

worldview

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PITY THE POOR READER

If anyone does not have all the information he needs to make a judgment about the war in Vietnam, it's because he hasn't taken the time to attend to what's available. This, at least, is a common opinion. There is, after all, the mounting pile of books, articles and newspaper stories, and there are continuing progress reports, briefings, lectures and T.V. "on-the-scene" accounts. The difficulty, it would seem, is not the lack of sound information but of a proper perspective from which to view it.

This may be the general opinion, but it is not the opinion of General S. L. A. Marshall. As he makes clear in the following pages, where he is quoted at length, he believes that those who report the fighting emphasize the sensational and trivial at the expense of the significant. The difference is crucial, for if the reporting on Vietnam were accurate, he concludes, "a national will might polarize around this solid, shining and reassuring performance." Marshall is a man to be listened to. As a military historian with numerous articles and almost a dozen books to his credit, he has gained a high reputation for both the substance and the style of his own accounts.

But it is immediately obvious that not all who listen will be persuaded. Certainly those under attack, the reporters themselves, will find a way to respond. And those who find morally intolerable the bombing of villages, the poisoning of crops and the torturing of prisoners will not readily change their judgment of these things even if they are convinced that demonstrations and accidents are overemphasized. Nor will they readily be persuaded that the number of civilians killed is a relatively insignificant factor simply because the incidence of civilians killed was higher in other wars.

Still there are many people whose attitudes are uncertain and fluid, people who would find Marshall's argument compelling and who might well form part of a national will that would polarize around a sound military performance if . . . if . . . If the only uncertain quantity was the performance of the American soldier. For even after reading a compilation of those unhappy incidents, a compilation which

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JAMES DOUGLASS

PAMPHILUS

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Marshall mentions as a possibility but which does exist in fact—e.g., “American Atrocities in Vietnam” by Eric Norden appeared in the February 1966 issue of *Liberation*—many citizens would respond positively to positive military feats.

Unfortunately the best reporting of the best military operations would be only a small part of a situation that is now clouded by wide-spread distrust and skepticism. Statements made by official spokesmen, from the President on down, have been shown to be deceptive, unfounded or sometimes simply untrue. This is a harsh statement that citizens do not wish to make consistently against any administration. Most citizens have learned to discount both the partisan charge against an administration and an occasional lapse on the part of an administration. The present accusation involves neither of these. It involves a basic, corrosive distrust that eats away at the very fabric of a democratic society, depending as it does upon a degree of mutual confidence

between citizens and their elected representatives and leaders.

This distrust is now an almost inevitable ingredient in the relations between the Administration and the press. This means that those who gain most of their knowledge about political affairs from the press—and this includes, in this instance, not only U.S. citizens, but allies and unfriendly nations—read with a more than wary eye. Having a natural desire to trust official statements, but reading accounts that question or disprove them, the reader has divided allegiance. Some years ago W. B. Yeats suggested a possible reaction to this situation:

The statesman is an easy man,
He tells his lies by rote;
A journalist makes up his lies
And takes you by the throat;
So stay at home and drink your beer
And let the neighbors vote.

J. F.

in the magazines

Military historian S. L. A. Marshall, lately returned from several months in Vietnam, reports on “Press Failure in Vietnam” in the October 10 issue of *The New Leader*. He relates that “the overwhelming majority of correspondents” in Saigon “do not get to the front; and in that regard at least, the American press continues to be derelict in its main responsibility. The story of the war is not being told in its daily columns; there we find only tangents and side-bars.

“To put it another way, there is a cynical faddishness to the war reporting out of Vietnam that contrasts diametrically with every prior performance, including Korea and Lebanon. Today’s average correspondent prefers a piece that will make people on the home front squirm and agonize. Never before, in any war, has there been so much concentration on the off-beat yarn to the exclusion of a balanced accounting of how operations are being conducted. . . .

“The off-beat yarns fall into several familiar patterns, none of which promises a beat any longer, though collectively they are beaten to death. Any demonstration or riot, and especially a Buddhist demonstration-riot, is sure-fire copy. So is the terrorist incident within the city even though it merely

scuttles a worn-out barge and may have been an act of private vengeance.

“Then there is the thing-that-went-wrong story. Hapless civilians have been killed in every war fought by the United States, but only in Vietnam, where they are far less common than in France during the invasion or in Korea, do they command first-page treatment every time.

“The same goes for the story about soldiers dying from their own air bombs, mortar fire or artillery shells. Though it was never the case in previous wars when such incidents were more frequent and with less reason, this, too, is now a dependable bell-ringer. If one correspondent could compile a large enough file of writings about these accidents, he might cop the Pulitzer Prize for war reporting.

“The war is being covered primarily for all bleeding hearts and for Senator Fulbright, who casts about for a way to stop it by frightening and shocking the citizenry. It is not being reported for simple souls who would like to know how it is being fought and how good are the chances that the South Vietnamese and American forces and their allies can bring off a military victory.”

General Marshall notes, in conclusion, that he has