

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON—How familiar it all seems as the generals and the jingoes begin their pressure for American intervention in Cambodia. The situation, we read, gives us a great chance to win the Vietnam war—if only we expand it. We must send arms and encourage the South Vietnamese Army to cross the border. The opportunity to clean out the Communist sanctuary is almost too good to be true. Etcetera.

After the pain of the war and the effort to disentangle ourselves from it, Americans naturally may find it frustrating to see the Vietnamese Communist forces enlarge their operations in Cambodia. And so the President's press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, denounces them as aggressors, aggressors blatantly violating the Geneva agreement in Cambodia as in Laos. But it is not that simple.

Forces and Tactics

For one thing, why should we expect the other side to play by our rules? We have B-52's and helicopters and CS gas and weapons beyond imagination; they have guerrilla tactics and ruthlessness. We operate from bases in Thai-

land and thousands of miles away; they slip into the other states of Indochina. There does not seem a great moral distinction.

Nor is it so clear that only the Communists are blatant violators of the Geneva accords. The evasions and lies of successive administrations about the American military presence in Laos have begun to be exposed by Senator Symington.

And in Cambodia it was the anti-Communists who upset the *status quo*, with the coup against Prince Sihanouk. The Vietcong and North Vietnamese could hardly have been expected to agree quietly to the cutting of their supply line through Cambodia. Their military activity may be intended primarily as pressure on Gen. Lon Nol to restore the *status quo*.

The character of the Lon Nol regime may also give us pause. After a week of bodies floating down the Mekong River—bodies of innocent Vietnamese residents of Cambodia evidently murdered because of their race—we now have had the Cambodian Army using unarmored Vietnamese civilians as an advance guard to draw enemy fire. Many were killed.

The general on the scene attributed that "psychological warfare plan" to Lon Nol.

The underlying conflict here is not political but racial, and centuries old. The Lon Nol Government, to the extent that it does govern, seems to have chosen to play on those ancient animosities. Do we really want to become involved in the entrenched bitterness of the Khmers and the Vietnamese, along with our other alien burdens?

A Siren Appeal

President Nixon now faces a siren appeal like the one that lured his predecessors in 1965: win the war by escalation. It may be worth remembering what America has done in that search for victory, and to what effect.

We have bombed Vietnam, North and South, with more explosives than were used in World War II. The military will of the North and of the Vietcong has not been broken.

We have pioneered the use of defoliants on a massive scale. Just now, belatedly, after much outcry, we have officially admitted that one of these chemicals may not only kill plants but cause human birth defects.

We have invented the concept of free-fire zones. That clean-sounding name actually tells American soldiers that they may kill any living thing with a clear conscience.

We have massacred civilians, women and children, in substantial numbers. Or so official investigations have concluded and legal proceedings charged.

Corruption of ourselves is the price we have paid for trying to impose our ideas on a scene where we do not belong. That is what American history will record, not the undoubted sacrifices in a selfless cause that President Nixon mentioned last week. The plea of good intentions will not suffice.

No Easy Way Out

To know all this, as the President must, is not to know an easy way out. But whatever the contradictions of his language, with the rhetorical gestures to victory, Mr. Nixon's policy is to reduce American involvement in Vietnam. And this time, in contrast to 1965, the issue is out in the open. There is no excuse for the President or any of us accepting an enlargement of the war without anticipating the consequences.