

And On This Side...

by Lillian Frantin

We know of perhaps three of four Americans, ranging in age from 22 to 83, who have recently emulated themselves in protest to the war in Viet Nam, and wars in general. We have heard slick psychiatrists and psychologists deny the impact such self-destruction can have upon Americans -even temporarily- and have read The Establishment's magazines (Newsweek, Time, Life. . .) for the mass public say that the disgusting spectacle of burning oneself alive has taken away any honor that might have been had from being anti-war and merely made it a disgusting spectacle period.

I am not writing to proclaim self-emulation as the be-all and end-all of ultimate dedication to ideals, nor that it will ultimately change the tide of events and world condition, but I do wish that I could present the other side of the self-sacrifices. They are more than mere sensational acts of insane people. They represent more than suicidal individual tendencies. They are symbolic of more than one man's shameful act.

I want to repeat, I am deeply saddened by such violent demonstrations and do not in any sense condone them. Yet, in the same sense, I feel it important to understand and register my understanding of them, or else they will truly be for absolutely nothing, which would only make them the more tragic. I do not know of the men and women's background fully, yet from what I do know, these people were not fanatical and prone to acts of violence. They were not murderers, nor con-artists, nor even ignorant, thoughtless, or average citizens. In this light, their acts must take on more significance.

What they were willing to sacrifice themselves for was an idea, a hope, and less than all these, a despair for the world and humanity. Their acts were not necessarily, nor primarily, an **escape** from the depressing and frustrating reality of wars; they were more importantly putting us **back into** reality- the horror of death- and showing us that war is that same horror thousands of times repeated. We, in New York, Washington, the Mid-West, all of us, may need to be awakened to the misery and anguish caused by war, instead of being lulled by the fact that "The Americans lost only 125 today in the battle at, while the Viet Cong loss was put at more than 800." What meaningless and empty words we travel listening to such vacuities. What pictureless and inhuman visions we have of war absorbing such lists of numbers and statistics like cold automatons created for the purpose of absorbing only. If this is what Patriotism means, I question it's merit to exist. Perhaps the idea of a man burning to death, while holding his child- a young, enthusiastic man- a middle-aged woman- an aging octogenarian- all, charred and lost to humanity gives the truer picture of war.

I hope that I have clearly told you what I have come to understand about these tragic events. This is not a plea for mass burnings, I would be truly insane to even excuse one self-emulation. What I did feel it necessary to do was offer a balance to the well- publicized comments that find the acts mere sensational suicides performed by a few deranged persons coincidental to their current "anti-Viet Nam" beliefs. Let us hope their unfortunate acts were not in vain.