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Facing the Dark Reality

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Nov. 28—Europeans might be expected to take some grim satisfaction these days at the troubles of their rich and powerful ally across the Atlantic. But the Vietnam massacre reports, on top of all the other recent American tragedies of violence and social conflict, have in fact produced almost no such *schadenfreude*.

The sickening stories of what happened at Songmy have not evoked the suggestion that Americans are an evil people. The episode is rather seen as a reminder that there is a dark side to all human beings, to all societies.

The people of Europe have experienced that darkness so recently in their own countries that they cannot but acknowledge its existence. Frenchmen of sensibility remember torture in Algeria. The British have on their consciences brutality in India and Ireland and other colonial outposts. The German examples of savagery need no reminder.

But it is not much of a solace to Americans to know that other people have been guilty of inhumanity. For we thought we were different. We thought we had crossed the ocean to escape from the old tyrannies

and found an idealistic society. We thought man's fate since the fall would be overcome in America.

We learned all that in school. Of course there was a good deal of hypocrisy in the lesson. Few of us stopped to think that our civilization was established in North America by the mass slaughter of Indians. Or to understand the cost of slavery, to whites as well as blacks. Or to consider the significance of the periodic waves of intolerance that have swept what we think of as an open society.

Pains of Social Growth

To recognize the bad in ourselves with the good, to see ourselves honestly, would be healthy for the United States in the end. Only children and stunted adults live in fairy tales. Growing up is good for countries as well as individuals.

But the process of learning to know oneself can be as painful for a society as for a person. There is a temptation to deny the unpleasant truth, to attach blame to others, to pick out scapegoats. But that way, in conditions of stress, lies national hysteria.

The task of American leadership today, therefore, is to give

us the strength to face the darkness in ourselves. Strength of that kind is nourished by unity. No leader can make all Americans agree on particular policies, for Vietnam or any other problem. But a leader can encourage mutual understanding and sympathy.

That conception of our need makes the recent posture of the Nixon Administration seem, from a distance, strange and dangerous. To all appearances men close to the President, with his approval, have set out deliberately to inflame mutual suspicion and division in the country.

There was the Attorney General of the United States predicting and, some would have thought, provoking violence in an antiwar demonstration—and then insisting afterward, in the teeth of the facts, that it had been violent. There was the Vice President teaching some Americans to hate and fear others—and fastening at last on that familiar object of political paranoia, the press.

The slowness of the Administration's reaction to the massacre allegations also raised questions. Once the charges had been published, a high-level statement of concern and determination to find the facts

was obviously essential if an impression of callousness or evasiveness was not to get abroad. Yet it was a week before the first real comment from a high official—Secretary of Defense Laird's forthright reply to Senator Fulbright that he was "shocked and sick" at the charges—and two more days before a statement from the White House.

Risks of Probes

The facts and the implications of the incident at Songmy are now surely going to be fully explored, and that will make the need for unifying political leadership in the United States even greater. In any such investigation there lurk temptations to find scapegoats, to seek political gain from a national disaster. But the risks are awesome.

Europeans know the danger of trying to govern a country by dividing and frightening its people. Those were the tactics of the right in the Dreyfus case, and the resulting bitterness permanently scarred the politics of France; those were the tactics of the Nazis. In the long run any people must seek the answer to their troubles not in others but in themselves.