

A General's Private War

WASHINGTON—Americans ought to view with the gravest misgivings the admission by Gen. John D. Lavelle that he ordered some 20 unauthorized raids on North Vietnam, using the phony excuse of "protective reaction."

This case of irresponsible contempt for civilian authority by a high military leader becomes all the more worrisome against the background of Communist China's recent characterization of U.S. bombings in the North as a threat to China's security.

LAVELLE'S PRIVATE fling at wider warfare, for which he has been fired, is but one flagrant example of the leashing that top military men have engaged in throughout a war that for them has been utterly frustrating.

Consider the impact of Lavelle's unauthorized raids on the chances for a negotiated peace in Paris, something Mr. Nixon now seems to be seeking with renewed vigor. We have dismissed as mere Communist rhetoric charges by Hanoi that that the U.S. was lying about its bombings.

But Hanoi has known all along what Lavelle only now has admitted: that he bombed because he wanted to bomb, and there was no Communist missile fire or hostile radar tracking to justify his claims of protective reaction.

Can you blame the enemy for doubting the integrity of our proposals in Paris? Can we dismiss the prospect of another Lavelle ignoring policy and bombing so close to or

into, China, finally drawing the Chinese into direct warfare?

Yet, Lavelle is unrepentant, asserting that if he had it to do over he would still order the bombings.

In saying this he has rekindled fears of the military that millions of Americans harbor. In almost every audience one stands before nowadays there is someone who asks whether Presidents Johnson and Nixon "were swept along into foolish decisions about Asia because they feared the military."

These notions that Pentagon admirals and generals tell U.S. presidents what to do are naive. The military leaders have influence, but if they were half as powerful as some Americans pretend to believe, Gen. Curtis Le May would have had us devastating North Vietnam, and perhaps China, too, eight years ago.

The problem is that presidents, secretaries of state and even secretaries of defense worry that the military leaders frequently are doing what Lavelle did: stretch war policies, evade them, sneak around them.

THE REMARKABLE thing is that there have been so few defiant generals like Lavelle in this country's long history. Civilian control of the military has remained firm enough that Americans virtually never think of a military coup in this country.

We would do well to keep it that way.