

...But a Whimper

By Anthony Lewis

In a few hours now Americans will no longer be killing people in Indochina, or destroying their land. After eight years, the bombing is to stop.

If we can believe it. For the American assault on Cambodia is ending as it began, as the American wars on all the countries of Indochina began: in a confusion of lies, arrogance, lawlessness and inhumanity.

"This is not an invasion of Cambodia." So Richard Nixon said on April 30, 1970, announcing that American troops were entering Cambodia to "clean out" enemy sanctuaries. He spoke of how "scrupulously" the United States had theretofore respected Cambodian neutrality. He said he had no intention of "expanding the war into Cambodia."

But American planes had in fact been bombing Cambodia for fourteen months, the targets concealed by an elaborate system of false reporting. And of course Cambodia was then dragged into full-scale war, lately including some of the heaviest bombing in history.

And the lies went on. The Nixon Administration, under Congressional pressure, promised not to engage in tactical bombing in the civil war between Cambodians. It instantly proceeded to do so, in secret and then in open cynicism.

And the lawlessness. For the last six months there has not been a shred of legal authority for the bombing. A



statute prohibits American military advisers in Cambodia, but there are men there acting in that capacity.

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we did in Indochina. Most regard it still as a well-meant war, an unselfish one in Nixon's phrase, a fight for freedom that somehow went wrong.

What we actually did was to intervene without any agreed international basis in a local struggle remote from our interests. And once there we fought the war with methods condemned by treaty and by our own military manuals.

We transported whole populations in order to make the destruction of their villages easier.

We set up a program to assassinate leaders suspected of sympathy with the other side.

We allowed, and sometimes participated in, the systematic torture of prisoners.

We wantonly killed civilians.

We bombed hospitals.

We did those things, we Americans, not some alien people indifferent to human life. It is hard to believe. Bomb hospitals? Impossible. But anyone who cared has known for years that the hospitals were bombed, and now we have had testimony from the Americans who did it.

The most important question left for us by the Indochina war is how Americans could be brought to do those things—to do them routinely, bureaucratically, without feeling. How were we desensitized?

It is the question that was asked about the Germans after World War II. The answer Hannah Arendt gave was that the Nazis made evil commonplace, banal, so much a part of the social order that the respectable people simply learned to live with it.

Something like that must have happened to Americans caught up in the making of war on Indochina. These last weeks have demonstrated as much. There are officials who should know better trying with all the earnestness of a petty German bureaucrat to explain away their role in the carrying on of a secret war. There are the B-52s being sent over populous areas of Cambodia for no reason except that the deadline of Aug. 15 has been set and the machine must go on till then. It is the ultimate obscenity.

The end is worse than the beginning, because we ought to have learned something. Robert McNamara and others in the Johnson Administration did learn, did feel remorse, did suffer. The only regret expressed publicly so far in this Administration is that the bombing cannot go on.

On April 30, 1970, announcing the Cambodian incursion, President Nixon said the United States must not act "like a pitiful, helpless giant." If our direct part in the Indochina war is really over at last, we must hope now to understand how we became an arrogant, lawless giant.

And the arrogance and inhumanity. "It was no great disaster," the American air attaché, Colonel David Opfer, said of the "accidental" B-52 bombing of Neak Luong. Colonel Opfer did his best to keep reporters out of the town, but one got there and saw terrible damage and human tragedy.

Cambodia really offered nothing new in those respects, only more of the same. President Johnson slipped his country into a massive land war in Vietnam by deception. We bombed Laos for years in secrecy.

Even now only a minority of Americans will admit to themselves what