

“This isn’t Munich, it’s Spain”

Photographs and Text by Bernard B. Fall

Bernard B. Fall is Professor of International Relations at Howard University. During World War II, he gained extensive experience in guerrilla warfare, fighting with the French Underground. He is the author of Street Without Joy—Indo-China at War and The Two Vietnams.

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*“... the whole country hates you, but
at least they won’t resist you . . .”*

THE FOLLOWING PASSAGE is a quotation from a French book, *Revolutionary War and Christian Conscience*, prefaced by Msgr. Pierre Marie Théas, Bishop of Bardes and Lourdes, and bearing the imprimatur of a Jesuit organization in Paris, published by the French section of *Pax Christi* in 1963: “*Respect for Man means, above all, that the enemy (true or presumed guilty or suspect), is considered as a human being.*”

Americans appear to have forgotten this in Vietnam. I have just returned from the war there and found it depersonalized and, to a large extent, dehumanized.

It is a brutal war. One million Vietnamese died in the

long colonial encounter with the French — and already, in what may loosely be termed the “American period,” the dead are near a quarter million, with perhaps another half million people seriously maimed. And other Vietnamese people are dying because they are starving; there are vast areas where people starve because food cannot get through — food blocked off by our side so it won’t get to the Viet Cong, or taken by the Viet Cong to feed their forces. If the present war were to last as long as the French war, another million people may well die in Vietnam.

There are two theoretical casualties in this war. One is the “war of national liberation” concept of the Communists, and the other is the American theory of “counter-insurgency.” At the heart of counter-insurgency is the idea that people matter — that we are in Vietnam to get people to fight for something *they* believe in rather than something *we* believe in. The new mix of air war and of land and seaborne firepower in Vietnam is one of technological counter-insurgency — if you keep up the kill rate you will eventually run out of enemies. Or at least armed enemies. Of course, the whole country will hate you, but at least they won’t resist you. What you will get is simply a cessation of resistance — an acquiescence in one’s fate rather than a belief that your side and your ideas have really prevailed.

I don’t think we are buying Vietnamese stability in the long run out of the present operation. What we are buying is an example — for Latin America and other guerrilla-prone areas. What we’re really doing in Vietnam is killing the cause of “wars of liberation.” And we may yet succeed.

The common explanation of America’s Vietnam involvement is that the United States is being “tested” — that we have to stand up and stop communism right here. The analogy of Munich is suggested here — the failure of

the British and French to stand up to the Nazis. But the situation in Vietnam isn't Munich; it is Spain. There is in Vietnam a test of wills, of course, as at Munich — but above all, there is a test of military technology and techniques and military ideas. One side believes it can win with a combination of guerrilla warfare and political ideology. The other side believes it can win with the massive use of military power. America may be able to prove, as the Germans and Italians did in Spain, that superior firepower will carry the day in such a situation. One can find many people who will look at the last quarter-century in Spain and argue that if it took the Spanish Civil War with its one and a half million dead to produce a "stable" Spain for 25 or 30 years, then the war was worth it. And no doubt there must be Russians who now look at the crushing of the Hungarian rebellion of 1956 as a "necessary" step to the "orderly" liberalization that eventually ensued under Janos Kadar. It is not straining the analogy to suggest that there are now Americans who would make the same judgment of the war in Vietnam: it may be a nasty claw-and-nail war, but what the hell, it's worth it if we come out on top.

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"... their trees are dead ..."

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR right now is not literally the killing of individuals by individuals — you do not often see heaps of the dead lying around. But what you do see is the impact on the countryside. In Asia vegetation is always lush, but now when you fly over parts of Vietnam you can see the dead, brown surface of the areas which have been sprayed with weed killers. You see the areas that were sprayed on purpose, and the places defoliated by accident. Ben Cat, a huge plantation near Saigon, was almost completely destroyed by accident; 3000 acres were transformed into the tropical equivalent of a winter forest. This picture is of a Catholic refugee village, Honai, along Highway 1 in South Vietnam. It was sprayed by mistake. All its fruit

trees died. United States Air Force planes were defoliating the jungle along Highway 1, but the wind shifted and blew the killer spray towards the villages instead. In a supreme irony, the jungle now stands in the background, lush and thick, while the villages are barren.

