

The Meaning of Hypocrisy

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, June 4 — The contemporary critics of our society often speak of its "hypocrisy." It is a charge naturally resented by the society's leaders, for with few exceptions they feel perfectly sincere in what they do.

But the charge is really not one of conscious insincerity; it is one of self-deception. The critics would say that those who run our politics and our economy blind themselves to inconvenient realities, to the unpleasant consequences of their policies.

There was a telling example in President Nixon's press conference this week. A questioner asked about the

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reports of mass heroin addiction among American soldiers in Vietnam.

"I think it is well for us to put the problem of drug addiction in Vietnam in perspective," the President replied. He said the United States had a drug problem generally, not only in Vietnam, and called for a new program of law enforcement, treatment and information.

But it is appallingly obvious that the heroin problem among the soldiers is different from the general American situation, and much worse. Official reports estimate that 10 to 15 per cent of the troops are addicted. If the problem were on that scale at home, it would mean 20 or 30 million addicts in the United States.

Mr. Nixon rightly mentioned the ready availability of heroin as a factor in Vietnam. But he said nothing about another reason for the incidence of heroin use among those troops: they are fighting for a cause they do not understand and do not believe in, by methods that are cruel and in some cases criminal. That men conscripted into such a war should seek narcotic oblivion is hardly surprising; sometimes they also shoot their officers. For an American official to discuss heroin addiction in Vietnam without

mentioning that context is a staggering example of selective vision.

President Nixon went on, in his answer to the question about heroin in Vietnam, to volunteer a comment on marijuana. He said he could see no justification for legalizing its use: that "would simply encourage more and more of our young people to start down that long, dismal road that leads to hard drugs and eventually self-destruction."

There again the social critics, especially the young, would recognize the familiar indicia of humbug: ignorance of, or contempt for, the facts; selective moralizing; argumentative overkill for political reasons.

Whether to legalize the use of marijuana is a serious issue. Certainly a society is entitled to limit the use of a mind-affecting drug, even though it permits others and the controls are not altogether logical. But it cannot help to discuss the issue in hysterical terms.

Dr. Lester Grinspoon of the Harvard Medical School, a student of the problem and author of the recently published "Marijuana Reconsidered," summed up his views in the Harvard Alumni Bulletin last month:

"No doctor will say that any drug is harmless. Aspirin kills people every year. But I'm convinced that marijuana is relatively harmless . . . it is a relatively safe intoxicant that is not addicting, does not in and of itself lead to the use of harder drugs, is not criminogenic [crime-producing] and does not lead to sexual excess."

Many doctors would take a much more skeptical view. But on the whole, today, serious debate about marijuana starts from the basis that it is probably less harmful physiologically than alcohol or tobacco and is not addictive. Doubts about making another euphoric drug generally available, and one with still uncertain qualities, are weighed against doubts about the effects of the existing, haphazardly enforced criminal laws.

Thus Dr. Dana Farnsworth, director of the Harvard health services, is opposed to legalization and considers marijuana a dangerous drug. But in

that same issue of the Bulletin he wrote that present anti-marijuana laws are "so severe and so out of proportion to the harm caused" that they destroy respect for law. He said it was time on this issue to substitute "reason for emotion."

Talk about the "long, dismal road that leads to hard drugs" is emotion without any proved basis in reason. When the President of the United States talks in those terms, he invites scorn from the informed.

But the question was about addiction in Vietnam. A fair answer, an honest answer, might have gone something like this: To have 30,000 young Americans led to heroin addiction in that war is a terrible thing, but it is a price we must be prepared to pay to give President Thieu's Government in Saigon a chance of survival.

The trouble with that kind of honesty is that it makes people think about questions of responsibility. It might recall Walter Lippmann's words way back at the beginning of American involvement in Vietnam: "I don't think old men ought to promote wars for young men to fight."