

Statement before the Justice Department. Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr.
October 30, 1967

What we are here to do is not a natural, easy thing for any of us. We are writers, professors, clergy, and this is not our "thing." But it must have been with precisely such people as we in mind that the poet Faguy wrote: "The worst of particularities is to withhold oneself, the worst ignorance is not to act, the worst lie is to steal away."

So we have come here to be with conscientious men in their hour of conscience; and because like them we cannot stand around with dry feet while wisdom and decency go under for the third time in Vietnam.

This week once again high government officials described protesters against the war as "naive," "wild-eyed idealists." But in our view it is not wild-eyed idealism but clear-eyed realism that brings us here. For as one of our number put it: "If what the United States is doing in Vietnam is right, what is there left to be called wrong?"

Many of us are veterans, and all of us have the highest sympathy for our boys in Vietnam. They know what a dirty, bloody war it is. But they have been told that the ends justify the means, and that the cleansing water of victory will wash clean their hands of all the blood and dirt. No wonder they hate us who say "There must be no cleansing water." But what they must strive to understand, hard as it is, is that there can be no cleansing water if military victory spells moral defeat.

We have the highest sympathies for those who back the war because their sons or lovers or husbands are fighting or have died in Vietnam. But they too must understand a very basic thing--that sacrifice in and of itself confers no sanctity. Even if half a million of our boys were to die in Vietnam that would not make the cause one-whit more sacred. Yet we realize how hard that knowledge is to appropriate when one's husband is numbered among the sacrificed.

The mother of a son lost in Vietnam once told me "My sonused to write how much he and his company were doing for the orphans. But I used to answer 'if you want to help the orphans, son, you must stop killing their fathers and mothers.'

Like this mother we do not dispute the good intentions, the good works of endless good Americans in Vietnam. But we do insist that no amount of good intentions nor good works, nor