20 SEP 72

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The Lavelle case: 'Something that sticks out here'

Tom Wicker

WASHINGTON — Sen. John Stennis of Mississippi is not likely to be elected man of the year by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but he may be the ideal person to investigate the strange case of Gen. John P. Lavelle and the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam. Not only is the senator a man of unquestioned personal integrity and one of those Southern patriarchs who commands exceptional respect in the Senate; he also has been active and effective for so long as a member of the Armed Services Committee that he knows as well as any man can where the bodies are buried in the Pentagon and the boondoggles are buried in the defense budget.

It is therefore a warning signal as loud and clear as a fire siren that Stennis has refused to commit himself to approval of Gen. Creighton W. Abrams as Army chief of staff, and that he remarked the other day that "there is just something that sticks out here . . . I just do not see how (General Lavelle) could, on his own . . . have launched out on plans like this."

Sen. Stennis
Knows where the bodies are buried

Something 'sticks out'

Indeed, there is something "that sticks out here." It is the damage done to military discipline, civilian control of the military, and the nation's position as a law-abiding power. Although the dimensions of the Lavelle affair are not yet clear, all three of these concepts appear to have been outraged by it; they now must be added to the endless casualty list of this longest and most dubious war in American history.

That is so whether or not Lavelle is vindicated in his contention that his superiors—specifically, Abrams and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer—knew and approved of the secret raids that were described officially as "protective reaction."

If they did not know, and Lavelle is proved to have been acting on his own, that would be at the least a grievous breakdown of discipline, one tending to bring the nation into disrepute and to disrupt its diplomatic undertakings. Moreover, as Stennis noted, at least once Lavelle and Abrams were "corrected" from Washington for a raid the Joint Chiefs said had been improper and unauthorized—but nothing else was done for two more months while many other improper raids were launched and then only to Lavelle, who at that was allowed to retire at a virtually tax-free $25,000 annually. Some punishment!

More than breakdown

But if Lavelle's superiors were aware of, or encouraging, the secret raids, something more than a mere breakdown of military discipline—bad as that is—is suggested. There seem to be two possibilities. One is a military conspiracy to sabotage, or at least in defiance of, national policy.

The other is that—generals not being notorious for sticking their necks out—the whole episode might have been known to the supposed civilian master of the armed forces, or to some of them. It may seem extraordinary to suppose that the administration or any of its officials could play such a deceptive game, but the history of this war is replete with extraordinary deceptions by American officials.

Whatever the facts finally show, the Lavelle affair raises in the sharpest way the question why either the civilian or the military spokesmen of this administration should be accepted at face value when they say that American planes are not bombing the Red River dike system in North Vietnam. The unauthorized raids of last winter and spring show all too well that these spokesmen could either be misinforming or misinformed.

Gen. Lavelle
Acted on his own?

Even more clearly, the Lavelle affair suggests that Hanoi has even less reason than the American people to trust official American statements. They knew right along that those "protective reaction" raids were no such thing, and in violation of the so-called "understanding" by which president Johnson had stopped the bombing in 1968.

The moral rot

The worst of all this may be the way it is being handled in this country. If Lavelle were solely responsible, he ought to have been severely punished; but he was not, certainly not by comparison to what happens to any ordinary person convicted of, say, assault or armed robbery. If his military superiors were implicated with him, the most sweeping penalties ought to be invoked all along the line; but Abrams is being nominated for the highest Army post, senators are falling over one another to pledge him their support, and other than for some members of the Senate committee, no one—certainly not the White House or the Pentagon—seems exercised over the matter.

Thus, the moral rot of the Vietnam war continues to foul institutions and processes — let alone men — of which Americans once were justly proud. How can anyone contend that there ever was anything to be gained in Indochina remotely worth the values and the honor the nation has lost in this corrupting war?

Same column, NYTimes 19 Sep 72, filed Lavelle.