When I was there, the villagers were chopping down the trees. The only resource they had left was the remains of their dead fruit trees, to be sold in Saigon for firewood.

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The 'Overkill'

MAO TSE TUNG'S THEORY that a guerrilla must live among the population like a fish in water worked in China against a politically and militarily ineffective enemy. This theory as a guideline for "wars of liberation" may be disproved in Vietnam. Mao's theory requires an effective political base in the country — but what is a political base against B-52's? The United States, by massive bombing, seeks to deprive the guerrilla of his population — the fish of his water. We want the population to flee to our side — after all, on our side you at least can get food, and get away from the bombing.

The statistics behind this strategy are as brutal as the reality. The Viet Cong are credited with killing or kidnapping between 15,000 and 16,000 village officials during the course of the war, and probably killing another 5,000 in one way or another during the past year. American casualties are less than 1,000 dead and about 3,000 wounded. On the other hand, the official United States statistics of "enemy" killed since 1961 have now passed the 100,000 mark. In the week ending October 4, 1965, some 1,067 Communists were said to have been killed in South Vietnam. At that rate, there will be 50,000 "enemy" deaths in Vietnam this year alone.

One of the great and crucial questions in this war is how many of these casualties are Viet Cong, and how many are civilians? It is generally estimated that there are two wounded for every one killed on the battlefield. Thus

by the end of this year the Viet Cong or somebody in its area of operations must be presumed to have suffered upwards of 400,000 casualties. Since the entire Viet Cong force is estimated at between 150,000 to 160,000, this means that we have “overkilled” the Viet Cong about two and a half times. Obviously this isn’t true.

Official figures set the number of infiltrators to the Viet Cong from North Vietnam at five to six thousand a year; yet, despite the tremendous firepower thrown at the Communists and the high casualty count, the Viet Cong does not appear to lose appreciably in strength. The conclusion that must be reached is that many of the people being killed are not Viet Cong, even though they may be listed as such. A truly staggering amount of civilians are getting killed or maimed in this war.

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“An impersonal, an American war”

THE VIETNAM CONFLICT has become an impersonal, an American war. I was with an American airborne unit operating strictly on its own. There was not one Vietnamese with that unit. It was going strictly by its own mark and literally by its own light. The picture is a close-up of a “Skyraider,” a World War II vintage bomber that is used quite effectively in Vietnam. It is said to be the only airplane that carries its own weight in payload. An extremely solid and heavy plane, the “Skyraider” can withstand small arms and automatic weapons ground fire better than any other fighter bombers, including the jets. It is an amazing airplane — especially in the amount of destruction it can bring to bear. You have to know an airplane like this before you can really understand the tremendous impact of American firepower on the Vietnamese on the ground. This airplane can carry a bombload of 7,500 pounds under its wings. It can unload a variety of bombs — 750-pounders, 500-pounders, 250-pounders, 100-pound general-purpose bombs. It also can drop 260-pound fragmentation bombs, 120-pound fragmentation bombs, or 100-pound white

phosphorous bombs and napalm. The “Skyraider” has four 20-millimeter cannon as well.

This was the airplane I was to ride in on a raid on a Vietnamese fishing village.

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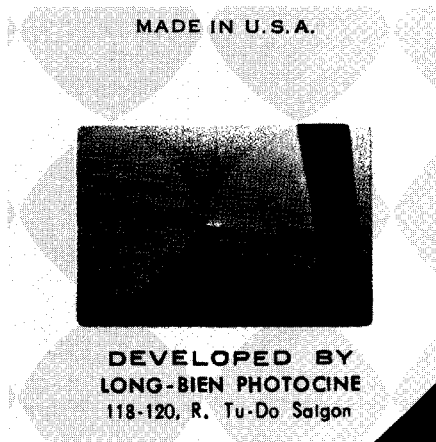
“A Raid On A Fishing Village”

OUR “SKYRAIDER” WAS LOADED with 750-pound napalm bombs and 500-pound napalm bombs, plus our four 20-millimeter cannon. Our wing plane carried 7,500 pounds of high explosive anti-personnel bombs, plus our four cannon. We were the lead plane going in. My pilot was Major John C. Carson. The picture shows our wingman flying next to us.

