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Scary Dreams Of Mr. Nixon

WASHINGTON—In his televised address on the war last Nov. 3, President Nixon declared that a “precipitate” American withdrawal from South Vietnam “would inevitably allow the Communists to repeat the massacres which followed their takeover in the north 15 years before. They then murdered more than 50,000 people and hundreds of thousands more died in slave labor camps.” In his speech of April 30, when he announced the invasion of Cambodia, Nixon again adduced the bloodbath story to support his action. Part of what he called “the easy political path,” he said, would be “to desert 18 million South Vietnamese people, who have put their trust in us and to expose them to the slaughter and savagery which the leaders of North Vietnam inflicted on hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese who chose freedom when the Communists took over North Vietnam in 1954.”

Then, at his news conference on May 8, Nixon escalated. It was a “moot question” whether the war had been worthwhile, he said, but “now that America is there, if . . . we withdraw from Vietnam and allow the enemy to come into Vietnam and massacre the civilians there by the millions, as they would, if we do that, let me say that America is finished insofar as the peacekeeper in the Asian world is concerned.”

Let us pass mercifully over the highly revealing remark about “the peacekeeper in the Asian world” to the question of the bloodbath. On each of Nixon’s two earlier assertions of this historical hobgoblin, I wrote that the record disclosed no evidence that such an atrocity had occurred. Professor George McT Kahin, director of Cornell University’s Southeast Asia program, authored an article published on Dec. 6, 1969, refuting the President’s Nov. 1 statement. Several magazine articles have gone into the matter in detail, as have numerous books on Indochina, each concluding that there was no bloodbath in North Vietnam in 1954.

In fact, quite the opposite; the records of the International Control Commission disclose only 19 complaints of political reprisals and only one involving murder in North Vietnam in the two years following the armistice; nor did the ICC allege that its inquiries were in any way hampered by the Communist government. But in South Vietnam, 214 complaints were lodged in the same period against the Diem government, and when Ngo Dinh Diem in 1957 summarily barred the ICC from any further investigations, 1,047 complaints were still pending against him. Moreover, the Diem government itself report-

ed 48,200 arrests of Communists between 1954 and 1960.

So the only events resembling mass political reprisal after the 1954 armistice occurred in the South, not the North. What did happen in North Vietnam was a harshly repressed peasant revolt in 1955 and 1956 against a severe land reform program. It had nothing to do with Ho Chi Minh’s takeover of the government in 1954, and Kahin thinks perhaps 10,000 to 15,000 may have died.

As evidence for the likelihood of a bloodbath, Nixon also mentioned on Nov. 3 that the troops who captured the city of Hue during the 1968 Tet offensive may have “eliminated” as many as 3,000 South Vietnamese. But D. G. Porter and L. E. Ackland, writing in *The Christian Century* of Nov. 5, 1969, have reported their findings, after careful research, that most of these wicked executions took place in the heat of battle and as “the revenge of an army in retreat” and were no more the deliberate policy of “Hanoi than was the American massacre at My Lai the deliberate policy of Washington.

So there are at least three things to be said about the bloodbath Nixon insists will take place if the Communists take over South Vietnam. To the extent Americans are led to believe in this specter, the President makes it harder to justify any end to the war that would appear to give North Vietnam opportunity for such a massacre: that is, almost any compromise settlement.

The second is that, since there is no historical evidence to justify the bloodbath prediction, this is an emotional argument to match or exceed any of the “emotionalism” or “sentimentality” or “lack of realism” so often charged to war critics.

Finally, since Nixon’s staff is perfectly capable of pointing out an untruth no President should wish to assert, his insistence on the bloodbath seems to stem from something stronger than evidence. It is as though he wills it to be true, even though it isn’t, both to justify the war and his policy and to confirm the anti-communism on which rests so much of his public life. Believing, perhaps, has made it so.