

“Let God Sort ‘em Out”

The Archaeology of a Warrior’s Catchphrase

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“The meaning of each proverb,” Wolfgang Mieder has observed, “must be analyzed in each of its unique social contexts” (1993, 11). While that is a sensible guideline for analyzing any social text, it has a particular salience with regard to proverbial phrases whose specificity make them less generalizable—less traditionally “proverbial”—than the generic words of wisdom we usually identify as proverbs. Even though all popular expressions must arise in some social context, some are more readily identified than others as apt comments on the human condition at large. Others, such as *blasons populaires*, are more socially and historically bounded, and might better be described as “proverbial expressions” than as “proverbs” proper. For example, I would consider the phrase “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth” a proverb proper; as metaphorical advice, it seems applicable (although also interpretable and debatable) to human beings in general. On the other hand, the phrase “Don’t trust a Greek bearing gifts” might be called a proverbial expression—something that sounds like a proverb but that is more bounded by historical circumstance. A Mongolian horseman might easily understand the “gift horse” idea; but unless he had somehow happened across a copy of the *Iliad*, the relevance of a gift-bearing Greek would be lost on him. Although it may be adaptable—as, for example, Wolfgang has shown that the “only good Indian” jibe is adaptable (Mieder 1997, 154)—at its heart it remains, quite specifically, an anti-Greek insult.

I begin with this distinction because the phrase I’m going to discuss, often identified as a “proverb,” is a good example of a historically bounded proverbial expression. It must therefore be analyzed within “each of its unique social contexts.”

The phrase is “Kill ‘em All. Let God sort ‘em out.” It will be familiar to anyone who is conversant with the popular expressions of the 1960s. During the Vietnam War, it was unofficially adopted by U.S. Special Forces and other warrior elites. No military command, so far as I know, had the effrontery to make it an official slogan. But it was “a common helmet scrawl” (Hopkins 1995, cited in Russell 1999, 290) among GIs, and it made its way quickly into the domestic economy, appearing—often alongside the image of a grinning skull—on items ranging from T shirts to coffee mugs, bumper stickers to key chains. It retains its popularity today as a byword for ruthlessness.

In Vietnam, the slogan boasted of a ferocity so merciless that, faced with the soldier’s ancient dilemma of whom to kill and whom to spare, it offered complete annihilation as a blanket solution. In a war whose distinguishing features included napalm, carpet bombing, the torching of hooches, and (on both sides) the mistreatment of captives, “Kill ‘em all” was perhaps not an uncharacteristic expression. Certainly it was not unique. One equivalent was the mock recruiting slogan, “Join the Army. See the world, meeting interesting people, and kill them.” Another, seen on a sign in a Special Forces camp, was, “If you kill for money you’re a mercenary. If you kill for pleasure you’re a sadist. If you kill for both, you’re a Green Beret” (Herr 1978, 257).

At first blush, one might see such phrases as simply grotesque acknowledgments of war’s brutality—and, on the U.S. side, of racist intolerance. This was a war in which the enemy and the civilian population from which it emerged were known, without apology, as “slants” and “gooks.” It was a war in which both sides routinely abused civilians. Oral histories by, among others, Jonathan Schell (1968), Michael Herr (1978), and Al Santoli (1981 & 1985) reveal in chilling detail how fiercely the Vietcong practiced terror against villagers, and how often American boys saw the physical abuse of Vietnamese, including rape, as a “right of combat.” The killing of noncombatants was understood as both unavoidable and vaguely amusing. A common expression in response to such events—accidental or intentional—was “Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke” (Cragg 1980, 172).

But there’s a nuance here that critics of the “Kill ‘em all” phrase often overlook. It’s implicit in the second part of the saying, where the soldier who has just indicated his eagerness to slaughter acknowledges that some of his victims may be innocent: It is not that everyone in his gun sights is equally worthy of death, but rather that he cannot be bothered to “sort them out.”