We were airborne for one and one half hours before we reached our primary target. But as we came over the target the monsoon came down with quite incredible force and completely obscured the ground. Then a decision was made, in accordance with established procedures, to switch over to the alternate target which was described as a “Communist rest center” in the Camau Peninsula. A rest center may of course be anything, any group of huts, or it may be just a normal village in which Viet Cong troops have put down stake for, perhaps, 48 hours.

As we flew over the target it looked to me very much as any normal village would look: on the edge of a river, sampans and fish nets in the water. It was a peaceful scene. Major Carson put our plane into a steep dive. I could see the napalm bombs dropping from the wings. The big bombs, first. As we peeled back from our dive I took the picture you see here — an incredibly bright flash of fire as napalm exploded at the tree level. The first pass had a one-two effect. The napalm was expected to force the people — fearing the heat and the burning — out into the open. Then the second plane was to move in with heavy fragmentation bombs to hit whatever — or whom-ever — had rushed out into the open. So our wingman followed us in and dropped his heavy explosives. Mushroom-like clouds drifted into the air. We made a second

pass and dropped our remaining 500-pound napalm bombs. Our wingman followed. Then we went in a third time and raked over the village with our cannon. We came down low, flying very fast, and I could see some of the villagers trying to head away from the burning shore in their sampans. The village was burning fiercely. I will never forget the sight of the fishing nets in flame, covered with burning, jellied gasoline. Behind me I could hear — even through my padded flying helmet — the roar of our plane's 20-millimeter cannon as we flew away.



“Awarding the ‘Score’ ”

BEHIND US FLEW A SMALL, very dainty-looking aircraft, an OF-1, otherwise referred to as a “bird dog.” It is a spotter plane — used to find targets for the bombers and to determine whether the targets have been hit and — as the word goes in Vietnam — award you your “score.” The “score” is usually worked out in numbers of structures hit and numbers of people seen dead on the ground. This information is reported to Air Intelligence, and eventually becomes part of the composite “score” for the week (the number of sorties flown plus what is called the “structure count” and the “body count.”) These are the terms by which success is measured in the new Vietnam war.

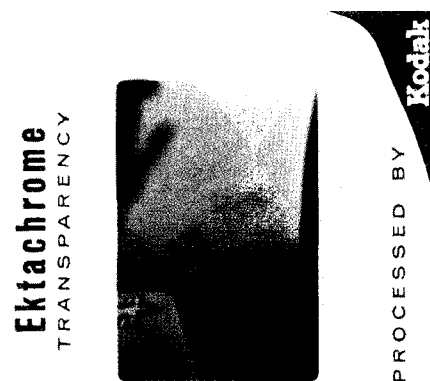
There were probably between 1,000 and 1,500 people living in the fishing village we attacked. It is difficult to estimate how many were killed. It is equally difficult to judge if there actually were any Viet Cong in the village, and if so, if any were killed. The observation planes are called the FAC's (Forward Air Controllers). But it happens very often in Vietnam that, as a current joke goes, the FAC's have their facts wrong; that the raid information is stale; that there may have been Communists in the village — but the day before. You may very often get the proper amount of structures awarded to your “score,” but you may not have hit any Communist structures. So it is difficult to say whether you hit a Communist or

whether you just hit the village which, unwilling, may have been the host of a Communist unit for one night. Or maybe not at all. This has happened.

During our attack probably ten to fifteen houses were hit. There is at least one family per house, and Vietnamese families average from six to eight persons. In each of those houses there must have been people maimed or killed — no one knows how many. I read an official report later which described the village as a Communist rest center, and said it had been successfully destroyed.

