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Vietnam - and the White Refrigerator

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Note

The short article below — “Vietnam and the White Refrigerator” — was written immediately after the Tet offensive, weeks before Johnson’s speech of March 31st, the assassination of Martin Luther King, and the sweeping black insurrections that followed. The article is a slap at the hypocrisy of white middle-class America. In this respect, absolutely nothing has happened to question its relevance. The Johnson speech was a shrewd maneuver, clearly intended to arrest the headlong plunge of the United States into an acute social crisis. Whether it leads to negotiations or to a resumption of the war on a still higher scale of military operations alters nothing in the article. White middle-class America for the most part exhibited a shameless indifference to the suffering inflicted on the Vietnamese people by American arms and a disgusting preoccupation with its own media-manufactured appetites, tastes, and concerns. Only the prospects of extended conscription, higher taxes, a call-up of the reserves, and the obvious futility of trying to achieve the subjugation of Vietnam by military means began to shatter this mindless indifference and evoke serious opposition from the great backwash of suburbia.

The assassination of Martin Luther King revealed this hypocrisy to its very core. No sooner was King murdered when the whole liberal Establishment moved in on the man’s death, co-opting in Hollywood style the eulogies, mourning, and funeral solemnities. It is an act of supreme hypocrisy that while Johnson and Humphrey were mouthing eulogies to King as a man of nonviolence, bombs were still dropping on Vietnam. It is an act of supreme hypocrisy that while King’s body was being flown to Atlanta, the strike of the predominantly black garbage collectors that brought him to Memphis in the first place was still dragging on, all but forgotten by his liberal “mourners.” It is an act of supreme hypocrisy that while Rockefeller, McCarthy, Kennedy, and Lindsay were following King’s body to a segregated cemetery, the body of Bobby Hutton, age 17, a Black Panther militant, was lying on Oakland slab, the victim of racist cops who shot him down when he emerged with raised hands from a beleaguered building. It is an act of supreme hypocrisy that while the liberal Establishment croaked the refrains of “We Shall Overcome” around King’s grave, H. Rapp Brown starved by a protest fast, was still in prison, the victim of outrageously high bail.

The article below is only too relevant. With a few modifications, a few changes in words, the reader has only to substitute “Afro-American” for “Vietnamese” in the lines that follow in order to retain a clear focus on recent events in Vietnam and the United State.

Tell me, white, fat-cat, middle-class America: how do you live with yourself? How can you endure yourself? How can you stomach yourself?

Right now, in Vietnam, what is at issue is no longer a social or political question, but a biological question — a question of whether the Vietnamese people will physically survive the attempt of America to “liberate” them. In this horrifying apocalypse, where all the horsemen are white, beautiful, gentle Asian people are being systematically butchered and their land reduced to a desolate cemetery. While white middle-class America wakes up to its favourite crispy breakfast cereal and its inane morning paper, while it sends its plump well-groomed kids off to gleaming suburban schools, countless Vietnamese families awoken to a diet of rifle and mortar fire, to high-explosive aerial bombs, to napalm. In the villages of Vietnam, thousands of children are too mutilated, too maimed to walk — much less to attend class for “improving their minds.”

While white middle-class America lathers itself with perfumed shaving cream, gargles with its choice mouthwash, smugly pats its plump face with brand-name lotions and deodorizes itself, millions of Vietnamese — their destroyed cities and villages lacking food, potable water, and the most minimal sanitary facilities — are faced with massive epidemics of typhoid fever, cholera, and bubonic plague.

The people of Vietnam do not have to diet on low-calorie biscuits and yogurt to stay thin; they live daily on the edge of starvation. They are not preoccupied with the length and styling of their garments; for them it is a question of finding bandages to cover the gangrenous ooze of wounds inflicted by American napalm and shell fragments. They are not shopping for face cream to pamper flabby, middle-aged skins; they desperately need antibiotic ointments to coat their festering, blackened, incinerated flesh. They are not concerned with occupying a corner of a psychoanalytic couch and coaxing some life out of bored, vacuous ego; they are looking for hospital beds in which to rest their shattered bodies.

What is your “dream” white middle-class America? A new dishwashing machine, a sleek Jaguar, a color television set, a hotshot hi-fi ensemble, a motorized lawnmower? In Vietnam it is simply: survival. Survival — and the silence of peace. Do you dare, white middle-class America, to babble about city planning, clean air, more park space while the cities and villages of Vietnam lie in shambles and the air is filled with the stench of decaying bodies? What has replaced your conscience and soul, white middle-class America? A supermarket, with its soothing, piped in music? A discotheque with weary go-go dancers wreathed in synthetic smiles? A topless cafe, where the naked tits of bought girls hang over your martinis? In Vietnam the supermarkets are the garbage dumps of American army camps and the grim children of Saigon have turned into pimps for their sisters and mothers.

It used to be said of the colonized countries that whisky preceded the bible, that dynamite paved the way for the cross. Those were idyllic days compared with the “blessings” you have conferred on southeast Asia today. You have the nerve to talk about “liberating” Vietnam, of “freeing” Saigon from Viet Cong infiltrators. You demoralized and crushed the soul of this Asian city long before your guns and bombs shattered its buildings and huts. In its shanty cheapness and florid vulgarity, in its blackmarket and brothels, in its corrupted, venial officials and sadistic police, in its garish neon lights and qualid, filthy streets, Saigon has become the authentic image of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, shorn of their myths, their false tints, their hypocritical claim to culture and civilization. You have not merely Americanized this city, white middle-class America; you have shown what America means, what America is. The only pure and cleaning thing in Saigon is the armed guerilla whose very presence is a defiant protest against all your “blessings” and “contributions.”

It’s your hypocrisy that rankles the soul, white middle-class America, your stinking pretensions. One can deal with a “radical” rightest, an outspoken fascist openly and cleanly — in a state of mutual hate that evokes respect. But to listen to your demeaning claims to be “liberators,” your pap about “negotiations,” your queasy moralism, or more horrifying than all, to suffocate in the atmosphere of your narrow egoism and indifference — this is what aches what nauseates. “Law-and-order” America, divinely-mediocre America, beauty parlor America, tv-soaked America — vapid like the soul of a Normal Vincent Paele. And “liberal” America — prudent like the speech of a Eugene McCarthy, treacherous like the opportunism of a Kennedy, vulgar, dense, and self-righteous like the column of a Max Lerner.

Take care, white middle-class America — the war is coming home. Your youth — the sweet concern of your baby doctors, your PTA meetings, your recreation directors — may not permit themselves to be hypocritically sacrificed by the thousands to your computerized god of war. Your black house-cleaners and handy-men may set your mortgaged little boxes afire. Your stinking cities may burn in the flames of insurrection.

What will you do the, white middle-class America? Try to place your youth in concentration camps? Try to place your conscience behind barbed wired and prison turrets? Try to bomb your own cities? And in the name of “freedom” try to turn America itself into the graveyard of freedom, its sepulcher: a towering, white-enameled refrigerator topped by a grinning skull? Then learn this much from your escapades in Vietnam: what will lie in that cemetery will be the ruins of your own foul and oppressive “civilization”.