

Byrd's Eye View
A Public Service Column by
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A WASTE OF LIFE

Americans have been horrified by recent spectacles of adult citizens of our Nation making human torches of themselves, apparently in voluntary protest against our Viet Nam policy.

Such self-immolation--by fire--is foreign to our way of life--alien to the customs and mores of our modern free and open society. The mode of this violent act of self-killing--by making a human torch of one's self--has its origins outside of our Western-bred culture; and it is significant that this idea originally came to recent worldwide attention in connection with "Buddhist" protests in South Viet Nam, having been violently utilized by fanatics to bring pressure against the officially established Diem government. An obvious similarity exists between those public actions in Saigon and actions by persons in the United States who, ostensibly, seized upon this method of self-destruction as a means of publicizing their protests against the military policies of our Nation in Viet Nam.

As one facet of the problem, students of mass movements have long noted that acts of suicidal violence seem to have a fascination for persons of deep frustrations and poorly adjusted personalities. Often a suicide of a particular type will apparently trigger a wave of similar acts. In Japan, Mount Fujiyama, the high volcanic peak in Central Honshu, has been a traditional goal of pilgrimage for the Japanese; and its volcanic crater (the last eruption having occurred in 1707) has, on occasions, had an apparent irresistible attraction for disappointed lovers, with youths hurling themselves to death in its depths. One such action sometimes seems to set a pattern for others to follow.

In past centuries, suttee--the compulsory suicide performed out of loyalty to a dead master or spouse--has been practiced in India. In ancient China, similar behavior was expected of a dead emperor's favorite courtiers.

However, self-killing is expressly condemned by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and attempts are punishable by law in various countries of the Western society. Attempted suicide has been classed as a felony in England since the 11th century. In the U.S., attempted suicide is classified in some States as a misdemeanor, a felony, or no crime at all, with penalties seldom enforced. Pyschiatric custody is regarded as the preferable treatment, but severe punishment is provided for those who advise, or abet, suicide. Because of the similarity of "fiery torch" actions in the United States (such as that at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.) to those organized in South Viet Nam, the question arises as to whether these actions in the U.S. are a result of a "triggering" of such thoughts in the minds of frustrated, or sociologically disturbed, persons, or whether these actions have instead been the results of deliberate planning by elements hostile to the welfare of our Nation.

Persons who become a part of a power-hungry mass movement without a humanitarian basis, having freed themselves from any vague stirrings of decency, feel free to go to extremes of cruelty and ruthlessness--to exploit others whenever it is considered advantageous.

Whatever the origin of the fiery suicides in the United States, the wholesome protest of the general American public--the strong condemnation of such self-immolating actions--would appear to provide the best climate for discouraging such acts.