using Thailand as a base for bombing North Vietnam was not officially admitted at the time); you would have thought they would try to camouflage it, I said to a German correspondent, so that the tourists would not see. As the Caravelle flew on toward Saigon, the tourists, bound for Tokyo or Manila, were able to watch a South Vietnamese hillside burning while consuming a “cool drink” served by the hostess. From above, the bright flames looked like a summer forest fire; you could not believe that bombers had just left. At Saigon, the airfield was dense with military aircraft; in the “civil” side, where we landed, a passenger jetliner was loading GI’s for Rest and Recreation in Hawaii. The American presence was overpowering, and, although one had read about it and was aware, as they say, that there was a war on, the sight and sound of that massed American might, casually disposed on foreign soil, like a corporal having his shoes shined, took one’s breath away. “They don’t try to hide it!” I kept saying to myself, as though the display of naked power and muscle ought to have worn some cover of modesty. But within a few hours I had lost this sense of incredulous surprise, and, seeing the word, “hide,” on a note-pad in my hotel room the next morning, I no longer knew what I had meant by it (as when a fragment of a dream, written down on waking, becomes indecipherable) or why I should have been pained, as an American, by this high degree of visibility.

* * *

As we drove into downtown Saigon, through a traffic jam, I had the fresh shock of being in what looked like an American city, a very shoddy West

Coast one, with a Chinatown and a slant-eyed Asiatic minority. Not only military vehicles of every description, but Chevrolets, Chryslers, Mercedes Benz, Volkswagens, Triumphs, and white men everywhere in sport shirts and drip-dry pants. The civilian takeover is even more astonishing than the military. To an American, Saigon today is less exotic than Florence or the Place de la Concorde. New office buildings of cheap modern design, teeming with teased, puffed secretaries and their Washington bosses, are surrounded by sandbags and guarded by MP's; new, jerry-built villas in pastel tones, to rent to Americans, are under construction or already beginning to peel and discolor. Even removing the sandbags and the machine guns and restoring the trees that have been chopped down to widen the road to the airport, the mind cannot excavate what Saigon must have been like "before." Now it resembles a gigantic PX. All those white men seem to be carrying brown paper shopping bags, full of whiskey and other goodies; rows of ballpoints gleam in the breast pockets of their checked shirts. In front of his villa, a leathery oldster, in visored cap, unpacks his golf clubs from his station wagon, while his cotton-haired wife, in a flowered print dress, glasses slung round her neck, stands by, watching, her hands on her hips. As in the American vacation-land, dress is strictly informal; nobody but an Asian wears a tie or a white shirt. The Vietnamese old men and boys, in wide, conical hats, pedaling their Cyclos (the modern version of the rickshaw) in and out of the traffic pattern, the Vietnamese women in high heels and filmy ao-dais of pink, lavender, heliotrope, the signs and Welcome banners in Vietnamese actually contribute to the Stateside impression by the addition of "local" color, as though you were back in a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco or in a Japanese suki-yaki place, under swaying paper lanterns, being served by women in kimonos while you sit on mats and play at using chopsticks.

Perhaps most of all Saigon is like a stewing Los Angeles, shading into Hollywood, Venice Beach, and Watts. The native stall markets are still in business, along Le Loi and Nguyen Hue Streets, but the merchandise, is, for Asia, exotic. There is hardly anything native to buy, except flowers and edibles and fire-crackers at Tet time and—oh yes—souvenir dolls. Street vendors and children are offering trays of American cigarettes and racks on racks of Johnnie Walker, Haig & Haig, Black & White (which are either black market, stolen from the PX, or spurious, depending on the price); billboards outside car agencies advertise Triumphs, Thunderbirds, MG's, Corvettes, "For Delivery here or Stateside, Payment on Easy Terms"; non-whites, the less affluent ones, are mounted on Hondas and Lambrettas. There are photocopying services, film-developing services, Western tailoring and dry-cleaning services, radio and TV repair shops, air-conditioners, Olivetti typewriters, comic books, *Time*, *Life*, and *Newsweek*, airmail paper—you name it, they have it. Toys for Vietnamese children (there are practically no American kids in Vietnam) include US-style jackknives, pistols, and simulated-leather belts, with holsters—I did not see any cowboy suits or Indian war-feathers. Pharmaceuticals are booming, and a huge billboard all along the top of a

building in the central marketplace shows, for some reason, a smiling Negro with very white teeth advertising a toothpaste called Hynos.

