

Saturday Review



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The Road to Songmy

"I sent them a good boy," said Mrs. Anthony Meadlo, "and they sent home a murderer." The name of Paul David Meadlo, of New Goshen, Indiana, has figured in the reports of the slaughter of more than 100 Vietnamese civilians (some accounts put the number above 350) by American soldiers at a village named Songmy.

Where did the journey to Songmy begin? Did it begin only after Paul David Meadlo arrived in Vietnam? Or did it start far, far back—back to the first time Paul Meadlo played the game of killing Indians, or cheered when Western movies showed Indians being driven off cliffs? Even in some schoolbooks, the Indians were fit subjects for humiliation and sudden death. They were something less than fully human, and their pain levied no claim on the compassion of children—or even adults.

Long before Paul Meadlo ever saw a Vietnamese, he learned that people of yellow skin were undesirable and therefore inferior. He learned in his history class about the Oriental Exclusion Act, the meaning of which was that people from Asia were less acceptable in the United States than people from Europe. He learned very little about the culture of Asian people but he learned to associate them with all sorts of sinister behavior.

The road to Songmy is long and wide. It is littered with children's toys—toy machine guns, toy flame-throwers, toy dive bombers, toy atom bombs. Standing at the side of the road are parents watching approvingly as the

children turn their murderous playthings on one another. The parents tell themselves that this is what children do in the act of growing up. But the act of growing up is an enlargement of, and not a retreat from, the games that children play. And so the subconscious is smudged at an early age by bloody stains that never fully disappear.

Paul David Meadlo grew up in a little town 10,000 miles away from Vietnam; but the kind of things that were to happen in Songmy came springing to life in his living room where there was an electronic box called television. Hour after hour, the box would be lit up by pictures showing people whose faces were smashed and pulverized, but it was part of an endless and casual routine. Where did the desensitization to human pain and the preciousness of life begin? Did it begin at formal indoctrination sessions in Vietnam, or at point-blank range in front of an electronic tube, spurting its messages about the cheapness of life.

And when the court-martial is held, who will be on trial? Will it be only the soldiers who were face-to-face with the civilians they say they were ordered to kill? The Army now says soldiers should not obey commands that are senseless and inhuman. What well-springs of sense and humaneness are to be found in the orders to destroy whole villages from the air? Is a man in a plane exempt from wrongdoing solely because he does not see the faces of the women and children whose bodies will be shattered by the explosives he rains on them from the sky? How does one define a legitimate

victim of war? What of a frightened mother and her baby who take refuge in a tunnel and are cremated alive by a soldier with a flame-thrower. Does the darkness of the tunnel make them proper candidates for death?

Will the trial summon every American officer who has applied contemptuous terms like "gook," "dink," and "slope" to the Vietnamese people—North and South? Will it ask whether these officers have ever understood the ease and rapidity with which people who are deprived of respect as humans tend to be regarded as sub-human? Have these officers ever comprehended the connection between the casual violence of the tongue and the absolute violence of the trigger finger?

Will the men who conceived and authorized the search-and-destroy missions be on trial? Search-and-destroy quickly became destroy first and search afterward. How far away from unauthorized massacre is authorized search-and-destroy?

Will the trial ask why it was that the United States, which said it was going into Vietnam to insure self-determination, called off the countrywide free elections provided for in the 1954 Geneva Agreements—after which call-off came not just Vietcong terror but the prodigious growth of the National Liberation Front?

Will the trial ask what role the United States played in the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem? Will it ask how it was that political killing and subversion, which had always been regarded as despicable actions perpetrated by our enemies, should have been made into practices acceptable to the United States?

Will there be no one at the trial to explain why the negotiations at Paris were deadlocked over the shape of the table for six weeks—during which time five thousand Americans and Vietnamese were killed? If the men at Paris had been able in advance to see the faces of those who were to die, would this have made them responsible for the dead?

There is a road back from Songmy and Vietnam. It is being traveled today by the American soldiers who gave their Thanksgiving dinners and regular rations to Vietnamese, and who in deed and attitude have made themselves exemplars of a creatively humane presence. There are doctors and teachers and volunteers on this road who comprehend the possibilities and power of regeneration. But their numbers need to be swelled to bursting in order to begin to meet the need.

It is a long road back, not just for the soldiers who were there but for all of us who showed them the way to Songmy.

—N.C.

Letters to the Editor

Questions and Answers

RE: Paul A. Weiss's essay "Living Nature and the Knowledge Gap" [SR, Nov. 29]. It is the nature of research to expand our awareness of our ignorance more rapidly than it expands our knowledge—to pose new questions more rapidly than it finds answers to old ones. This is one reason for the accelerating separation of specialties within a science, with loss of inter-specialty ties to an organized whole as expressed for the life sciences by Dr. Weiss in SR's series addressed to "The Great Unanswered Questions." But it is true of the physical and social sciences as well as the life sciences.

Education for research should include education in asking questions as well as in data-gathering. Literature reporting of new data should include the new questions posed. It is in the question-asking that we should find the interdisciplinary ties and relevance to the "great questions."

RICHARD P. NEVILLE,
Sunnyvale, Calif.

University of Barzun

JACQUES BARZUN's attempt to discredit the idea of student power in "Tomorrow's University—Back to the Middle Ages?" [SR, Nov. 15] misses the point completely. Many critics of the contemporary university do not advocate *total* student power. We want to make education a *joint* effort of teachers and students.

