

The View From Hanoi

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By ANTHONY LEWIS

HANOI, May 19—Writing from North Vietnam is a strange experience. A reporter seldom goes to a country with which his own is actively at war. But it is not only the emotions that are confusing. There is the problem of facts.

Ordinarily it is tedious and self-important for newspapermen to write about their own concerns. Like politicians, they asked for the job and deserve no sympathy. But the difficulty of forming accurate judgments about North Vietnam is not just a newspaper problem; it has been at the heart of the whole American entanglement in this war for seven years.

Consider the question of fear. I have been in North Vietnam a week now and during a considerable part of that time I have been afraid. Other Europeans here say the same—French, Swedish, Russian, Italian, British, East German. It is no fun being in a small country while the most powerful on earth is bombing it.

But in the bomb shelters, while the Europeans look especially pale, the Vietnamese chatter and laugh. Does this mean they are not afraid? Of course anything may become more bearable over time, but they clearly still know fear. They explain that they have no choice except to fight until the Americans go away. When a young girl says that, does it represent some general truth about Vietnamese attitudes?

That leads to the central question of this country's determination. It is simply impossible for an outsider to find anyone who expresses feelings other than a confident stoicism about the war. One asks a frail elderly man, a historian and poet, whether North Vietnam would fight on if America escalated the bombing further. He replies:

"In 1945 and '46 we had a famine in which two million people died. The war has done nothing like that, so you see that we can stand much worse."

Is that attitude a result of Communist indoctrination and repression? Or does it spring genuinely from Vietnamese history, from the thousands of years of fighting against Chinese

and other invaders? One can only offer the judgment—supported by the Western diplomats and other observers here—that it is genuine.

Propaganda is incessant, naturally. The newspapers are full of stories of great victories in the South and the shooting down of American planes. There is no immediate way to judge the accuracy of a claim unless one happens to see with one's own eyes.

When American bombers hit civilian targets in Hanoi, correspondents are taken to see the damage. But sometimes after a raid officials refuse to say what has been hit; the likely conclusion is that it was military targets.

Restrictions and propaganda are hardly unusual in wartime, in any country. The curious thing is that the North Vietnamese have allowed reports on some military matters to go out uncensored when a correspondent happened to see something—for example the observation that the bombers had succeeded in cutting a bridge here.

The other day in Haiphong officials told this correspondent that they were sweeping and defusing American mines and that ships were going in and out of the port. The Pentagon denounced the claim, saying reconnaissance showed no ships entering or leaving. The only way to be certain would be extended investigation or observation of the harbor which the North Vietnamese would not allow. So the claim could be mere bravado.

On the other hand, propaganda is not all on one side. The same American reconnaissance system that watches Haiphong also selects bombing targets. The announcements in Saigon and Washington always speak of attacks on military targets. How does it happen, then, that a large hospital standing alone in the middle of rice fields has been hit not once but twice in the last six months?

After seven years of this war most Americans recognize that truth is difficult to establish in Vietnam. For both newspapermen and the public the right attitude is skepticism toward all official claims.