* * *

If Saigon by day is like a PX, at night, with flares overhead, it is like a World's Fair or Exposition in some hick American city. There are Chinese restaurants, innumerable French restaurants (not surprising), but also La Dolce Vita, Le Guillaume Tell, the Paprika (a Spanish restaurant on a rooftop, serving paella and sangría). The national cuisine no American wants to sample is the Vietnamese. In February, a German circus was in town. "French" wine is made in Cholon, the local Chinatown. In the nightclubs, if it were not for the bar girls, you would think you were on a cruise ship: a *chanteuse* from Singapore sings old French, Italian, and American favorites into the microphone; an Italian magician palms the watch of a middleaged Vietnamese customer; the band strikes up "Happy Birthday to You," as a cake is brought in. The "vice" in Saigon—at least what I was able to observe of it—has a pepless *Playboy* flavor.

As for virtue, I went to church one Sunday in the Cathedral (a medley of Gothic, Romanesque, and vaguely Moorish) on John F. Kennedy Square, hoping to hear the mass in Vietnamese. Instead, an Irish-American priest preached a sermon on the hemline to a large male white congregation of soldiers, construction-workers, newspaper correspondents; in the pews were also some female secretaries from the Embassy and other US agencies and a quotient of middle-class Vietnamese of both sexes. The married men present, he began, did not have to be told that the yearly rise or fall in skirt lengths was a "traumatic experience" for a woman, and he likened the contemporary style centers—New York, Chicago, San Francisco—to the ancient "style centers" of the Church—Rome, Antioch, Jerusalem. His point seemed to be that the various rites of the Church (Latin, Coptic, Armenian, Maronite—he went into it very thoroughly) were only *modes* of worship. What the Sunday-dressed Vietnamese, whose hemline remains undisturbed by changes emanating from the "style centers" and who were hearing the Latin mass in American, were able to make of the sermon, it was impossible to tell. Just as it was impossible to tell what some very small Vietnamese children I saw in a home for war orphans were getting out of an American adult TV program they were watching at bedtime, the littlest ones mother-naked. Maybe TV too is catholic, and the words do not matter.

Saigon has a smog problem, like New York and Los Angeles, a municipal garbage problem, a traffic problem, power failures, inflation, juvenile delinquency. In short, it meets most of the criteria of a modern Western city. The young soldiers do not like Saigon and its clip joints and high prices. Everybody is trying to sell them something or buy something from them. Six-year-old boys, cute as pins, are plucking at them: "You come see my sister. She Number One fuck." To help the GI resist the temptations of merchants—and soak up his buying power—diamonds and minks are offered him in the

PX, tax free. (There were no minks the day I went there, but I did see a case of diamond rings, the prices ranging up to 900-odd dollars.) Unfortunately, the PX presents its own temptation—that of resale. The GI is gypped by taxidrivers and warned against Cyclo men, (probably VC) and he may wind up in a Vietnamese jail, like some of his buddies, for doing what everybody else does—illegal currency transactions. If he walks in the center after nightfall, he has to pick his way among whole families who are cooking their unsanitary meal or sleeping, right on the street, in the filth. When he rides in from the airport, he has to cross a bend of the river, bordered by shanties, that he has named, with rich American humor, Cholera Creek.

* * *

To the servicemen, Saigon stinks. They would rather be in base camp, which is clean. And the JUSPAO press officer has a rote speech for arriving correspondents: "Get out of Saigon. That's my advice to you. Go out into the field." As though the air were purer there, where the fighting is.

That is true in a way. The Americanization process smells better out there, to Americans, even when perfumed by napalm. Out there, too, there is an enemy a man can respect. For many of the soldiers in the field and especially the younger officers, the Viet Cong is the only Vietnamese worthy of notice. "If we only had them fighting on our side, instead of the goddamned Arvin [Army of the Vietnamese Republic], we'd *win* this war" is a sentiment the newspapermen like to quote. I never heard it said in those words, but I found that you could judge an American by his attitude toward the Viet Cong. If he called them "Charlie" (cf. John Steinbeck), he was either an infatuated civilian, a low-grade primitive in uniform, or a fatuous military mouthpiece. Decent soldiers and officers called them "the VC." The same code of honor applied in South Vietnamese circles; with the Vietnamese, who are ironic, it was almost a pet name for the enemy. Most of the American military will praise the fighting qualities of the VC, and the more intellectual (who are not necessarily the best) praise them for their "motivation." Americans have become very incurious, but the Viet Cong has awakened the curiosity of the men who are fighting them. From within the perimeter of the camp, behind the barbed wire and the sandbags, they study their habits, half-amused, half-admiring; a gingerly relationship is established with the unseen enemy, who is probably carefully fashioning a booby trap a few hundred yards away. This relation does not seem to extend to the North Vietnamese troops, but in that case contact is rarer. The military are justly nervous of the VC, but unless they have been wounded out on a patrol or have had the next man killed by a mine or a mortar, they do not show hatred or picture the black-pajama saboteur as a "monster," a word heard in Saigon offices.

