

Hope Against Hope

Buffalo Bill's
defunct

who used to
ride a watersmooth-silver

stallion

and break onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat

Jesus

he was a handsome man

and what i want to know is

how do you like your blueeyed boy

Mister Death

—e.e. cummings

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON—One striking aspect of President Nixon's decision to mine the harbors of North Vietnam, and the manner of its taking, was his contempt for the concept of law. He did not even attempt to justify in international legal terms what stood, unless justified in some way, as an act of outlawry. Domestically he showed not the slightest deference, in committing this formal act of war, to the Constitution's requirement that Congress declare war.

Law is a restraint on the exercise of arbitrary power. Its absence here symbolizes the danger in what the President has done, the sense he has conveyed of power without restraint. But there is another reason, perhaps more concrete, to view this moment in American history with the deepest anxiety. That is the prospect ahead.

If mining Haiphong does not work in the sense of making the North Vietnamese accept Mr. Nixon's terms—and almost no informed person thinks it will—what will this President do next? Bomb the Red River dikes to flood North Vietnam? Use B-52's to turn Hanoi into a salt plain? Use nuclear weapons?

Nothing can be excluded. The possibilities may sound fantastic now, but even a little while ago so did mining Haiphong. And each step makes the next easier. Every reason he gave for this one—preventing a Communist victory in the South, keeping our pledge to President Thieu, maintaining American credibility—will as easily justify the next.

It would be understandable now if Americans who oppose the war gave way to hopelessness. For over all these years of obsession with Vietnam nothing has seemed to make a difference: not protests or elections or Congressional resolutions. Four years after Lyndon Johnson began de-escalating the American war in Vietnam, Richard Nixon has taken it to its highest pitch yet.

But the duty of those who see their country on the path of self-destruction is still to make the attempt to stop it. And at least now there is no longer any question of ambiguity, political or moral. It is clear that this war can never end while Richard Nixon is President unless by overwhelming political effort. It is a problem of politics.

Mr. Nixon could have ended it all

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three years ago, with decency for himself and his country. Those three years have accounted for more than one-third of all American battle deaths in Vietnam, and for well over half of all the bombs and shells that have scarred Vietnam and her people. And what does he, or do we, have to show for all that destruction?

The duty of those who want to prevent more years of dishonor and danger begins with one simple understanding: that this issue is now paramount. It comes before other obligations, before personal ambition or comfort.

For the ordinary citizen that means participation in some form of political expression, however inconvenient. It means even a step that in less urgent circumstances would be doubtful—involving one's professional association, school or other activity in the attempt to stop the war. But it does not mean violence or irrationality. The object is to convince Washington, not to destroy symbols somewhere else.

For those holding office in Washington there is a special obligation of conscience. That is to consider resigning from this Administration.

The old argument is that the man who doubts his Government's policy does more good by staying and working for change from within. That had weight when, in the Johnson Administration, there was still a reasonable chance that the policy would work or that the President would change it in response to facts.

Those excuses are no good any more. The policy of bombing and mass destruction has been tried for seven years, and no one really thinks it can work. This President is remote from the world of human beings, of blood in Vietnam, of agony in America. He is impervious to facts.

In those circumstances the only real question for a high official opposed to our course in the war is political: Might his resignation have some impact? He cannot salve his soul with the thought that he is doing good elsewhere: Building a better welfare system or budget is marginal stuff compared to ending this war. He has to look at himself in the mirror. So do we all.