This extraordinary admission is gruesome enough. But it's not as mindlessly callous as it might first appear. The implication is not that "the only good gook is a dead gook" but that telling the difference between the good and the bad Vietnamese exceeds the capacity of mortal men.

That incapacity, I want to argue, is a direct function of the phrase's "unique social context." To understand its appeal to soldiers in the 1960s, we need to move beyond clichés about racism and martial brutality and examine the conditions under which this particular reflection of those maladies found a voice. In this paper, I provide a comparative framework for such an analysis by showing how the phrase functioned in two very different historical contexts. The obvious one is Vietnam, and I will turn to that shortly. The less obvious one is the context routinely identified as the phrase's *locus classicus*: the city of Beziers, in medieval Languedoc, during the so-called Albigensian Crusade.

Beziers was a center of the Manichean heresy known as Catharism. The specifics of the heresy, fascinating in themselves, need not concern us here. What matters is that in the summer of 1209 an army of French crusaders and their roughneck followers, endorsed by Pope Innocent III, descended from the North on Beziers, put it to siege, and demanded that the leaders surrender for punishment all heretics who were living within its walls. Beziers's Catholics refused to surrender their Cathar neighbors, and on July 22—Saint Mary Magdalen's Day—the city walls were breached and the crusading horde rushed in, initiating what a contemporary called "lo plus grand murtre de gens que jamais fossa fait en tout lo monde" (Anonyme 1971, 54) and a modern historian has called "the Guernica of the Middle Ages" (O'Shea 2000, 6). Estimates vary, but the consensus is that perhaps fifteen or twenty thousand people were put to the sword.

Legend says this happened in response to a command from the crusade's leader, the cleric Arnold Amalric. A field commander noted that it was impossible to tell Cathars from Catholics, especially since the former might pretend to be Catholics to avoid death. When he asked Amalric what was to be done, the cleric allegedly told him, "Kill them all. God will know his own." Or, in French, "Tuez les tous. Dieu reconnaitra les siens." (note 1) The phrase, as historians routinely point out, echoes II Timothy 2:19, where Paul, urging unbelievers to "shun profane and vain babblings," says that "the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his own."

Amalric's directive seems to encapsulate a "homicidal ethic" (Pegg 2008, page), and it is frequently quoted as an instance of religious fanaticism. It is also almost certainly apocryphal. Of the four contemporary chroniclers of the Albigensian Crusade, none mentions an exchange between Amalric and a field captain. (note 2) Nor does Amalric himself. In his report to the pope, he cheerfully announces that his camp followers put thousands to death, "irrespective of rank, sex or age," and that they burned the city (Amalric 1978, 128), but he does not mention an invocation of Paul's epistle.

The actual *locus classicus* for the famous line is a tract called *A Dialogue of Miracles*, written by a German monk, Caesarius of Heisterbach (1974), several hundred miles north of Beziers and at least a decade after its celebrated destruction. Caesarius could have heard the story from a crusader, it could have reached Germany in oral tradition, or he could simply have made it up, as he made up "tales of all sorts to point up the edifying conclusions he wished to impart" (ibid., 195). Most likely, "Kill them" (Caesarius's Latin was *Caedite eos*) was a deft appropriation of a Biblical phrase by a cleric intent on colorfully denouncing a heresy which he saw as execrable enough to deserve just such treatment.

We will never know, probably, whether or not Amalric ever uttered the line Caesarius attributed to him. But it certainly sounds like something a rabid heretic-hunter might have said: It answers to our conventional image of a "medieval" mindset, and it may I think be examined on just those grounds. Let me do that briefly, by asking what the phrase (apocryphal or not) might tell us about the mentality—and about the "unique social context"—of a 13th century Frenchman.