In the field, moreover, the war is not questioned: it is just a fact. The job has to be finished—that is the attitude. In Saigon, the idea that the war can ever be finished appears fantastic: the Americans will be there forever, one feels; if they go, the economy will collapse. What postwar aid program could

be conceived—or passed by Congress—that would keep the air in the balloon? And if the Americans go, the middle-class Saigonese think, the Viet Cong will surely come back, in two years, five years, ten, as they come back to a “pacified” hamlet at Tet time, to leave, as it were, a calling card, a reminder—we are still here. But, at the same time, in Saigon the worth of the American presence, that is, of the war, seems very dubious, since the actual results, in uglification, moral and physical, are evident to all. The American soldier, bumping along in a jeep or a military truck, resents seeing all those Asiatics at the wheels of new Cadillacs. He knows about corruption, often firsthand, having contributed his bit to it, graft, theft of AID and military supplies from the port. He thinks it is disgusting that the local employees steal from the PX and then stage a strike when the manageress makes them line up to be searched on leaving the building. And he has heard that these “apes,” as some men call them, are salting away the profits in Switzerland or in France, where De Gaulle, who is pro-VC, has just run the army out.

Of course, all wars have had their profiteers, but it has not usually been so manifest, so inescapable. The absence of the austerity that normally accompanies war, of civilian sacrifices, rationing, shortages, blackouts (compare wartime London or even wartime New York, twenty-five years ago) makes this war seem singularly immoral and unheroic to those who are likely to die in it—for what? So that the Saigonese and other civilians can live high off the hog? The fact that the soldier or officer is living pretty high off the hog himself does not reconcile him to the glut of Saigon; rather the contrary. Furthermore, an atmosphere of sacrifice is heady; that—and danger—is what used to make wartime capitals gay. Saigon is not gay. The peculiar thing is that with all those young soldiers wandering about, all those young journalists news-chasing, Saigon seems so middle-aged—inert, listless, bored. That, I suppose, is because everyone’s principal interest there is money, the only currency that is circulating, like the stale air moved by ceiling-fans and air-conditioners in hotels and offices.

* * *

The war, they say, is not going to be won in Saigon, nor on the battlefield, but in the villages and hamlets. This idea, by now trite (it was first discovered in Diem’s time and has been rebaptized under a number of names—New Life Hamlets, Rural Construction, Counter Insurgency, Nation-Building, Revolutionary Development, the Hearts and Minds Program), is the main source of inspiration for the various teams of missionaries, military and civilian, who think they are engaged in a crusade. Not just a crusade against Communism, but something *positive*. Back in the Fifties and early Sixties, the war was presented as an investment: the taxpayer was persuaded that if he stopped Communism *now* in Vietnam, he would not have to keep stopping it in Thailand, Burma, etc. That was the domino theory, which our leading statesmen today, quite comically, are busy repudiating before Congressional committees—suddenly nobody will admit to ever having been an advocate of

it. The notion of a costly investment that will save money in the end had a natural appeal to a nation of homeowners, but now the assertion of an American "interest" in Vietnam has begun to look too speculative as the stake increases ("When is it going to pay off?") and also too squalid as the war daily becomes more savage and destructive. Hence the "other" war, proclaimed by Johnson in Honolulu, which is simultaneously pictured as a strategy for winning War Number One and as a top priority in itself. Indeed, in Vietnam, there are moments when the "other" war seems to be viewed as the sole reason for the American presence, and it is certainly more congenial to American officials, brimming with public spirit, than the war they are launching from the skies. Americans do not like to be negative, and the "other" war is constructive.

