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Is Recrimination Necessary?

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, April 12—A vacation in which scant attention was paid to the news may provide a poor perspective, but what offers a good one these days? And in the instant case, two strong impressions did work their way unscientifically through more personal concerns.

One was that since the Laos invasion began in euphoria and ended in haste, Americans have turned massively—perhaps decisively—against the war, and want it ended straight away. The other is that the tremendous outcry against the conviction and sentencing of Lieutenant Calley was a cry from the hearts of millions of Americans, however strange that may seem to others of different attitudes and experience.

There is nothing necessarily contradictory about these conclusions. Everyone may want the war ended. But the number of those who apparently regard Lieutenant Calley as a hero, or as a soldier serving his country, or as a young man who killed Communists as he was supposed to do, is cautionary. It suggests how many want to end the war only because it is not being "won," because it is too bewildering in its complexities, because it is hard to make it fit the standard national myth of good Americans vs. bad foreigners, or because it has gone on too long and become too exhausting and dispiriting.

It is altogether likely, therefore, that the Calley reaction confirmed Mr. Nixon in his apparent belief that an American "defeat" in the war would lead to a revival of McCarthyism—or worse—in this country. Certainly it lent authority to Mr. Nixon's warning

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in his speech last week that a precipitate end to the war "would plunge [us] from the anguish of war into a nightmare of recrimination."

That is not merely a self-serving or fairy-tale view on Mr. Nixon's part, and it ill behooves those who have long and consistently opposed the war to suppose that it is. After all, many of these war critics already are actively engaged in searching for and denouncing scapegoats who got us into the war—an explicit form of "recrimination." It is altogether likely that their opposite numbers sooner or later will start looking for the scapegoats who got us out of it—or prevented us from winning it, as the charge is more likely to be put.

Moreover, Mr. Nixon is right to worry in advance about this possibility, as it would be any prudent President's duty to do. It is doubly suggestive of the man, therefore, that he has consistently conducted himself and spoken to the nation in a fashion much more likely to increase the likely "recriminations" than to diminish them.

At least Mr. Nixon has stopped talking about the inevitable bloodbath that would ensue if the Communists took over South Vietnam; such scare talk was hardly the way to prepare the nation for anything less than an American triumph. In other ways, however, he continues to strum the chords of anti-Communism, patriotism and mindless sentimentality—as in his supposedly serious remarks last week, when a tear-jerk ending reminded millions of viewers of the Checkers speech of nineteen years ago.

How will it help to avoid tearing the nation apart in "recrimination" to promise "a South Vietnam free to determine its own future" and an end to the war "that will redeem the sacrifices that have been made," in a speech that had already made clear that the best the South Vietnamese can hope for is "a reasonable chance to survive as a free people"? How will it ease future conflicts to say now that "the other plan" would "give victory to the Communists"?

How can it possibly soften the coming "recriminations" for the President to suggest by his intervention the possibility that Lieutenant Calley is a victim of injustice and politics, when there is not a shred of evidence to support that view and much to refute it?

Even without such Presidential intervention, the Calley case graphically demonstrates that the fear of a post-war political "nightmare" is real and justified. A President genuinely and properly concerned to avoid it might be saying at least two things—not yet heard from Mr. Nixon—to the American people.

He might be saying that a nation can hardly demonstrate "the courage and character of a great people" by winking at or refusing to acknowledge the proved guilt of individuals for specific deeds, like shooting prisoners of war and clubbing old men in the mouth.

But he might also be saying that greater national wisdom and unity will not be found in a search for individual villains, although there may be some; they will be found, if at all, in honest and searching study of the war's painful lessons for us all. Disillusionment may bring recriminations, but it can also bring enlightenment.

Last sentence above presumably refers to remarks added at end of speech - not carried in official text as published by NYTimes - about his feelings on being saluted by small boy, to whose father he had just awarded a posthumous medal.