

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Nov. 23—The film made from Joan Littlewood's "Oh! What a Lovely War" contrasts the vanity of generals and the empty jingoism of politicians with the savage reality of life in the trenches of World War I. We are meant to see how senseless the mass slaughter was, and we do.

But the movie gives us a glimpse of something else. In that war, for all its horrors, the men in the trenches still thought of those on the other side as human beings like themselves. On Christmas Day they climbed out of their trenches and sang together, until the generals started the artillery again.

Technological development in the last fifty years has made killing a more remote, impersonal process. At its ultimate, the leader of one of the superpowers can give an order and destroy fifty million people.

We all know that and manage to live with the fact because it still seems so theoretical; we hope and believe none of our political leaders will be so mad. What we may not realize is the extent to which the dehumanization of military killing has progressed on a lower level and in actual practice.

The Dehumanization of War

In Vietnam the tremendous wealth and inventiveness of American technology determine the character of our war effort. Bombs are dropped from giant planes so high up that human victims can scarcely be imagined. Shells are summoned by radio and aimed by computer. Helicopter gunships spray whole areas so that every living thing is eliminated.

Detached and Impersonal

Moreover, American forces are for the most part alien from the Vietnamese, friend or enemy. They live in American bases and eat American food and rely on American machines, divorced from the world in which they fight.

In these circumstances, it would be surprising if some Americans did not come to think of the Vietnamese as figures on a television screen—as somehow less than human. The psychology of war has always encouraged numbness about humanity, and that risk must be greater when death can be delivered so distantly and impersonally.

Jonathan Schell, in his chilling New Yorker article on the destruction of Vietnamese villages, quoted a private from Texas as saying: "The trouble

is, no one sees the Vietnamese as people. They're not people. Therefore, it doesn't matter what you do to them."

We do not yet know what happened in the village of Songmy in March, 1968. The stories of mass murder by American soldiers, however detailed in their horror, may turn out to be false or exaggerated. It is right to be cautious about the facts.

But we must know. For Americans to be satisfied with less than the whole truth about such charges—to shrug them off, to be complacent—would be as much a sign of moral bankruptcy as the atrocity itself.

British friends of the United States are confident that in the end America will live up to its tradition of full inquiry. But they are puzzled that President Nixon has so far remained silent on the Songmy affair while his Vice President and Cabinet members have spoken on so many other controversial subjects. It is accepted that officials must avoid statements prejudicial to potential court-martial defendants, as is always the rule in Britain. But that would not keep the President from expressing concern at the massacre stories and pledging to get the facts.

There is of course the view

that all wars produce savagery, and that Americans should not be overly surprised or ashamed at this example. George Brown, the former Foreign Secretary, said as much the other day.

If Means Outlaw the End

A compelling answer came from a conservative-minded political commentator, Ronald Butt of The London Sunday Times. "There may come a time," he said, "for any civilized nation, when the consequences of continuing a struggle become so beastly that the means outlaw the end." That was the reason, he suggested, that Britain left Ireland and India.

We may complain that the British apply a double standard: they react more strongly to the present atrocity charges than to undoubted mass murder by the Communists at Hue. But then the British believe us when we say we are fighting this war because we and the Communists have different standards.

So there is no escape from the facts of Songmy, and the consequences. "If these things have been done," Mr. Butt said, "and are excused as an inevitable concomitant of war, then the war in Vietnam has ceased to have any justification."