Then something happened that was not part of the plan. One of our napalm bombs failed to drop off the airplane! Pilots are not supposed to land with bombs aboard for fear of the bomb exploding on the airfield and burning grounded planes (it happened at Bien Hoa and caused a major disaster). We had to get rid of our bomb or, if need be, bail out and let the plane crash. My pilot went into a steep power dive and pulled out brutally to force the bomb off its rack. It is an incredible experience as the force of gravity grabs your body. You cannot lift your arms except with enormous effort. I could see my face muscles being pulled into a horrible grimace in the side view mirror. Finally, the bomb dropped. The pilot pointed at an accelerometer: 4.8 G's. For a few instants my body had weighed 900 lbs.

It was a good thing for some Vietnamese peasants that we could find our secondary target and could get rid of our recalcitrant bomb, because if that target had been rained out or clouded over, we would have jettisoned our bombs in what is known as a “free bomb” zone. Now in a free bomb area you are authorized to drop your ordnance anywhere. Any target, any structure, any movement at all. The free bomb zones in South Vietnam change constantly, so it is difficult to give any accurate acreage for them. But, for example, the free bomb zone around Zone D adds up to something like 300 square miles. Anyone living in these areas is presumed to be the enemy. Or, at least, presumed to be “hostile” and therefore destroyable.



*“The French
Didn’t Have The Bombs . . .”*

THE MASSIVENESS OF AMERICAN military superiority is overwhelming. When you compare it to the French Indo-China military effort you see just how overwhelming. The raid I flew on was a small raid. But there are very large raids, very often, in Vietnam. It is quite normal to fly 150 air raids in one day. The French, at the peak of their Indo-China campaign at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, expended during the entire 56 days of battle less bomb power than the United States does in one single day. It is meaningless to compare the use of air power by the French and Americans in Vietnam. When you resort to area bombing, you begin to frighten or to destroy the populace, and the French weren’t effective at that because the French planes didn’t have the range, and the French didn’t have the bombs. The French aircraft total in all of Indo-China — in North and South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos — was 112 fighters and 68 bombers. That is what the United States flies in a single mission.

One of the major mistakes that Europeans and many non-specialists make is to view the American military effort as only a multiple of the French effort. It is not a multiple, it is a geometric progression. This has to be clearly understood. For example, when I saw President Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam in 1962, he told me that he thought that since he had been able to defeat the French in eight years, the stronger Americans could in all likelihood be defeated in 10 years. This is precisely the extent of the misconception. Anyone who believes the Americans are simply 20 per cent stronger than the French simply does not understand the strength of American power — and the willingness of Americans to use that power in such a war. The French, for example, never dared to send conscripts to Vietnam, nor did they increase the draft at home for fear of public opposition to the war. Vietnam was not considered by the French parliament, or for that matter the French people, as being a vital issue of French power. The United States obviously feels differently. This is reaffirmed every day in Vietnam.

The United States ground firepower is also extraordinary. Soldiers used to carry rifles with clips of maybe 8 or 10 rounds. Now, almost every American in Vietnam carries an automatic rifle which can shoot up to four or five hundred rounds a minute, if it has to. The Vietnamese are the only ones carrying single-shot or semi-automatic weapons. It doesn’t even do the Viet Cong much good to capture American automatic weapons. A guerrilla force

can’t possibly sustain the supply of ammunition needed to keep those guns firing. Of course, the United States side can, indefinitely. And it does.

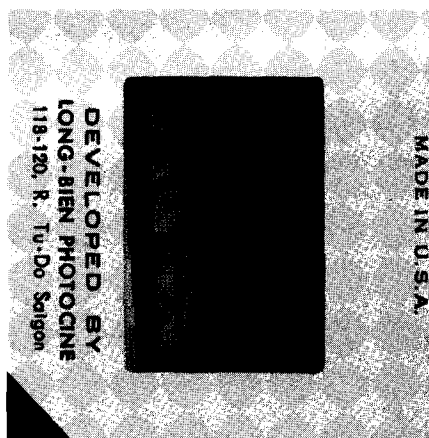
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“No Respect for the wounded . . .”

