



Village of Ben Suc

Jonathan Schell

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BEN SUC was a relatively prosperous farming village thirty miles from Saigon, on the edge of the Iron Triangle, the formidable Vietcong stronghold. It had been “pacified” many times, but because of security leaks no Vietcong were ever captured, and it always reverted to them. Therefore on January 8, 1967, American forces launched a surprise assault kept secret even from their South Vietnamese allies. The plan was to envelop the village, to seal it off, to remove its inhabitants, to destroy its every physical trace, and to level the surrounding jungle.

Jonathan Schell accompanied the operation from its beginning to its successful but dismal end, and reports it in depth as he saw it. This time no one slipped away. The story of the bewildering task of separating the V.C. from ordinary villagers is the dramatic core of the first part of this book.

The 3,500 villagers were moved to a refugee camp in Phu Loi, a barren, treeless “safe” area, with only what possessions they could carry. The bulldozers went to work and flattened every building. For security reasons no advance preparations had been made, and the move became a human and administrative nightmare. The people of Ben Suc were farmers, and there was nothing for them to do at Phu Loi, Mr. Schell offers vivid portraits of one individual after another—women, children, old men—as they are pacified and sink into apathy and despair.

Here is an overwhelmingly affective narrative of American skill and good intentions squandered in a cause made hopeless by misunderstanding, by resistant traditions, and by cultural gaps not only between ourselves and the villagers, but between them and the Saigon government. Mr. Schell’s report is devastating.

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