To see it, of course, you have to get out of Saigon, but, before you go, you will have to be briefed, in one of those new office buildings, on what you are going to see. In the field, you will be briefed again, by a military man, in a district or province headquarters, and frequently all you will see of New Life Hamlets, Constructed Hamlets, Consolidated Hamlets, are the charts and graphs and maps and symbols that some ardent colonel or brisk bureaucrat is demonstrating to you with a pointer, and the mimeographed hand-out, full of statistics, that you take away with you, together with a supplement on Viet Cong Terror. On paper and in chart form, it all sounds commendable, especially if you are able to ignore the sounds of bombing from B-52s that are shaking the windows and making the charts rattle. The briefing official is enthusiastic, as he points out the progress that has been made, when, for example, the activities organized under AID were reorganized under OCO (Office of Civilian Operations). You stare at the chart on the office wall in which to you there is no semblance of logic or sequence ("Why," you wonder, "should Youth Affairs be grouped under Urban Development?"), and the official rubs his hands with pleasure: "First we organized it *vertically*. Now we've organized *horizontally!*" Out in the field, you learn from some disgruntled officer that the AID representatives, who are perhaps now OCO representatives without knowing it, have not been paid for six months.

In a Saigon "backgrounder," you are told about public health measures undertaken by Free World Forces. Again a glowing progress report. In 1965, there were 180 medical people from the "Free World" in Vietnam treating patients; in 1966, there were 700—quite a little escalation, almost four times as many. The troop commitment, of course, not mentioned by the briefer, jumped from 60,000 to 400,000—more than six-and-a-half times as many. That the multiplication of troops implied an obvious escalation in the number of civilian patients requiring treatment is not mentioned either. Under questioning, the official, slightly irritated, estimates that the civilian casualties comprise between 7 1/2 and 15 per cent of the surgical patients treated in hospitals. He had "not been interested particularly, until all the furore," in what percentage of the patients were war casualties. And naturally he was not interested in what percentage of civilian casualties never reached a hospital at

all.

* * *

But the treatment of war victims, it turned out, was not one of the medical “bull’s eyes” aimed at in the “other” war. Rather a peacetime-type program, “beefing up” the medical school, improvement of hospital facilities, donation of drugs and antibiotics (which, as I learned from a field worker, are in turn sold by the local nurses to the patients for whom they have been prescribed), the control of epidemic diseases, such as plague and cholera, education of the population in good health procedures. American and allied workers, you hear, are teaching the Vietnamese in the government villages to boil their water, and the children are learning dental hygiene. Toothbrushes are distributed, and the children are shown how to use them. If the children get the habit, the parents will copy them, a former social worker explains, projecting from experience with first-generation immigrants back home. There is a campaign on to vaccinate and immunize as much of the population as can be got to cooperate; easy subjects are refugees and forced evacuees, who can be lined up for shots while going through the screening process and being issued an identity card—a political health certificate.

All this is not simply on paper. In the field, you are actually able to see medical teams at work, setting up temporary dispensaries under the trees in the hamlets for the weekly or bi-weekly “sick call”—distributing medicines, tapping, listening, sterilizing, bandaging; the most common diagnosis is suspected tuberculosis. In Tay Ninh Province, I watched a Philcag (Filipino) medical team at work in a Buddhist hamlet. One doctor was examining a very thin old man, who was stripped to the waist; probably tubercular, the doctor told me, writing something on a card which he gave to the old man. “What happens next?” I wanted to know. Well, the old man would go to the province hospital for an X-ray (that was the purpose of the card), and if the diagnosis was positive, then treatment should follow. I was impressed. But (as I later learned at a briefing) there are only sixty civilian hospitals in South Vietnam—for nearly 16 million people—so that the old man’s total benefit, most likely, from the open-air consultation was to have learned, gratis, that he might be tubercular.

Across the road, some dentist’s chairs were set up, and teeth were being pulled, very efficiently, from women and children of all ages. I asked about the toothbrushes I had heard about in Saigon. The Filipino major laughed. “Yes, we have distributed them. They use them as toys.” Then he reached into his pocket—he was a kindly young man with children of his own—and took out some money for all the children who had gathered round to buy popsicles (the local equivalent) from the popsicle man. Later I watched the Filipino general, a very handsome tall man with a cropped head, resembling Yul Brynner, distribute Tet gifts and candy to children in a Cao Dai orphanage and be photographed with his arm around a little blind girl. A few hours earlier, he had posed distributing food in a Catholic hamlet—“Free World”

surplus items, such as canned cooked beets. The photography, I was told, would help sell the Philcag operation to the Assembly in Manila, where some leftist elements were trying to block funds for it. Actually, I could not see that the general was doing any harm—unless not doing enough is harm, in which case we are all guilty—and he was more efficient than other Civic Action leaders. His troops had just chopped down a large section of jungle (we proceeded through it in convoy, wearing bullet-proof vests and bristling with rifles and machine-guns, because of the VC), which was going to be turned into a New Life Hamlet for resettling refugees. They had also built a school, which we stopped to inspect, finding, to the general's surprise, that it had been taken over by the local district chief for his office headquarters.

