

THE GOOD SOLDIER

War is a very bad thing—we say that every time it happens. But it does seem to be a social habit, so perhaps we should consider how far we enjoy it and set it up. Most wars become “official”; they are “declared”; and then some common codes of decency are suspended. Men realize they are freer to behave badly, and there have been wars in which the hallowed Geneva conventions have been forgotten. Murder can run riot over talk of strategy or “decisiveness.” Bravery itself falters ideologically in the face of ordinary cowardice and compromise.

In the television documentary *The Vietnam War*, by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, it is steadily conceded that official, “permitted” combat killing was one thing, and the casual offing of civilians, or “the wrong gooks,” was another, not to be confused with GIs sometimes disposing of zealous officers who insisted on one damn attack after another. Still, there will always be a conserva-