

Military Honor

Brooklyn, N.Y.

Dear Sir: Wilson Carey McWilliams and Henry Plotkin are no doubt right in saying that, so long as a nation has a military, some notion of honor must be cultivated ("Military Honor After My Lai," January, 1972). Their notion of honor, however, seems peculiarly tied to questions of expediency rather than of truth. It may be that for every Calley convicted there must be a hero rewarded. But how does it follow that "for those of us who have acted dishonorably—the draft dodger and the deserter—there must be penalties and opprobrium, not laudatory amnesty"?

Those of us who work in the reform wing of the Democratic Party are eager to raise the issue of amnesty in the 1972 campaign; we do not care particularly if the amnesty be "laudatory," just so long as it is unconditional and effective. Honor, contrary to McWilliams and Plotkin, is not some socially contrived expediency but emerges from objective truth. If indeed the objective truth is that the war in Indochina was at least a tragic error, if not an outrage of morality, honor should be accorded those who perceived this truth, even if somewhat prematurely.

McWilliams and Plotkin, like too many people in our society, seem to attach honor to a combination of suffering and *machismo*. Those who have borne the burden are to be honored, they argue, as are those who demonstrated courage. As for suffering, have not thousands of young men "risked injury" by being exiled for long periods of time from family, friends, country and career? As for *machismo*, is not this a rather dated (to say nothing of male chauvinistic) notion of what comprises manhood?

Finally, however, neither the degree of suffering nor of *machismo* is the measure of honor. The question is one of truth and faithfulness to its perception. The truth is, it seems to me and many others, that thousands of young men acted upon their judgment before that judgment was fashionable, and were in a position

where their protest could not be easily expressed by writing an article or attending a few peace rallies. They have paid and are paying the price for their convictions. It is time for us to welcome them back with gratitude for their witness; yes, with honor.

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The Authors respond:

Machismo is Mr. Price's word, not ours; it is, as we read his letter, also his problem. But a more serious problem is the fact that Mr. Price wants to have it too many ways.

He tells us that he and his fellows "do not particularly care if the amnesty be 'laudatory,' just so long as it is unconditional and effective." Suppose the amnesty, unconditionally and effectively, forgave those who, from youth and inexperience, acted in an immoral way? Would he find that acceptable? How would that square with his desire to receive the draft dodgers and deserters "with gratitude for their witness, yes, with honor"?

He finds it troubling that we regard suffering for one's beliefs as a mark of honor, yet he hastens to assure us that the persons in question did suffer and that they did so before it was "fashionable" to do so.

He also asserts that honor consists in "truth and faithfulness to its perception." If those he lauds were, in fact, right in their perception and conduct, in what sense did they act "prematurely" except in acting before Mr. Price decided that they were correct?

But the more basic problem is that honor is a matter of *conduct*, not of perception. Many Germans, after all, saw correctly and acted basely. Consequently, the "tragic error" or "outrage to morality" in Vietnam will not cover every sin. There were many possible responses to that perception: to resist violently or non-violently within the United States, to join the

N.L.F. or the armed forces of North Vietnam, to shelter under a legal exemption or—when called—to beat it for the border. Are all of these actions equally honorable? Does the good end, for Mr. Price, hallow every means?

Mr. Price defines honor in terms of the relationship between an individual and what he is pleased to call "the objective truth." Fidelity enters only in relation to this individual perception. And that is a fair definition of *machismo*. Keeping faith with one's "family, friends, country" (let us leave "career" aside) is also a part of honor, because the fidelity of honor acknowledges, as part of the "objective truth," the debt one owes and one's dependence on one's kinsmen, brothers and fellow citizens. The intent of those who sought exile has been noble; their conduct was indistinguishable from that of cravens. (Or does Mr. Price contend that *all* those who dodged the draft were moved by moral outrage at the war?) As such, it failed, as the witness of a David Harris did not, to disturb the moral certainty of Americans at large. As a citizen, one has obligations to teach one's fellows to do right as one sees it—and certainly performing that function is a condition of honor.

Honor is a matter of social expedience, though it is also much more. It involves what we as a people wish to praise and encourage, and what we wish to discourage and blame. It is, of course, the easy—and fashionable—course to forgive our deserters and voluntary exiles. To do otherwise would require us to have convictions, about our own duties and dependences as well as those of others, and liberalism finds forgiveness easier than faith. Small wonder that Nietzsche toyed with the notion that if God is dead, it is because modern philosophy smothered Him with His compassion. Perhaps the only true utterance of Roscoe Conkling was his remark, which we commend to Mr. Price, that when Dr. Johnson called patriotism the "last refuge of a scoundrel," he was unaware of the possibilities inherent in the term "reform."