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MY LAI: 2003

Meditations on How the Vietnam War is Memorialized (again).

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MARCH! It's that time of year again. It's time for trotting out the shimmering chimera Americans have come to know as *MY LAI*. It is, after all, 35 years since March 1968. The ever-turning, vaguely anonymous cultural mill fueled by the "media's" appetite for sensational grist is voracious – and, apparently, as cyclic as karma. Remember, though, that it was left to the Vietnam veterans themselves to commemorate their own misunderstood sacrifice - the massive death of individual GI's. And then, in 1992, phoenix-like, on the 10th anniversary of the first commemoration, another monument was commemorated - almost as if folks were so moved by the first one that a second one was needed to replicate the silently intoxicating grief still hanging in the air from the first dedication in 1982. Most recently, the gracefully hard-bodied patriotism of the women was, with good reason, saluted, though late. And in the mean time, and in between time, there were commemorated the memorials to the signings in Paris, the captivities in Hanoi, the Cu Chi - Cu Chi - Cu Tunnel theme park in New Viet Nam, and the comings into Saigon, and goings out of Ho Chi Minh City. And there will soon be a fine

monument to the GI dogs. What the Hell, at this late date what's left to commemorate?

Well, as I say, it's MARCH. Might as well throw in the commemoration of a Massacre. Now, to be sure, memorializing atrocity is certainly not unique in the world, what with the antic cruelties of the endlessly reproduced St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572 Paris, the 1923 Armenian Genocide, The Rape of Nanking in 1937, the decade-long Jewish Holocaust, and even the preposterous Custer himself. No, what is odd about this one - My Lai, that is - is that the atrocity being commemorated was perpetrated and commemorated by the GOOD GUYS!" America. What a country.

The homicidal fury visited upon a peasant hamlet on 16 March 1968 is best known now simply as My Lai. Oddly, the word "Massacre" has somehow become superfluous. Like so much of America's imagined memory of the Viet Nam War, the 500 or so elderly men, women, and children slaughtered that day have been rendered into yet another item of cultural shorthand that most Americans just seem to recognize. The next anniversary of the My Lai event will always disgorge enough editorials, feature articles, opinion pieces like this very one, epitaphs, and God help us, sermons, than would be healthy for any nation's cultural digestion.

The blizzard of media images bearing the now iconic images of the mass murders at My Lai will be driven to white-out conditions by the solar winds emanating from the

lips of the talk show hosts. Pundit interviewers will, though only momentarily, replace interviewing celebrities by creating the celebrity of Death itself. As late as 2002 Ex-governor and Senator Robert Kerrey is simply the latest avatar of the phenomenon – never mind Hussein. The network news magazines will be stumbling over one another to “have as our guest tonight on this solemn 35th anniversary of the TRAGEDY OF MY LAI” the man who: broke the story; stopped the killing; covered up the killing; prosecuted the killing; participated in the killing; was killed, was nearly killed, made the movie about the killing, wrote THE book about the killing, and so on and on.

You get the idea. In fact, what you will be witnessing is the latest freakish stage of the serial memorialization of the Viet Nam War itself. It is inevitable that you will see the talking heads and the endlessly recut video montage - what you should be watching, though, is the phenomenon itself. It is this phenomenon of memorialization played out over about a two-week period in it's uniquely American excess that will reveal American culture and its progress in coming to terms with a past it is doomed to keep remembering in different ways. I am afraid that it is not the actual My Lai Massacre itself that is somehow suspect as a suitable subject for memorialization. Lord knows it ought to be. It's just that it feels awfully like it's simply My Lai's turn for commemorative attention. Most everything else about the war seems to have been enshrined already – the GI's themselves, those who sacrificed differently, those who didn't return, those who did. In the state of Georgia alone there are 300 local monuments. The power of this war to regenerate new

facets of itself is breathtaking. It is this phenomenon of regenerating concepts of itself that is ITSELF one of the symptoms of a nation that cannot gaze righteously at its own scars.

