



General Lavelle-- The Scapegoat?

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A STOCK character in fiction is the gung-ho American military man hooked on anti-Communism to the point of starting a nuclear war by private actions taken against the explicit orders of the President. All of us are tempted to cast in that role General John Lavelle, the air commander who has been retired and demoted for exceeding bombing orders in Vietnam.

But the evidence, though not yet complete, points in another direction. It suggests a supreme company man who allowed himself to be made the scapegoat for a massive, sophisticated and systematic stretching of Presidential orders by the military commands in both Washington and Vietnam.

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THE OFFICIAL version of the case is relatively simple. In the four-month period between Nov. 8, 1971-March 8, 1972, 147 planes carried out 28 missions over North Vietnam and that went beyond the standing order to bomb only after being fired upon, or locked by enemy radar.

On March 8, the violations were brought to the attention of the Air Force Chief of Staff, John Ryan, who ordered an investigation. As a result, General Lavelle was demoted from four-star to three-star rank and retired. End of story, almost.

Only a lot of little details keep coming to the surface which prolong the story. For one thing, General Lavelle, in testimony to the investigating subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, said that his practice of hitting the enemy first and then calling it "protective reac-

tion" was widely known in Vietnam.

Then there is a curious set of developments that took place on March 8 — the day the first evidence of the bombing excess was supposedly made known to General Ryan. On that very day in Vietnam, the Air Force suddenly stopped giving detailed briefing accounts of raids over North Vietnam.

On top of that, there is the treatment accorded Representative Otis Pike (Dem-N.Y.), who has forced the issue to the surface. On two occasions, very high officials in the Pentagon intervened to muzzle Pike. Once, it seems, General Ryan offered to give him the true facts providing Pike kept them to himself. Pike refused.

On a second occasion, it seems, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird offered to give Pike the true story provided Pike kept it off the record. Pike again refused.

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FINALLY and most importantly, there is the demeanor and personality of General Lavelle. Nothing in his background suggests the one-man operation; everything points towards the conformist.

At the hearing, his attitude towards what he had done was uncontrite, and he seemed to be on the best of personal terms with General Ryan, the man who hammered him. At one point General Lavelle said that he would do it just the same if he had it to do all over again.

When the violation of orders became known, the instinct of the system was to find a scapegoat. General Lavelle, loyal to the Air Force all the way, stepped forward.