

This Picture...

National Guardian

1966

...was taken at Cam Che in South Vietnam by a U.S. news photographer. It shows a mother seeking to comfort her child burned by napalm dropped by a U.S. plane during "Operation Colorado."

The child most likely has died since—and one is almost tempted to say, mercifully, because for most victims of napalm, survival is living death. You will note the care with which the numbed mother seeks to avoid touching her child's skin. If she did, her fingers would sink into the destroyed flesh.

It is not easy to write such words. One tries to wait until the nausea and the anger subside—if they ever will—and then to search for appropriate words to seek, to convey to one's fellow Americans the meaning of such a photograph. In the end one concludes there are no appropriate words. There can only be a sense of horror, and a determination to take this evidence of U.S. behavior in South Vietnam and confront the conscience of a nation with it.

The photograph reached the *Guardian* the day the President of the United States celebrated his 58th birthday. He sat in the comfortable living room of his ranch house in Texas, his wife by his side, and reminisced with reporters. He talked of his past, his parents and grandparents, the burdens of his office, and his feelings about his life. He said he had much to be thankful for—a happy family, lovely daughters and a lovely home.

He gazed across the lawns to the Pedernales River swollen with rain and said: "We spend too much time worrying about things that go wrong—and too little thinking about the things that go right."

He felt the war in Vietnam was going right, but of course things occasionally go wrong—like last week, U.S. planes napalm-bombed a U.S. outfit killing a (censored number of troops and burning others the way the Vietnamese baby was burned. But that's the way war goes: there will always be children, and they become the unfortunate victims of war, and bombing mistakes do happen too.

By the same token we can expect more unfortunate victims—Vietnamese and U.S.—with the contemplated plan to raise the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam to 600,000 in the next 18 months. It's a small country, and even precision bombing 'can't be that precise.

The problem is, as the President took pains to tell the reporters on his birthday, the most important thing is to make the communist world "understand" that the American people and their government genuinely want peace. He acknowledged that there were difficulties in communication but he believed that "when they do understand it, I don't think there will be any trouble."

Perhaps if he had a chance to talk with the mother in this photo he might be able to impress upon her that her child was really a sacrifice to his desire for peace.

Somehow the nausea and the anger do not go away. There are no words. There can only be determination...



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