

# Vietnam: Remembered

## AT HOME ABROAD

By ANTHONY LEWIS

London, Nov. 6—When it is all over, some day, what shall we have learned from the war in Vietnam? What will it have told us about America and the world, about the use of power, about the relationship between political ends and military means?

To ask such questions now, when the war has evidently faded from the American political consciousness, must seem odd. But whether President Nixon's hope of gradual, quiet disengagement is realized or not, those questions will remain. No future American leader will rightly be able to ignore them in considering matters of international security.

The tragedy of Vietnam, from which so much ill has flowed, has been one of proportion. For a political end of modest significance, we have caused military destruction almost beyond imagination. That disproportion has overtaken all, becoming in itself the fundamental, self-destructive significance of the war for us.

Put to one side the radical critics and assume, as most of us would, that the United States went into Vietnam originally with good motives. We wanted to prevent a Communist takeover by force in South Vietnam.

But suppose President Eisenhower or President Kennedy had known originally that in trying to achieve that goal the United States would drop millions of tons of bombs on South Vietnam, that it would make an eighth of her population homeless, that it would poison much of her land with toxic chemicals. It is conceivable that they would have thought such a price worth paying?

Those are some of the things that the United States has in fact done in South Vietnam.

Exact figures are not available, but in the last five years, civilian casualties among the South Vietnamese are estimated at 300,000 or more. Some were killed or wounded by the Communist side, but American firepower is so much greater that experts think most casualties must be attributed to U.S. action.

Air bombardment is ours alone, and historically it is in a class by itself. While lawyers wrangle about the moral ambiguities of command decisions in the Sonmy massacre, the U.S. Air Force continues to drop tons of bombs at a distance so great—and on targets so

vague—that civilian casualties, though unintended, are inevitable.

The amount and effects of defoliation are disputed, but we do know that the use of such chemicals is an American novelty tried out in Vietnam. And we know that some materials have still been used, against orders, when they are suspected of causing genetic defects.

We have invented also the concept of the free-fire zone—the forced removal of population from a whole area, so that any moving thing may be shot at without compunction.

In 1968, Robert Kennedy estimated that American actions in South Vietnam had turned 2 million of the 16 million people in the country into refugees. Later estimates have put the figure as high as 3 million.

All these things were done in the name of realism. Hard-headed men decided that we must answer the cruelty of Communist guerrillas in our own way, with our own strength. But they were not truly realistic, for the results have been self-defeating.

For example, one reason often given for sending American forces into South Vietnam, and keeping them there, has been to prevent massacres that would take place if the Communists took over. But a Marine colonel who was there, James A. Donovan, has said: "Those who talk about the massacre of South Vietnamese that may happen at some future date if our troops leave the battlefield are apparently oblivious to the fact that a massacre of the Vietnamese has been going on for five years, and much of the bloodshed has resulted from U.S. firepower."

That comment is quoted in a new book by Telford Taylor, "Nuremberg and Vietnam: An American Tragedy." Professor Taylor, who was at the Nuremberg Trials for the United States, notes among other things that in recent years we have spent for civilian relief in Vietnam only about 4 per cent of our military expenditure there for air operations alone. Many now see us, Professor Taylor suggests, as John Steinbeck's Lennie, "gigantic and powerful, but prone to shatter what we try to save."

These are not only moral questions, luxuries in international politics. For they go right to the heart of our failure in Vietnam. The means we have used there have been so disproportionate to the political end we sought that we have succeeded mainly in arousing fear among others and revulsion and dissension among ourselves. That is the lesson to be remembered from Vietnam.