Well, I guess it's just that time. Everything else that can be commemorated about the Viet Nam War has been the subject of a memorial – why not atrocity. Each one a memorial to the previous one, and the one before that one - 1982. 1992. 1993. A short parade to be sure, and slow to start - but a parade nevertheless. What started off as the hardened monument to dead boys in 1982 ribboned off into the future as a few tentative parades, in a few cities, commemorating the early anniversary of the war's end, or at least America's part in it. And then, with silent permission somehow granted onto the winds, those wisps of parades connecting distant cities solidified back into the stern sculptures of those three hard boys and four hardened women - following one another in lockstep outward from the The Wall. The statues gaze backward at the WALL almost seeming to reassure themselves that it's OK to move away from it. And then, still later, from these deformed bronze ova were spawned hundreds of other memorials, dedicated on hundreds of duplicated anniversary dates, in hundreds of towns and cities. There are already recorded more than 500 memorials in the Lower 48 alone, with double that number in all probability. This is a culture that went from the impossibility of ANY monuments to veterans (or their war) to literally hundreds, if not thousands, within 15 years!

But now, seemingly out of the blue, comes the cyclical return to a vast national guilt reclaimed from what looked like a quiet end to grieving at the local Town Square. That is to say, America's sense of itself is accordion-like, concentric alternations of grief and guilt. First there was NO possibility of any monuments at all; then a larger-than-life unified monument in the Nation's capitol; then a 15-year paroxysm of hundreds of tiny memorials, and now back – apparently – to a single commemoration once again. Only THIS time, even though the subject is still America in Vietnam, the intention of the commemoration and its memorials is decidedly darkened. THIS time, it is a matter of what American troops did – but not why.

Hanging almost as a pendant at the loop of years of memorials comes this latest act of remembrance. Appearing in the April 1997 issue of the Indochina Interchange (a publication representing a good and sincere group of peace-seekers known as the Indochina Reconciliation Project) comes the report of the next stage of memorialization of the Viet Nam War. There have been the tiny and the large and the hundreds in between, there have been the parades and the re-dedications of already dedicated memorials. The 30th anniversary of the war's most documented atrocity brought the planned dedication of an entire park! The My Lai Peace Park. According to press releases the Madison, Wisconsin Quakers announced (3/16/97) plans to build a Peace Park for My Lai. This commemorative “park” was said to be similar to one recently dedicated in Bac Giang Province near the Madison sister-city of Bac Giang outside Hanoi. The goal of this plan is to commemorate the My Lai

Peace Park in My Lai on March 16, 1998 – the 30th anniversary of the My Lai massacre. This initiative to create the most monumental of shrines to the war to date (unless, of course, the Tunnels of Cu Chi theme park is counted) came, apparently, at the invitation of the Women’s Union of Quang Ngai Province and the Quang Ngai Peoples’ Committee. A “Memorandum of Understanding” signed by a Vietnamese official and the American co-ordinator of the project envisions the My Lai Peace Park to be, “a place for children to entertain and a place where people can meditate over the past with its suffering and losses and also to hope for a better future.” The site of this park was intended to be about 7.5 acres.

So, what’s the point of this narrative of the evolution of memorialization of the Viet Nam War? Well, the point is that it is a process – an evolution – rather than an event. And it is the very nature of this process that speaks volumes about how American culture comes to terms with unresolved guilt and historical events that lack unambiguous closure. Somehow the monuments, ceremonies, parades, and their periodic re-dedications that have been so far created so far do not seem to be enough. The memorialization of this war is still – in 2003 – unsatisfying. Groups of one kind or another are still seeking ever narrower or ever larger contexts in which to offer a final memorialization of this cruel joke of a war. Every time some private group or political entity erects a memorial some other group does it differently later. Instead of getting to the fundamental issue that stands at the heart of the ambiguity, instead of getting to an irreducible emotional acceptance of the event itself the vast mechanisms of the American culture machine simply keeps resurrecting previous

responses or creating new versions. The same body keeps being transferred into ever-more-clever caskets. This is how American culture deals with ambiguity and ambivalence. Why, for instance, did this flurry of dedicatory exuberance come at the 30-year mark? Twenty would have been more traditional and a 25th perhaps more logical. Let's see what happens this March at the 35th.

Given the track record of memorialization since the 1982 dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial there appears to be a real possibility that the American culture is headed inevitably toward the ultimate Viet Nam War Memorial in the form of a vast weekend "family experience" resort park, wired, perhaps, by Bill Gates, funded by Disney, and orchestrated by Spielberg. A vast replica of Viet Nam itself set somewhere in the Arizona desert or, better yet - the Poconos. Divided into meticulously detailed recreations of each of the four military regions, families will be able to choose from among many possible "war experiences" that can be participated in by the nuclear family – a fun day in park that the whole family can enjoy. There won't be a My Lai-Land, though. It's been done already, (twice.)

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