Although education theoretically exists for the students, the vast majority of pro-

fessors know next to nothing about *teaching* for a very simple reason: the rewards are in research. Academic freedom too often means freedom for professors to spend their time on research that will bring them fame and royalties. We all have heard the expression "publish or perish." Why not demand that professors "teach or perish"? Create a dual faculty—a large *teaching* faculty for undergraduates, a smaller *research* faculty for graduates.

I suggest that scholars such as Professor Barzun should worry less about defending their own vested interests and start thinking about ways to make their subjects relevant to non-pedants and non-dilettantes. Then perhaps the threat to the university from the "radical" Left may recede.

BEN WRIGHT,
Teaching Assistant,
University of Wisconsin,
Madison, Wis.

Consultant's Reply

ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON's obvious opposition to the Pastore bill (S. 2004) in "Taking Sides" [TV-RADIO, Nov. 15] does not give him license to vilify one of opposing views, and particularly one who has himself, and three generations of his family before him, had the total respect of blacks throughout this nation for a long history of agitation for the civil rights of all.

Mr. Shayon reports, quite gratuitously, that my appointment by the National Association of Broadcasters as a consultant to it on community relations, "has raised

cyclobrows across the country among black leaders who are vigorously opposing the Pastore bill." Shayon, who is not black, does not name any black leaders from "across the country," but mentions the names of only two Negroes, both of whom live in Washington, D.C., and neither of whom is known to me, although I have been in the public relations profession for more than twenty years, and in the process have edited both a black newspaper and a black magazine.

Further, Shayon states that "many black citizens and several black organizations have taken a strong stand against the bill." Again he cites only two organizations, both of which are headed by the two "leaders" mentioned in his article. The two oldest black organizations in the nation and the most respected by blacks and whites—the National Urban League and the NAACP—are conceded by Shayon not to have taken any official position on the bill, and, I might add, neither has any of the black press. He admits that the only black member of the U.S. Senate, Edward Brooke, is a co-sponsor of the bill, but he attempts to dampen that fact by asserting that the Senator is "supposedly reconsidering his support."

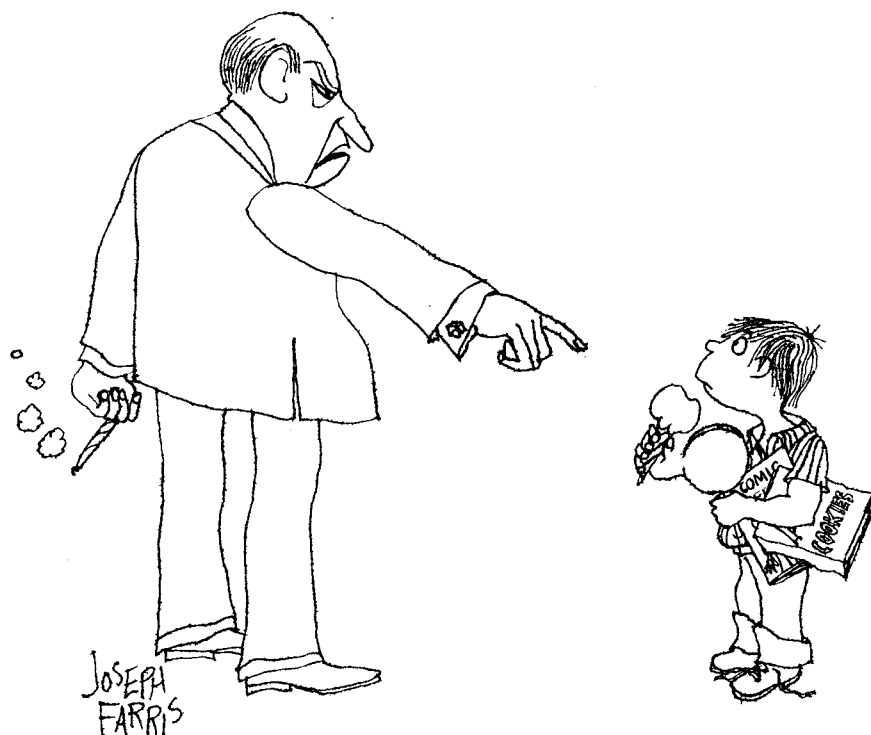
Shayon then makes the following observation: "Weaver's appointment, and his disagreement with other black leaders about the Pastore bill, cannot help but focus the issue more sharply, particularly in the Negro press, which, for the most part, has been silent on the merits of the proposed legislation." Isn't it remarkable that Shayon can discern a "strong stand against the bill" in the face of the admitted silence of the NAACP, the National Urban League, the black press, and the co-sponsorship of the bill by Senator Brooke?

Shayon writes of the "fact" that "black leaders see their opposition to the Pastore bill as a defensive measure," but the only "leader" he identifies is the director of Unity House in Washington, D. C. He had no trouble finding and quoting me, albeit both incorrectly and out of context. Somehow, the director of Unity House is the only other partisan he could find.

I do not consider myself to be a "black leader," but in addition to being the president of a black public relations firm, I am a former Commissioner of Housing of New York City and served under two Presidents as Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia, and I support the Pastore bill enthusiastically.

If the purpose of Shayon's attack was to paint me as an "Uncle Tom," he has failed miserably. Real black leaders know better. Incidentally, I was the consultant to Columbia University and later to CBS for the "Black Heritage" series. I am now under contract with the NAB to assist them in implementing the recommendations of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that grew out of extensive hearings held by the commission both here and on the West Coast. I leave it to the black people—not Shayon—to determine whether or not my efforts in that direction are effective.

FREDERICK S. WEAVER,
New York, N.Y.



"I accuse you of fiscal irresponsibility."