

What Are We Doing to Ourselves?

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON—One reason given by President Nixon for keeping American troops in Vietnam until an unspecified day when the Thieu-Ky Government can carry on alone is that, otherwise, "Our allies would lose confidence in America." After the terrible news of this past week, the proposition sounds like mockery.

The reports of mass murder by American soldiers have been devastating in their effect on the British, long our closest allies. Like anyone whose trust in a friend's honor is shadowed by doubt, they are bewildered; they meet Americans and ask: Why? How?

Even before this week's allegations, our involvement in Vietnam was probably on balance lessening British confidence in the United States. The Government gave official support, but privately many informed Britons expressed their urgent wish that the United States get out of Vietnam.

Their reason was not, mainly, sympathy for the Vietnamese; it was concern about the effect of the war on the United States. There was a fear that disillusion with Vietnam might turn us to isolation. More important, there was anxiety about the impact of the war on

American society—the brutalization of young men, the bitter division of opinion, the signs of moral obtuseness.

Thus the affair of the Green Berets was deeply disturbing to British civil servants and politicians. They were not surprised at one murder in a war. What shocked them was President Nixon's decision to quash the prosecution of the suspected murderers in the interest of intelligence secrecy—and the evident American public approval of that decision.

Corrupting Effect

It was the sense of a corrupting effect on the American character that changed a man as devoted to the United States as Lord Harlech from a supporter to a resolute critic of U.S. policy in Vietnam. And David Harlech speaks from hard experience; as British Ambassador and friend he stood close to President Kennedy in the Cuban missile crisis.

Last Sunday's Observer devoted four pages to a condensation of Daniel Lang's horrifying New Yorker article, now a book, on how four American soldiers on patrol kidnapped, raped and killed a Vietnamese girl. Even at that the editors, perhaps making clear they were not anti-American, said their pur-

pose was to show the effect of war "on any men and any country."

And then came the stories of American soldiers shooting down hundreds of unarmed old men, women and children in Songmy village. In London, memories of the Nazis were inevitably evoked. Songmy was compared with Lidice, the Czech village destroyed by the Germans in a 1942 reprisal. But at Lidice the Nazis spared the women and children.

One of the most awful visual images of the Nazis was that of a storm trooper leading a child who could barely walk into the gas chambers. It was the description of the children at Songmy that was most heart-rending.

Sgt. Michael Bernhardt, in his account, spoke of a boy three or four years old holding a wounded arm while blood trickled between his fingers. "He just stood there with big eyes staring around, like he didn't understand; he didn't believe what was happening. Then the captain's radio operator put a burst of M-16 fire into him."

Ronald Haerberle, the photographer, said he saw "two small children, one only four or five years old. A guy with an M-16 rifle fired at the first boy. The

older boy fell over to protect him . . . then they fired six more shots and just let them lie."

If that is even partially true, how can America ever be the same?

And even then the British friends of America found some hope. For unlike the Germans, they said, we had pointed to our own sin; it had taken twenty months, and the persistent effort of just one or two men, but now the conscience of America was aroused and the guilty would surely be punished.

Punishment Not Sure

But punishment cannot be so sure. In a guerrilla war with objectives unclear to those who fight it, there is bound to be moral ambiguity. When a President takes up into war by stealth, when he orders more bombs dropped on a small agricultural country than fell on Europe in World War II, will the law surely overrule an ordinary soldier's plea that he was only following orders when he shot civilians?

An Englishman who greatly admires the United States tried last night to articulate his feelings about Vietnam. Finally he said:

"It is what you are doing to yourselves that matters."