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Slaughterhouse Six

By ANTHONY LEWIS

AT HOME ABROAD

LONDON, April 16—In my generation we grew up believing in America. We knew there was a fundamental decency and humanity in our country, whatever its wrongs, and openness: The wrongs could be changed by reason and persuasion.

The violent and American rhetoric of the radicals and the young has therefore repelled us. To call the United States an aggressive country, so tightly controlled that only revolution could change its course, seemed the stuff of fantasy. A general might talk about bombing the Vietnamese back to the Stone Age, but our political system would never allow it.

That faith in America has been sorely tested in these last years, but never more terribly than by Richard Nixon's bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. For the truth is now impossible to escape if we open our eyes: The United States is the most dangerous and destructive power in the world. And its political leadership seems virtually immune to persuasion by reason and experience.

It is seven years—seven years!—since Lyndon Johnson began bombing North Vietnam. Literally millions of tons of American explosives have been dropped on Indochina since then, but the peninsula is no more "secure"—secure for the American system that we want to impose on it. Only a fool or a madman could believe, now, that more bombing will bring peace to Indochina.

Why are we bombing? To keep Nguyen Van Thieu in office in Saigon. To make sure that Nixon is not the first American President to lose a war. To teach the Russians a lesson about supplying arms to our enemies.

Those are some of the reasons that are advanced. To state them is to laugh, because none of them could remotely justify the disproportionate cost of the bombing in human or political terms.

Proportion: That is the terrible failure of American policy in Vietnam. Of course the Communists are fighting the war too, and attacking in the South, and killing human beings. But they are doing so in what they regard as their own country, for a genuine cause and at immense sacrifice to themselves. The United States is dropping bombs from 50,000 feet above a country thousands of miles from our shores, for no cause that Americans can state. How different the moral equation would be if the officials and the generals who give the bombing orders ever found their own lives at risk.

It is the old question of means and

ends. For American leadership in the world there is no more important question. Our allies have accepted our leadership because they believed we would exercise our power with restraint and wisdom.

Englishmen and Frenchmen will not easily lose their affection for America, and certainly not their fear of Communist tyranny, but they can hardly help noticing that it is not the Russians or the Chinese but the Americans who are bombing a distant country for reasons of pride and pique.

Yes, pique. Thinking about it, one realizes that that is the real reason for the escalation: Richard Nixon does not know how else to react to the Communists' advances on the ground, so he has chosen to punish them by slaughter in the mass. That is the ultimate disregard of the relationship between means and ends. It passes mistake and approaches crime.

The effect of Indochina will be to delay still further the adjustment to political reality that must some day take place—reconciliation among the people who inhabit the peninsula. Bombing can only destroy and embitter.

For America's place in the world, too, there must be damage. The reason was expressed the other day—before the expanded bombing—by a German known to American strategists as an outstanding thinker on alliance problems, Theo Sommer, deputy editor of Die Zeit.

Writing in The Financial Times of London, Mr. Sommer said: "It would be sad to see South Vietnam go down, but fatal to see the United States go in again." For "re-escalation" by the American side, he said, would make more likely an eventual American "revulsion" against military commitments elsewhere, notably in Europe.

But the most disastrous effects of the bombing escalation must be inside the United States. For no society can be at peace within when it begins to see itself as a destroyer outside.

What is left to say to those who question the very nature of America? After seven years, it is not possible to go on saying that it will all work out, that peaceful change within the political system will have its effect eventually. I cannot believe myself that violence improves the lot of mankind. The only hope left is that somehow—in some new form of protest—the decent strain in American life will make itself felt. The alternative is black despair.