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The bombing of the French mission

NEW YORK—The destruction of the French diplomatic mission in Hanoi is one of those rare events that illuminate our condition. If we Americans look, we can see what has become of us in the Vietnam war. We can see what sort of men lead us.

To bomb Hanoi at all at such a critical time in the peace talks came close to the irrational. Nor could it be dismissed as a policy oversight. Twice before American bombing has disrupted attempts to negotiate a settlement. We have to conclude that the bombing has taken on a life of its own: a brutalism that feeds itself.

But the folly of the bombing in terms of policy was not the worst of it. There was the reaction of those who make the policy.

Laird's obscene spectacle

Not one person in the Saigon command or the Pentagon was man enough to say that this country accepted responsibility for the death and destruction in the French mission. Instead the American public saw on television the obscene spectacle of Melvin R. Laird, the secretary of Defense, trying to find someone or something else to blame.

The French mission might have been hit by anti-aircraft missiles, the Defense Department suggested. As if that would make any difference in our responsibility! The North Vietnamese are not yet forbidden to defend their own capital, though the American military sometimes talks as if there ought to be a law to that effect. Those who bomb are responsible for all the consequences.

A lack of courage

In this case it happens that a Canadian correspondent, Michael MacLear, saw the bombing attack. Repeated sorties

Anthony Lewis

by American planes "over the center of the capital," he wrote, an area with embassies but "no North Vietnamese ministries or factories anywhere near." And so we know that this war has not only brutalized American policy; it has left us with leaders who lack the candor and the courage to admit it when we have gone wrong.

But even that was not the worst in the episode of the French mission.

This bombing led the national television news and made the headlines. But the death and destruction were really pretty small stuff by the standards of what American planes have done. Western correspondents visiting North Vietnam have seen villages pulverized by B52s, hospitals and schools hit, acres of housing smashed. On one day last April in one city, Haiphong, hundreds and probably thousands of Vietnamese were killed by American bombers.

Skin color

Why did we pay more attention to the incident of the French mission? Could it be that skin color makes a difference? Would our pilots worry a little more if the people they bombed day after day and year after year were Europeans instead of Asians? Would successive presidents have found it politically possible to carry on a war of mass destruction against a small European country for seven years? The questions are not for Washington officials alone but for all of us.

The bombing in Hanoi occurred a few hours after George McGovern spoke to the American people on the issue of Vietnam, and it dramatized his central argu-

ment: that this war, conducted by brutal means for an ignoble cause, is corrupting America as surely as it is destroying Indochina.

Courageous speech

Some people concerned about the war and issues of freedom at home have been disappointed in the McGovern campaign, I among them. It is therefore important, and only just, to say that the television talk on Vietnam was the most courageous political speech delivered in this country in a long time.

McGovern could have fudged the hard questions. He could, for example, have said that as president he would go on supplying military aid to Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon after withdrawing all American forces. That would have been an easier path politically, but McGovern did not take it. He said right out what he believes and what many Americans have bitterly learned in Vietnam: Thieu is a tyrant who has survived only by American bombing and who does not deserve our support for one more day.

Some commentators who despise this war for what it has done to America nevertheless criticized the McGovern speech. It was too one-sided, they said, too simple; it should have covered this negotiating point or that. To me that criticism seems extraordinarily misconceived.

Four years ago this country had a presidential candidate who said he would end the war. His name was Nixon, and the people believed him. It turned out that his pledge had some footnotes about American "honor" and the survival of Thieu. The result has been four more years of war, intensified war, the greatest bombardment in the history of the earth.

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