

Madness in great ones

LONDON—One symptom of the state of our civilization is the loss of confidence in reason. Mysticism and anti-intellectualism flourish. R. D. Laing, the Savonarola-psychiatrist, says our society is so terrible that schizophrenia is an appropriate reaction.

Lionel Trilling spoke of all this with sadness and deep perception in his Thomas Jefferson lecture in Washington last April. According to the new doctrine, he said, "society itself is insane, and when this is understood, the apparent aberration of the individual appears as rationality, as liberation from the delusions of the social madness."

More, not less

Professor Trilling and others who resist the new cults of unreason are not under any illusion about the goodness of this age. They argue, rather, that reason is the basis of our political society and that we need more of it, not less. They believe that civilization is worth saving.

Faith in reason and civilization has been one of the intangible victims of Richard Nixon's Christmas bombing offensive against North Vietnam. If the elected leader of the greatest democracy acts like a maddened tyrant, and not one person in his government says the feeblest nay, it is hard to argue against Laing's view that ours is a lunatic society.

One day American planes bomb a hospital, as part of the most intense destruction ever visited by man upon man. A few days later American planes rush medicine to another corner of the globe, to relieve a natural disaster. It would be

impossible to explain to a visitor from a rational planet.

The official reaction

Those with the duty to expound American policy have forsaken any attempt at

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reasoned justification. An example was the official U.S. reaction to news that the 1,000-bed Bac Mai hospital in Hanoi had been bombed. The chief Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, dismissed the report as "propaganda" and went on to say: "We have not struck a large 1,000-bed civilian hospital. I have no information that supports that at all."

The word "lie" does not adequately describe that statement in its contempt for truth. For the New York Times had just published an account of the devastating bomb damage to the hospital by an impeccable eyewitness, Telford Taylor, a retired U.S. Army general and professor at Columbia Law School.

Horrifying implications

Even more horrifying in its implications was the official reaction to word from Hanoi that bombs had damaged a building where American prisoners were held. Friedheim, supported by a White House spokesman, said the United States would hold North Vietnam responsible if she violated the Geneva Convention by holding prisoners "in or near military target areas."

It would be interesting to know what part of Vietnam is not, in the logic of Richard Nixon, a "military target area." Virtually every major hospital in the country, for example, has now been hit

by American bombers, many of them more than once.

The arrogance

But the more significant aspect of that statement is its arrogance. If we bomb you by the million tons, it says, it will be your fault if any American prisoner is injured. Goebbels would likewise have blamed the Jews for not closing their shutters if someone was cut by broken glass after the brownshirts marched through a street smashing windows.

Bullies and cowards always try to escape responsibility for what they do. And when someone else points it out, they puff up with outrage. That is why the Nixon State Department put on a pettish diplomatic display when the Swedish premier, Olof Palme, described the bombing as "torture" and "the language of force" in the tradition of Lidice.

Olof Palme is hardly alone in his views. Among many others in Europe, Roy Jenkins, that most moderate and cautious of British Labor politicians, spoke of the bombing as "brutality on a vast scale." Palme is just a convenient target for the fury and secret shame of American officials, at least some of whom know that nothing now can keep Richard Nixon and his colleagues from going down on the page of history reserved for those who use extermination as a political device.

The consequences of political madness on so grand a scale cannot yet be measured. When next some small country invades a neighbor, or guerrillas carry out a kidnaping, the United States will deplore the use of force. But who will ever listen again?