

The Bombing—II: The Message

By ANTHONY LEWIS

"I can assure you tonight with confidence that American involvement in this war is coming to an end."

RICHARD NIXON, April 7, 1971

LONDON, Jan. 2—The bombs that fell on North Vietnam for five days after Christmas carried a message as significant to the American people as to the Vietnamese. For the message, properly understood, dissolved a number of illusions Americans have had about President Nixon's policy in Indochina.

The illusion, laboriously constructed by the President, is that American forces remain in South Vietnam because the enemy holds American prisoners. The truth is the opposite: The prisoners are useful under the Nixon policy to help justify a residual American force.

The illusion has it that bombing is necessary to protect the remaining American forces in South Vietnam. The truth is now seen to be the opposite: A residual force will remain largely to provide a reason for continued bombing.

The illusion is that American responsibility for life and death in Indochina is slowly coming to an end. The truth is that the Nixon policy makes it impossible to see the end of American involvement.

Those conclusions are painful, but they are not just bitter paradox. They follow remorselessly from what more and more people are beginning to understand is Mr. Nixon's purpose in Vietnam: to end the combat role of American ground forces but win the war by other means.

That is why a commitment to massive continuing use of American air power has really been implicit all along in the Nixon withdrawal program. Without bombing and close

AT HOME ABROAD

support by American planes, the Thieu Government in Saigon would have little chance of surviving. And its survival is now, unambiguously, why we are in Vietnam: The talk of stopping China and advancing democracy has been dropped.

The South Vietnamese can take over some of the functions now carried out by American planes and pilots. But there is no realistic chance of their developing the capacity to bomb Laos and Cambodia and North Vietnam as we have, to cut the flow of enemy supplies, or for that matter of our giving them the necessary aircraft to do so.

How, then, can we expect Saigon to win the war?

One theory is that we can scare the enemy into giving up, by the threat of such bombing assaults as the one just completed. According to reports, this is Henry Kissinger's hope—that Hanoi can be driven to making a deal at the Paris peace talks, to accepting the Thieu Government.

But that is the same old mirage that Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk chased so long and so disastrously. They could not believe that, in the end, the immense power of the United States could be resisted by a tiny underdeveloped country like North Vietnam. But it could, as those who understood the extraordinary Vietnamese psychology had always warned. Why should Hanoi's will break now when it did not under endless months of heavier bombing?

It is actually an old delusion—the idea that a great power can bring about effective political results by bombing. Churchill's pseudo-scientific friend, Professor Lindemann, sold him on it in World War II; the result was

hundreds of thousands of deaths, German and Allied, that did not speed German capitulation.

If bombing does not make the enemy give up now in Indochina, what is the alternative way to assure the status quo in Saigon? It must be for the American bombing to go on indefinitely, with raids in the North whenever the military deems them necessary.

American opinion has been muted on the war over recent months. The President has had much greater success than critics expected in persuading the public to accept his policy. But that may be because the drop in troop levels and in American casualties seemed to point toward the inevitability of a total U.S. withdrawal.

What if the public begins to see that no end is in sight? What if those bombers go North again, every few months, to attack another reported enemy build-up? What if more planes are lost, and more pilots made prisoners?

Barring some diplomatic *deus ex machina*, that is the message of Richard Nixon's post-Christmas bombing: The United States will continue to have the air role in what The Economist of London, a strong supporter of the war, has just called "a permanent holding position in Vietnam." Permanent.

There may be some doubt that the people who live in Indochina would welcome that result; it means a perpetual war in Laos and Cambodia as well as Vietnam. Even assuming the merits of the Thieu Government, is it worth that cost?

But the more immediate question is what Americans want. Will they be prepared to face the fact that on the next Inaugural Day in Washington, and two years from now, and four, there will still be an American war in Indochina?