THIS IS A PHOTOGRAPH of a South Vietnamese prisoner cage. I took the picture inside a camp where Americans were present. No attempt was made to hide the cage, an iron frame covered completely with barbed wire. About four feet high, it is used for bringing prisoners to “reason.” I was not told what kind of prisoners are put in the cage, but no matter who they are, this is a pretty violent process. The prisoner cannot stand up or sit down — if he moves out of a crouch he falls against the sharp barbed wire; there is so much wire that his body is punctured all over. This makes Christ’s Crown of Thorns look like a child’s toy.



In this war, there is no respect for the wounded. The Communist prisoner in the photograph had been shot in the back. He was bleeding when I found him lying on the floor in a Vietnamese Army Command Post. A journalist from a New York paper came in and asked to photograph him. The South Vietnamese officer in the room raised the wounded man matter-of-factly and

propped him against a table leg for the photographer. The prisoner grimaced in pain.

I told an American officer who was with the unit that the man was wounded and should get some attention. His answer: "Yes, I know he needs help, but there isn't anything I can do about it. He's in Vietnamese hands. That is why I walked away, don't you see?" I saw. I also walked away and said nothing.

In this war, there is no respect for hospitals, either. I saw a South Vietnamese civilian ambulance which had been raked with machine gun fire by the Viet Cong. All four patients and the driver were killed inside. This sort of brutality has become normal on both sides: Joseph Alsop reported recently, unblinkingly, that there had been three Viet Cong hospitals destroyed in Zone D along with "vast stocks of medicine." This followed on complaints from the North, now verified by non-Communist outside observers, that at least one hospital had been completely destroyed by bombers. Canadian officials who recently returned from North Vietnam also told me that the city of Vinh was "flattened." It used to have a population of 60,000. I can't believe that the whole city was a "military objective."

The answer to any attempt to raise the question of America's moral responsibility for such actions is the same excuse the Army officer gave me about the bleeding, unattended prisoner: the violation of rules is done by the Vietnamese. But that in itself is not an *excuse*. While it is true that South Vietnam is a sovereign entity, it is also true that it hardly operates independently of the United States. I spent 1946-48 at the Nuremberg trials as a young research analyst and in a number of cases I heard the Germans attempt to excuse atrocities as acts committed by troops of their allies. This wasn't considered an excuse and did not absolve the Germans of their responsibility. (By the way, both Vietnam and the United States have signed and ratified the 1949 Geneva Convention on War Victims.)

I have heard no questions of morality raised by American officials over the South Vietnamese treatment of prisoners. But many Americans have complained, on purely practical grounds, that the mistreatment of the wounded and captured has resulted in few surrenders by hard-core Viet Cong and has sparked reprisals against American soldiers by the Viet Cong.

But, contrary to what had been expected, the Viet Cong have treated American prisoners quite correctly. From all the accounts I received from Intelligence in Vietnam, there is no evidence of torture of American prisoners by the Viet Cong, and released United States prisoners have confirmed this.

The torture and terror utilized by the South Vietnamese

is something else. It is, in the Pentagon phrase, "counter-productive." American officers in the field with Vietnamese troops make critical remarks about their behavior toward their own people — stealing, raping, burning down villages, generally kicking people around. In contrast to this random brutality, one of the most heralded of the Viet Cong's terror tactics, the selective assassination of village chiefs, could even be considered, in the military idiom, "productive." When Diem ended the 400 to 500 year tradition of the democratic election of village chiefs by each village, he made, to my mind, probably his most crucial mistake. He began making local appointments from Saigon, and the appointees — many of them outsiders — were met with open hostility by the villagers. Diem's men would have to go outside the village to the police post to sleep safely. Many of them were known to be gouging the villages. The hard fact is that when the Viet Cong assassinated these men, the Viet Cong were given a Robin Hood halo by the villagers.

The reality in Vietnam is that the international rules of war are not obeyed and, contrary to popular belief, the rules *do* apply to guerrilla wars as well. "War crimes" are recorded almost daily and sometimes by cameramen — the burning of villages, for example. There seems to be a predisposition on our side to no longer be able to see the Vietnamese as people against whom crimes can be committed. This is the ultimate impersonalization of the war.



