

Tuesday, January 23. 2007

Collective memories must be sharpened and broadened to stop injustice.

U.S. government photo. Napalm was one of the horrors of the Vietnam war. Here is the horrifying picture of Kim Phuc and other villagers after a napalm attack. Here are Kim Phuc's resulting physical scars. The vast majority of American soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere not only do not recall the countless American military atrocities in Vietnam as they happened, but were not even born yet. What a splendid way for the military to have recruited with a cleansed slate on Vietnam, let alone the invasions of Grenada and Panama, and the list goes on. Rambo's asking his father if "we get to win this time" in Vietnam probably is better known by those under forty than the horrors of My Lai and mini-My Lais. Enter former Senator Gary Hart to remind us how critical are our collective memories at this time of civil liberties violations that approach and probably collectively exceed the civil liberties violations during the 1950's Communist witchhunts. His words are tremendously sobering in this December 2005 piece about the Bush Administration's continued reversal of the many post-Nixon Congressional efforts to reign in executive branch abuses committed in the name of national security. Mr. Hart's 1980's Donna Rice scandal makes his words no less important to heed. Mr. Hart's short article particularly drew my attention to the CIA's Phoenix program in Vietnam, in which American soldiers captured and killed countless innocent Vietnamese based on information from South Vietnamese army officers and village chiefs, where sometimes the finger-pointing was to settle a private score and had nothing to do with fighting the perceived "enemy" of the American military. In December 2003, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh wrote about the Phoenix Project and its relationship to today's covert United States intelligence operations in Iraq. Much of his piece still rings true today. One of my best friends -- who, like me, was obsessed from an early age with the world's injustices and who was determined to change that -- talked to me during law school in 1988 about how complacency (and fear for job security and social status security) was so prevalent at the expense of activism for justice. Since that time, with some people spurred on in part by the subsequent recession and wars, plenty of people are refusing to be complacent and are speaking out for civil liberties and human rights. Let us remember that today's injustices from government officials, employees and legislators in the United States come from all over the political spectrum. It will be a terrible mistake to expect that merely replacing Bush with a Democrat will automatically make the United States a civil liberties paradise. The Internet -- despite all the disinformation among the reliable facts on the Web-- has made it easier than ever to learn about past injustices so that they not be repeated. Jon Katz. ADDENDUM: More on the Vietnam atrocities are found through the Winter Soldier Investigation [here](#) (text); [here](#) (Winter Soldier Investigation video); [here](#) (part one of Winter Soldier Investigation excerpts); and [here](#) (part two of Winter Soldier Investigation excerpts).

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 01:00