* * *

The Filipino team, possibly because they were Asians, seemed to be on quite good terms with the population. Elsewhere—at Go Cong, in the delta—I saw mistrustful patients and heard stories of rivalry between the Vietnamese doctor, a gynecologist, and the Spanish and American medical teams; my companion and I were told that we were the first “outsiders,” including the resident doctors, to be allowed by the Vietnamese into *his* wing—the maternity, which was far the cleanest and most modern in the hospital and contained one patient. Similar jealousies existed of the German medical staff at Hue. In the rather squalid surgical wing of the Go Pong hospital, there were two badly burned children. Were they war casualties, I asked the official who was showing us through. Yes, he conceded, as a matter of fact they were. How many of the patients were war-wounded, I wanted to know. “About four” of the children, he reckoned. And one old man, he added, after reflection.

The Filipinos were fairly dispassionate about their role in pacification; this may have been because they had no troops fighting in the war (those leftist elements in the Assembly!) and therefore did not have to act like saviors of the Vietnamese people. The Americans, on the contrary, are zealots, above all the blueprinters in the Saigon offices, although occasionally in the field, too, you meet a true believer—a sandy, crew-cut, keen-eyed army colonel who talks to you about “the nuts and bolts” of the program, which, he is glad to say, is finally getting the “grass roots” support it needs. It is impossible to find out from such a man what he is doing, concretely; an aide steps forward to state, “We sterilize the area prior to the insertion of the RD teams,” whose task, says the colonel, is to find out “the aspirations of the people.” He cannot tell you whether there has been any land reform in his area—that is a strictly Vietnamese pigeon—in fact he has no idea of *how* the land in the area is owned. He is strong on coordination: all his Vietnamese counterparts, the colonel who “wears two hats” as province chief, the mayor, a deposed general are all “very fine sound men,” and the Marine general in the area is “one of the finest men and officers” he has ever met. For another army zealot every Vietnamese officer he deals with is “an outstanding individual.”

These springy, zesty, burning-eyed warriors, military and civilian, engaged

in AID or Combined Action (essentially pacification) stir faraway memories of American college presidents of the fund-raising type; their diction is peppery with oxymoron (“When peace breaks out,” “Then the commodities started to hit the beach”), like a college president’s address to an alumni gathering. They see themselves in fact as educators, spreading the American way of life, a new *propaganda fide*. When I asked an OCO man in Saigon what his groups actually did in a Vietnamese village to prepare—his word—the people for elections, he answered curtly, “We teach them Civics 101.”

* * *

The American taxpayer who thinks that aid means help has missed the idea. Aid is, first of all, to achieve economic stability within the present system, i.e., political stability for the present ruling groups. Loans are extended, under the counterpart fund arrangement, to finance Vietnamese imports of American capital equipment (thus aiding, with the other hand, American industry). Second, aid is *education*. Distribution of canned goods (instill new food habits), distribution of seeds, fertilizer, chewing gum and candy (the Vietnamese complain that the GI’s fire candy at their children, like a spray of bullets), lessons in sanitation, hog-raising, and crop rotation. The program is designed, not just to make Americans popular but to shake up the Vietnamese, as in some “stimulating” freshman course where the student learns to question the “prejudices” implanted in him by his parents. “We’re trying to wean them away from the old barter economy and show them a market economy. Then they’ll really go.”

“We’re teaching them free enterprise,” explains a breathless JUSPAO official in the grim town of Phu Cuong. He is speaking of the “refugees” from the Iron Triangle, who were forcibly cleared out of their hamlets, which were then burned and leveled, during Operation Cedar Falls (“Clear and Destroy”). They had just been transferred into a camp, hastily constructed by the ARVN with tin roofs painted red and white, to make the form, as seen from the air, of a giant Red Cross—1,651 women, 3,754 children, 582 men, mostly old, who had been kindly allowed to bring some of their furniture and pots and pans and their pigs and chickens and sacks of their hoarded rice; their cattle had been transported for them, on barges, and were now sickening on a dry, stubby, sandy plain. “We’ve got a captive audience!” the official continued excitedly. “This is our big chance!”

