

A Question of Intent

By ANTHONY LEWIS

ABROAD AT HOME

If a man keeps dangerous animals running wild on his estate, and one mauls a guest's child, he cannot escape responsibility by saying that he had no intention of letting children be hurt. That is generally the law now, and common sense. Subjective intent does not have to be proved, because keeping wild animals where people go makes it so likely that someone will be hurt.

The same common-sense view cuts through the argument about whether the United States is "deliberately" bombing dikes and other civilian targets in North Vietnam. When the greatest power on earth pours bombs on a small, backward country, it is a necessary consequence that people and things of an innocent character will be destroyed. In the legal phrase, the great power will not be heard to argue that it meant no harm.

Of course there would be a different degree of moral culpability in any calculated attempt to destroy dikes or houses or hospitals in North Vietnam. The generals and the politicians in this and previous Administrations have concealed so many horrors—massacres and forest fires and crop destruction and the like—that we cannot exclude the possibility of more.

But it is bad enough to deny responsibility for the human costs of a policy of mass destruction. And that is what the United States Government is doing: putting on a show of amazement at the notion that American bombs actually kill people. The piety of the performance drips like treacle.

Consider, for example, an episode well before the present phase of continuous all-out bombing. Last December, when four American Phantoms were shot down in Laos, the U. S. retaliated by 1,000 bombing sorties against North Vietnam in five days. Most of the time the weather was so bad that the pilots could not even see the ground. Yet the official claim remained that only military targets were being hit. President Nixon called the raids "very successful."

Since last May, Mr. Nixon has removed some of the restrictions on American bombing of North Vietnam. The command is now free to hit economic as well as military targets, and to carry on a planned bombing campaign without regular reference back to Washington.

Half the planes in the Strategic Air Command—200 B-52's—are now being used against Vietnam, North and South. Those are our *strategic* planes, designed for use against aggressive targets in an ultimate conflict with another great power. And the United States is using them against a peasant country.

The propaganda from Washington and Saigon makes it sound as though every American raid is hitting the Ruhr or some mighty military installation. There is talk of destroying "industries" and "naval bases."

Naval bases! For what—sampans? As for industries, there is hardly a factory in North Vietnam that an American businessman would have looked at twice in 1890. When the Joint Chiefs of Staff first tried to pick bombing targets in North Vietnam, they found only eight industrial sites worth listing.

It is on this backward country, with its mud villages and primitive technology, that the United States is dropping thousands of tons of bombs every month. (The total figure for Indochina is running over 100,000 tons a month, but the Pentagon does not give the total separately for the four target countries.)

Necessarily, then, inevitably, bombs in that volume destroy things not remotely related to the North Vietnamese war effort. In Haiphong last May I saw acres of housing smashed flat, a school destroyed, a hospital damaged. More recently Joseph Kraft wrote from Hanoi: "I have seen with my own eyes the damage done by American bombs to homes, schools, stores and many innocent people."

First-hand reports of civilian bomb damage have in fact been available for years, but American officials continued to react to them with an injured innocence, an imperturbable cynicism. It is in the light of this experience that one should now read the denials of any "deliberate" bombing of the dikes.

The explanation given by Washington for the bomb craters that have been seen in the dikes is that the damage was incidental to attacks on nearby military targets such as "road and river transport lines." But in the waterlogged Red River Delta, laced by more than 2,000 miles of dikes, the dikes are often the only place to build an all-weather road. If you bomb roads and "river transport lines" in North Vietnam, you will hit dikes.

The United States has now dropped on Indochina, three times the tonnage of bombs that it used in all theaters of World War II. Those bombs have hit, among other things, dikes and hospitals and schools and peasant villages. Washington knows about that destruction: it has the pictures. In those circumstances a judge in the Common Law tradition would not allow the American Government to wash its hands of responsibility for the civilian damage. Or the American people.