A clue to that context lies in Caesarius's invocation of Paul's letter to Timothy. There we find that to Paul—and presumably to his 13th century disciples—heresy was not an intellectual error but a moral one—he calls it a sign of "ungodliness" and a "canker" (II Timothy 2: 16-17)—which imperiled the souls not only of heretics themselves but also of the believers whom they might "infect." In the 13th century, "It was the duty of all men to combat heresy, according to their understanding and station in life. Failure to fight heresy was as evil as heresy itself" (Strayer 1971, 24). To Caesarius and Amalric, then, the slaughter at Beziers would have been seen as doubly moral. It sent the ungodly to damnation and the believers to Heaven. The good Catholics lost their physical lives. But because God "knew them," they gained an eternal

life of inestimably greater value. To a modern sensibility, this may seem grotesque. But in the 1220s, sending the virtuous to their deaths might easily have been considered an instrument of their salvation. This may explain why Amalric's report to Rome, lacking the least suggestion of regret or remorse, exults in "Divine vengeance [raging] marvelously" (Amalric 1978, 128).

To us this churchmen's logic seems simply off the charts—an example of a sensibility and a practice that, like the modern practices of honor killing, infibulation, and slavery, test our commitment to the principle of cultural tolerance. I won't argue for that principle, as it seems to me consistently overvalued by anthropologists. I will only say that, to understand the medieval resonance of the "Kill them all" phrase, we may have to enter a mindset that we find repugnant.

This observation applies in a different way when we consider the phrase's reappearance in Vietnam. That it was seen as relevant by U.S. soldiers there suggests that there may be parallels between Vietnam and Beziers, between the Cathar threat to the Church and the Viet Cong's perceived threat to democracy. But the similarities between the two situations are so much less important than the differences that to see the 20th century "Kill 'em all" as merely a resuscitation of the 13th century "Tuez les tous" would be to recklessly neglect each appearance's unique social context. Let me turn now to an examination of those differences.

At Beziers, those thought to be wicked were hiding within the virtuous population, posing a potential threat to souls, if not to bodies. In Vietnam, the hidden threat was more immediate and more physical. There, within every hamlet, were people who looked exactly like noncombatants but who were dedicated to killing and maiming Americans. In Vietnam, the distinction between "good" and "bad" locals was effectively erased as an entire population became—in reality, not just perception—a potential threat. Here, it was the inability to tell friend from foe that led to body bags for countless Americans, to both defensive and retaliatory aggression, and eventually to the rebirth of a "medieval" slogan.

Vietnam veterans' stories make this clear. Here's an example from Mark Baker's *Nam*, a collection of memoirs told "in the words of the soldiers who fought there": "You can't tell who's your enemy. You got to shoot kids, you got to shoot women. You don't want to. You may be sorry that you did. But you might be sorrier if you didn't. That's the damn truth" (Baker 1985, 193). A second example appears in veteran W.D. Ehrhart's poem "Guerrilla War" (1980):

They tape grenades
inside their clothes,
and carry satchel charges
in their market baskets.

Even their women fight,
and young boys,
and girls.

It's practically impossible
to tell civilians
from the Vietcong;

after awhile,
you quit trying.

Finally, a more elaborate example, from a third veteran. He has just described how a GI, irritated by a chafing bandolier, “throws the damn thing away and charges on.”

Along come the little kids, and they carry the bandolier off for the VC to shoot at that soldier with. Or say we break camp: the kids come in and they canvass it for an empty ration can. A bandolier and a ration can, a kid could make a grenade from. And throw it: I had to go through the villages thinking, *Which are the VC kids?* (Calley 1971, 59).

The speaker here is William L. Calley, the Army lieutenant found most directly responsible for the My Lai massacre and the only participant to suffer legal consequences. In reflecting on that terrible day in March 1968, he is puzzled by the complexity of his own response:

Could it be I did something wrong? I knew that war's wrong. Killing's wrong: I realized that. I had gone to a war, though. I had killed, but I knew, *So did a million others...*I

pictured the people of Mylai: the bodies, and they didn't bother me....I had destroyed the VC: the mission that day, I thought. *It couldn't be wrong or I'd have remorse about it* (ibid., 8).

His lack of remorse, understandably condemned by the antiwar movement, might also be interpreted as a logical defense mechanism from someone who lacked the information required to make a "moral" decision and who was only "following orders"—two circumstances which, by the way, earned him enormous support among Americans who believed him to have been judged unfairly (Bilton and Sim 1992).