To teach them free enterprise and, presumably, when they were “ready” for it, Civics 101; for the present, the government had to consider them “hostile civilians.” These wives and children and grandfathers of men thought to be at large with the Viet Cong had been rice farmers only a few weeks before. Now they were going to have to pitch in and learn to be vegetable farmers; the area selected for their eventual resettlement was not suitable for rice-growing, unfortunately. Opportunity was beckoning for these poor peasants, thanks to the uprooting process they had just undergone. They would have the chance to buy and build their own homes on a pattern and of materials already

picked out for them; the government was allowing them 1700 piasters toward the purchase price. To get a new house free, even though just in the abstract, would be unfair to them as human beings: investing their own labor and their own money would make them feel that the house was really *theirs*.

In the camp, a schoolroom had been set up for their children. Interviews with the parents revealed that more than anything else they wanted education for their children; they had not had a school for five years. I remarked that this seemed queer, since Communists were usually strong on education. The official insisted. "Not for five years." But in fact another American, a young one, who had actually been working in the camp, told me that strangely enough the small children there knew their multiplication tables and possibly their primer—he could not account for this. And in one of the razed villages, he related, the Americans had found, from captured exercise books, that someone had been teaching the past participle in English, using Latin models—defectors spoke of a high school teacher, a Ph.D. from Hanoi.

Perhaps the parents, in the interviews, told the Americans what they thought they wanted to hear. All over Vietnam, wherever peace has broken out, if only in the form of a respite, Marine and army officers are proud to show the schoolhouses their men are building or rebuilding for the hamlets they are patrolling, rifle on shoulder. At Rach Kien, in the delta (a Pentagon pilot-project of a few months ago), I saw the little schoolhouse Steinbeck wrote about, back in January, and the blue school desks he had seen the soldiers painting. They were still sitting outside, in the sun; the school was not yet rebuilt more than a month later—they were waiting for materials. In this hamlet, everything seemed to have halted, as in "The Sleeping Beauty," the enchanted day Steinbeck left; nothing had advanced. Indeed, the picture he sketched, of a ghost town coming back to civic life, made the officers who had entertained him smile—"He used his imagination." In other hamlets, I saw schoolhouses actually finished and one in operation. "The school is dirty," the colonel in charge barked at the Revolutionary Development director—a case of American tactlessness, though he was right. A young Vietnamese social worker said sadly that he wished the Americans would stop building schools. "They don't realize—we have no teachers for them."

Yet the little cream schoolhouse is essential to the American dream of what we are doing in Vietnam, and it is essential for the soldiers to believe that in *Viet Cong* hamlets no schooling is permitted. In Rach Kien I again expressed doubts, as a captain, with a professionally shocked face, pointed out the evidence that the school had been used as "Charlie's" headquarters. "So you really think that the children here got no lessons, *nothing*, under the VC?" "Oh, indoctrination courses!" he answered with a savvy wave of his pipe. In other words, VC Civics 101.

* * *

If you ask a junior officer what he thinks our war aims are in Vietnam, he usually replies without hesitation: "To punish aggression." It is unkind to try

to draw him into a discussion of what constitutes aggression and what is defense (the Bay of Pigs, Santo Domingo, Goa?), for he really has no further ideas on the subject. He has been indoctrinated, just as much as the North Vietnamese POW, who tells the interrogation team he is fighting to “liberate the native soil from the American aggressors”—maybe more. Only the young American does not know it; he probably imagines that he is *thinking* when he produces that formula. And yet he does believe in something profoundly, though he may not be able to find the words for it: free enterprise. A parcel that to the American mind wraps up for delivery hospitals, sanitation, roads, harbors, schools, air travel, Jack Daniels, convertibles, Stim-U-Dents. That is the C-ration that keeps him going. The American troops are not exactly conscious of bombing, shelling, and defoliating to defend free enterprise (which they cannot imagine as being under serious attack), but they plan to come out of the war with their values intact. Which means that they must spread them, until everyone is convinced, by demonstration, that the American way is better, just as American seed-strains are better and American pigs are better. Their conviction is sometimes baldly stated. North of Da Nang, at a Marine base, there is an ice-cream plant on which is printed in large official letters the words: “ICE-CREAM PLANT: ARVN MORALE BUILDER.” Or it may wear a humanitarian disguise, e.g., OPERATION CONCERN, in which a proud little town in Kansas airlifted 110 pregnant sows to a humble little town in Vietnam.