"The worst is yet to come . . ."

THE INCREDIBLE THING ABOUT VIETNAM is that the worst is yet to come. We have been bombing for a relatively short time and the results are devastating. The United States is probably only operating at one per cent capacity in Vietnam. Everything could be escalated vastly — in the North, major industrial targets, major towns, and then the irrigation dams; in the South, more powerful bombs on more vulnerable targets. (It is strictly a one-way operation in the South. The Viet Cong do not have a single flying machine. We can literally

go anywhere and bomb anything. The possibilities of devastation are open-ended.)

Yet what America is seeking is not total victory over the Viet Cong. We are going for *total defeat* of the V.C. The semantics are important, because what America should want to prove in Vietnam is that the Free World is “better,” *not* that it can kill people more efficiently. If we would induce 100,000 Viet Cong to surrender to our side because our offers of social reform are better than those of the other side’s, *that* would be victory. Hence, even a total military or technological defeat of the Viet Cong is going to be a partial defeat of our own purposes — a defeat of ourselves, by ourselves, as it were.

I think it is clearly established that the kind of forces in this photograph, in huge and growing numbers, are just so enormous that the chance of an American Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam are nil. But I do not speak about military victory — rather I want to make it clear that military *losing* is no longer a question. But given military “un-losability,” the big question remaining is what it will take to bring about a “stable” Vietnam. “Stability” is the great catchword these days, and the Pentagon is now using the phrase “stability operation” in lieu of “counter-insurgency.” Most knowledgeable people will say that a ten-year “stabilization” period is not beyond the realm of the imagination, with the number of American troops in Vietnam reaching upwards of one million.

When Hanson Baldwin, the *New York Times*’ noted military commentator, suggested last spring that one million Americans might be required in Vietnam he was greeted with general derision and disbelief. Now we can say that one million American troops is a quite possible figure, though it might be reduced if other nations send in troops. The United States is constantly on the search for allies.

If one accepts the 10-to-1 ratio of “stabilizing” troops to guerrillas, then at least 1.5 million men would be required in Vietnam. The South Vietnamese army now has 600,000 men with all para-military forces included, but has low morale and efficiency, and a high desertion rate — and is having a very hard time finding more men. Anyway, it is quite pointless in one sense to project a “stabilization” period in terms of years — the British had a 55-to-1 superiority in Malaya and it took them 13 years to win.

‘Neo-Machiavellianism’

BUT IN THE WAY THE WAR is now fought in Vietnam, the human element which, I feel, *must* be at the center even of a deadly conflict, recedes further and further into the periphery. Vietnam is simply a test case — on our side of “credibility” in

resisting Communist penetration; on the Viet Cong side of the possibility of changing the world balance by leap-frogging (or burrowing under) the nuclear stalemate of the big powers. Or worse, Vietnam is simply a test bed of weapons and battle techniques. The armed peasant versus Detroit and the “think factories.” But what I really fear most, if this sort of situation drags on indefinitely, is the creation of new ethics to match new warfare. Indications are that a new ethic is already being created, and such influential men as former Secretary of State Dean Acheson have begun to provide its intellectual underpinning. Acheson said in a speech at Amherst College in December 1965:

“The end sought by our foreign policy . . . is, as I have said, to preserve and foster an environment in which free societies may exist and flourish. Our policies and actions must be decided by whether they contribute to or detract from achievement of this end. They need no other justification or moral or ethical embellishment. . . .”

That argument was answered in a way by French Cardinal Feltin in a Pastoral Letter issued on October 24th, 1960 (in the midst of the Algerian war) to the French military chaplains. In it the Cardinal said:

“There cannot be a morality which justifies efficacy by all means, if those means are in formal contradiction with Natural Law and Divine Law. Efficacy, in that case, goes against the very aim it seeks to achieve. There can be exceptional laws for exceptional situations . . . there cannot exist an exceptional morality which somehow takes leave of Natural Law and Divine Law.”

Looking back at the Vietnam I left, I can see the means only too clearly, and so can everyone else who is not altogether blind. But I cannot say that I have found anyone who seems to have a clear idea of the end — of the “war aims” — and if the end is not clearly defined, are we justified to use any means to attain it?