To return to our proverbial expression, we can now see how its adoption in a new social context invests it with a quite different valence from the one it carried in medieval Languedoc. If crusaders at Beziers "killed them all" out of moral duty, soldiers in Vietnam who "quit trying" may have acted not out of mindless or racist rage but from a sense of frustration heightened by fear—a sense that, in this unique social context, sorting things out yourself might get you killed. The uncertainty rested on more than the traditional "fog of war." It was exacerbated by the fact that, like all guerrilla wars, Vietnam defied the traditional rules of military engagement, including the Geneva Convention's rule that you should not harm civilians. This humane proviso meant little to an enemy which looked for counsel to Mao Tse-tung, who had written that there was "no profound difference between the farmer and the soldier" (1965, 73), and that the relationship between the people and guerrillas was analogous to that between water and "the fish who inhabit it" (93). Another popular theoretician, Che Guevara, calling the guerrilla "the maverick of war," had stressed his immunity from traditional constraints: "He practices deception, treachery, surprise, and night operations. Thus, circumstances and the will to win often oblige him to forget romantic and sportsmanlike concepts" (1962, 8). Both comments were applicable to Vietnam, where it was virtually impossible to tell the difference between a friendly Vietnamese and a shadow warrior who would happily impale you on a punji stick. Indeed, given the support—free or coerced—for the Viet Cong among Vietnamese villagers, one might say that in many cases civilians *were* combatants. In that situation, to err on the part of humanity rather than self-protection could be fatal.

The force of the "Kill 'em all" injunction, then, was not simple bloodlust but a pragmatic refusal to honor a legal nicety that could cost you your life. Clearly, the sentiment implicit in the

phrase is morally problematic. But to see it as simply a reflection of racism or testosterone is to ignore its unique social context. In Vietnam, as in America's wars against the Plains Indians (see Martin), the mindset of annihilation may have been informed at least as much by apprehension as by aggression: It was the constant fear of attack by an elusive enemy—one frequently shielded by the civilian population—that engendered the grim response "Kill 'em all."

It's worth noting one other difference between Bezier and Vietnam. As I've suggested, it was quite possible for a 13th century warrior to slaughter women and children and not feel that he was violating a moral code, much less God's law. Not so for American soldiers in the 1960s. To young draftees, frequently forced to kill civilians simply because the sorting out process was too dangerous, the psychological toll of this kind of warfare was severe. The prevalence of PTSD among Vietnam veterans attests to that fact.

I no more want to justify My Lai than I want to justify Bezier. But, again in the interests of contextualization, I do want to say that their common catch phrase is only understandable if we transcend the catchall of masculine aggressiveness and listen to the slogan's resonance in each context. The actions of Bezier and My Lai may have been similar, but the psychology driving them was dramatically different.

Finally: Why is the phrase still popular today? Part of the explanation, I suppose, is that ersatz warriors find it daring to flaunt an intimidating image, and they embrace the slogan as a boast—to quote Gene Wilder's parody in *Silver Streak*—that "We be bad." Eric Eliason, who served with Special Forces in Afghanistan, suggests that Green Berets use the phrase rarely and half mockingly, as a darkly humorous taunt. "Their very job," he says, is to take great care in 'sorting them out.' 'Kill 'em all' is only taken seriously by poser soldiers—guys who have grown up on too many Rambo movies."

But there may be more than that to the slogan's continued popularity. In today's world, guerrilla warfare has become the dominant mode of combat. An attack on U.S. troops in Afghanistan, for example, is as likely to come from an IED or a suicidal teenager as from a mortar or an RPG. In this world, where the innocence of civilians is again being viewed with suspicion, "killing them all" reemerges as an answer to frustration. We may now admit that "sorting them out" is not God's job but ours. At the same time, though, we may have to

acknowledge that collateral damage is an inevitable consequence as we enter ever more engagements with the world's shadow warriors.