Occasionally the profit motive is undisguised. Flying to Hue in a big C-130, I heard the pilot and the co-pilot discussing their personal war aim, which was to make a killing, as soon as the war was over, in Vietnamese real estate. From the air, while they kept an eye out for VC, they had surveyed the possibilities and had decided on Nha Trang—“beautiful sand beaches”—better than Cam Ranh Bay—a “desert.” They disagreed as to the kind of development that would make the most money: the pilot wanted to build a high-class hotel and villas, while the co-pilot thought that the future lay with low-cost housing. I found this conversation hallucinating, but the next day, in Hue, I met a Marine colonel who had returned to the service after retirement; having fought the Japanese, he had made his killing as a “developer” in Okinawa and invested the profits in a frozen-shrimp import business (from Japan) supplying restaurants in San Diego. War, a cheap form of mass tourism, opens the mind to business opportunities.

All these developers were Californians. In fact, the majority of the Americans I met in the field in Vietnam were WASPS from Southern California; most of the rest were from the rural South. In nearly a month I met *one* Jewish boy in the services (a nice young naval officer from Pittsburgh), two Boston Irish, and a captain from Connecticut. Given the demographic shift toward the Pacific in the United States, this Californian ascendancy gave me the peculiar feeling that I was seeing the future of our country as if on a movie screen. Nobody has dared make a war movie about Vietnam, but the prevailing unreality, as experienced in base camps and headquarters, is eerily

like a movie, a contest between good and evil, which is heading toward a happy ending, when men with names like “Colonel Culpepper,” “Colonel Derryberry,” “Captain Stanhope,” will vanquish Victor Charlie. The state that has a movie actor for governor and a movie actor for US senator seemed to be running the show.

* * *

No doubt the very extensive press and television coverage of the war has made the participants very conscious of “exposure,” that is, of roleplaying. Aside from the usual networks, Italian television, Mexican television, the BBC, CBC were all filming the “other” war during the month of February, and the former Italian Chief of Staff, General Liuzzi, was covering it as a commentator for the *Corriere della Sera*. The effect of all this attention on the generals, colonels, and lesser officers was to put a premium on “sincerity.”

Nobody likes to be a villain, least of all a WASP officer, who feels he is playing the heavy in Vietnam through some awful mistake in type-casting. He *knows* he is good at heart, because everything in his home environment—his TV set, his paper, his Frigidaire, the President of the United States—has promised him that, whatever shortcomings he may have as an individual, collectively he is good. The “other” war is giving him the chance to clear up the momentary misunderstanding created by those bombs, which, through no fault of his, are happening to hit civilians. He has *warned* them to get away, dropped leaflets saying he was coming and urging “Charlie” to defect, to join the other side; lately, in pacified areas, he has even taken the precaution of having his targets cleared by the village chief before shelling or bombing, so that now the press officer giving the daily briefing is able to reel out: “OPERATION BLOCKHOUSE. 29 civilians reported wounded today. Two are in ‘poor’ condition. Target had been approved by the district chief.” Small thanks he gets, our military hero, for that scrupulous restraint. But in the work of pacification, his real self comes out, clear and true. Digging wells for the natives (too bad if the water comes up brackish), repairing roads (“Just a jungle trail before we came,” says the captain, though his colonel, in another part of the forest, has just been saying that the engineers had uncovered a fine stone roadbed built eighty years ago by the French), building a house for the widow of a Viet Cong (so far unreconciled; it takes time).

American officers in the field can become very sentimental when they think of the good they are doing and the hard row they have to hoe with the natives, who have been brainwashed by the Viet Cong. A Marine general in charge of logistics in I-Corps district was deeply moved when he spoke of his Marines: moving in to help rebuild some refugee housing with scrap lumber and sheet tin (the normal materials were cardboard boxes and flattened beer cans); working in their off-hours to build desks for a school; giving their Christmas money for a new high school; planning a new marketplace. The Marine Corps had donated a children’s hospital, and in that hospital, up the road, was a little girl who had been wounded during a Marine assault. “We’re