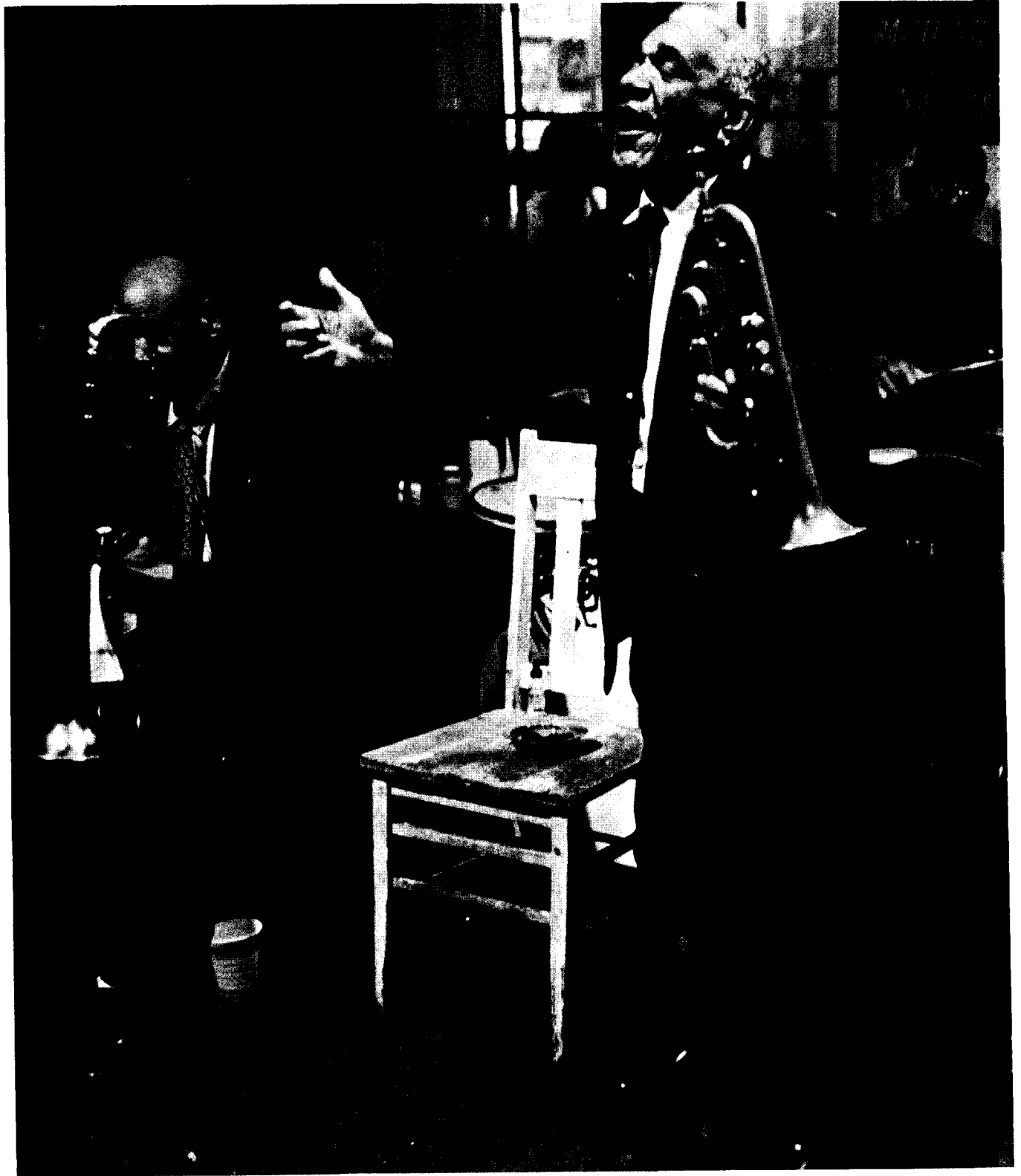
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Where the Saint



Albert Warner

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