

APR 10 1971

THE NEW YORK TIMES, S

The Conscience of the King

THE KING (in disguise): *Methinks I could not die anywhere so contented as in the King's company, his cause being just. . . .*

WILLIAMS (a soldier): *But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day and cry all, 'We died at such and such a place,' some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them. . . .*

—Shakespeare, "King Henry V": In the English camp the night before Agincourt.

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, April 9—It is a strange feeling to be part of a country whose President shows less concern for the process of law than for the comfort of a man found guilty of murdering little children. A President who shows less concern for millions of Indochinese civilians, their lives and safety, than for his own political appearance.

Respect for the Presidency is built into the consciousness of most Americans; it rightly inhibits the most skeptical reporter in the White House. But the events of the last two weeks compel one to face the reality of this President: the moral insensitivity of Richard Nixon.

Consider one passage of his latest speech to the nation on Vietnam. The President said it was "time for Hanoi to end the barbaric use of our prisoners as negotiating pawns." That from a man who had just intervened on behalf of an American officer convicted of killing in cold blood at least 22 civilians who were under his control. The speech, making a political argument for the Nixon policy in Indo-

AT HOME ABROAD

china, emphasized the reduction in American casualties. There was a passing reference to South Vietnamese military casualties.

But Mr. Nixon said not one word about the cost of the war to the civilians of Indochina, the people who happen to live there.

No one could have known, from listening to him, that since the United States intervened actively in the war, there have been more than 1.5 million civilian casualties, most of them from American and allied action. Or that four or five million people in South Vietnam alone have been made refugees, mostly by American or allied action.

No one could have learned from the President of the United States that this being killed and wounded and made year, right now, more civilians are homeless in Indochina than ever before, most of them by American and allied military action. For Richard Nixon, none of this carries any weight in the scales. It is not worth mentioning.

In explaining why he could not put an end to the American involvement in Indochina, the President said: "If the United States should announce that we will quit regardless of what the enemy does, we would have thrown away our principal bargaining counter to win the release of American prisoners."

But there is no if. Mr. Nixon's Secretary of State has already said that American withdrawal is irreversible. The world knows that the United States is on its way out of Vietnam no matter what the military situation

may be. The reason has just been stated by Stewart Alsop, a supporter of the war, in Newsweek: "It is not practical to try to continue to fight a war that has no popular support at all."

In short, the Nixon policy is to go on fighting, and killing, in a war that America demonstrably does not want and is giving up. He says we have to do that because otherwise our allies will stop believing us and we shall stop believing in ourselves. It is a view of belief that defies not only morality but reason. For only an end to the war can restore confidence in America, just as anyone can see that only an end is likely to bring the prisoners home.

The President has immense power of persuasion. When he tells the country that war is its patriotic duty, the automatic reaction is patriotic. When he says that we have won a great victory in Cambodia or Laos, the people want to believe him.

But there are limits of credibility, and they have been reached. No President can persuade sensible men that a Cambodia pitted with American bombs and half-controlled by Communist forces marks a victory for the free world. No President can turn what happened in Laos into triumph. No President can permanently ignore the moral sensibilities of the American people.

Mr. Nixon quoted Jefferson to the effect that Americans will always choose hope over despair. True, that is why we can have confidence that in the end the American conscience will understand murder in Vietnam for what it is. One can only pray that the country will not be torn apart while waiting for that understanding to penetrate the conscience of the President.