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# Letter to A Student

By ANTHONY LEWIS

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich.—Calvin College in Grand Rapids is an institution of the Christian Reformed Church, an American offshoot of the Calvinist, intensely conservative Dutch Reformed Church. Its 3,000 students are mostly Dutch descent.

In the college Field House the other day Vice President Agnew spoke to a large and overwhelmingly favorable audience. There were some McGovern supporters, shouting "stop the war," but he handled them expertly, winning applause when he remarked on their "lack of civility."

One of the students wearing a Nixon button was a tall young man with a soft voice and a thoughtful manner. He was Martin Sterk, a 21-year-old senior from the Los Angeles area. I asked why he and others were for Nixon—what issues moved them.

"The war first of all," Mr. Sterk replied. "It's a religious school, you know, and there's very deep religious feeling."

Why should religion point them toward the President's position on Vietnam?

"We've got ourselves in a bad mess," he said, "and the question is how to get out—by packing up or by leaving in a way so the 50,000 Americans who died there have not died in vain. We have an awful lot invested there, and I think it would be foolish to just up and leave."

"Then there is the possibility of what the Communists might do if they

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## ABROAD AT HOME

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took over. I know what they did in other countries."

If the opinion polls are correct, many Americans share these views; that must be why surveys show a majority favoring the President's war policy. But there was something particular about Martin Sterk, about the concern, evident in his words, that seemed to call for an answer.

Dear Mr. Sterk:

If we look at the American lives and treasure spent in Indochina as an investment, then the financial advice that comes to mind is the warning not to throw good money after bad. South Vietnam is not happier or more secure than it was when we began bombing seven years ago; to the contrary, much of the country has been destroyed, millions have been killed or wounded or made refugees, and still General Thieu cannot survive in his own politics without a continuing American war. Why will it save our investment, or our honor, to go on with a policy that has only caused misery on a terrible scale?

But what is involved is of course not just an investment but human souls—Indochinese more than Americans. In the last four years alone, under President Nixon, two million people have been killed or wounded in the four little countries of Indochina. In South Vietnam a third of the population has been uprooted. Can you imagine the United States with seventy million of its people as refugees in shacks and miserable camps?

It is hard for Americans to understand that we are responsible for most of the slaughter and destruction of this war. Only our side uses B-52's or indeed any bombing planes. Only we have cruisers and destroyers firing away from offshore at unseen targets. Only we have sprayed massive doses of herbicide. Only we have made populations leave entire areas by declaring them free-fire zones. Only we use napalm.

Many Americans cannot imagine what all that means in human terms because they are too distant from the victims. It is not so easy to shrug off our war when you meet the victims: a woman whose village of mud huts was destroyed by B-52's, for example, or a boy whose body is full of fragments from an American anti-personnel bomb. I simply refuse to believe that you or other Americans could remain unmoved if you faced such realities.

It is even more painful to realize that these horrors are not "accidents," as the Pentagon and Richard Nixon like to say. Pierre Susini, the French delegate, is dead today because American planes—watched by Western eyewitnesses—made repeated attacks on the center of Hanoi and bombed his mission. The current issue of Time puts the truth bluntly:

"Since April 6, when Nixon officially reinstated mass bombing of the North, aerial attacks on civilian targets have become all too common. American jets in search of visible targets have destroyed countless hospitals, churches and even cathedrals, as well as residential suburbs."

In short, we are conducting a war of terror. Do you think that can be a moral or even a practical way of saving the Vietnamese people from the risk you mention, Communist reprisals? In any case, the people we keep in office in Saigon are hardly kind. General Thieu and his men, in their American-supported Phoenix program, have killed 20,000 persons arrested as suspected subversives. Have you read the Congressional testimony on that program? Do you know that men and women were dropped from helicopters, slowly starved to death, tortured by having rods hammered into their ears?

Our intervention in a war between Vietnamese has only escalated the horror for them and wounded the American character. If a person as sensitive as you cannot see that, Mr. Sterk, the wound is serious indeed.