

War Brings Peace

By TOM WICKER

EASTON, Pa., April 19—The hilltop campus of Lafayette College was quiet and peaceful today, with Frisbees swooping and floating in the spring sunshine. Some students said they had scarcely noticed the new outbreak of antiwar protests at Harvard, Columbia and other colleges.

One reason for the evident calm here and elsewhere is no doubt the surface plausibility of the Nixon Administration's contention that it bombed Hanoi and Haiphong in order to protect the lives of American troops in South Vietnam. That is nevertheless an Orwellian proposition, not far removed from "War Is Peace."

No one has shown any direct threat to the remaining American forces that would justify such admittedly severe reaction. No one has shown any evidence that the military results of the bombing will or could, in fact, save any American lives. No one has shown that the attacks can have that result even peripherally, by substantially affecting the course of the fighting in South Vietnam.

If there were a direct threat to American forces, moreover, it would be at least as much a result of Mr. Nixon's own chosen policy. It has been implicit from the start of his program of gradual, unilateral American withdrawal that at some point the dwindling American force would be open to attack. The Administration has consistently recognized that possibility inherent in its own policy by making dire threats against anyone taking advantage of it. Now the threats are being made good, even though American groundforces are not known to be in combat, or threatened, in South Vietnam.

The reasons Mr. Nixon opted for gradual withdrawal were that he was unwilling to negotiate a settlement, since that could not be done without the removal of the anti-Communist Thieu regime in Saigon; and that gradual withdrawal provided time for the military strengthening of that regime. Thus antiwar sentiment in the United States was largely placated by withdrawal, while the same old policy of propping up South Vietnam was carried out by different means.

The hard truth, therefore, is that the President elected to save the Saigon regime at the hazard of the American force that would remain in South Vietnam near the end of the withdrawal. And the bombings now being carried out in the guise of saving those lives are, in fact, saving little but Mr. Nixon's face.

Not the high-level leaks in which this administration specializes are made that doubly clear. While Secretary Rogers and Laird righteously prock to Congress and the people

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that the bombings in the North are protecting American lives, "White House officials" and other unnamed sources explain to the press that the attacks really constitute a signal to the Soviets.

As this explanation goes, Mr. Nixon is not only annoyed with the Soviets for giving material support to the North Vietnamese invasion; he wanted to tell them that he had no intention of altering his policy of supporting the Thieu regime; and he also wanted to arrive in Moscow for the forthcoming summit conference in a "position of strength," not merely as a leader whose ally was being invaded. So he bombed Hanoi and Haiphong and Mr. Rogers says that, short of nuclear weapons, no other attacks can be ruled out.

But all of that comes out only to another way of saying that the bombing of the North had to be carried out as a result of Mr. Nixon's policy of maintaining, endlessly and at any cost, the Saigon regime in power. From that determination on his part flows continuing American involvement in a continuing Asian war; and it is that continuing involvement in that continuing war that provides whatever threat there is to the remaining American forces in South Vietnam.

What is to be said, moreover, of a Government that deliberately sends two of its highest officials before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the television cameras to make one public case for the bombing, while even more powerful White House aides privately set forth quite a different reason? At what point, in the long ordeal of credibility, will the American people simply stop believing anything? At what point will the "consent of the governed," so often obtained by lies, subterfuge and sophistry, finally be extended to everything, or to nothing?

And when all of that is said and done, Americans still must recognize the means by which Mr. Nixon's face and political position are being saved, the method by which his signal is being sent to Moscow. All that is being done by raining down high explosives on human beings, not just on the battlefield but in distant cities. This war has gone on so long and so mindlessly and so cruelly that its perpetrators seem no longer to see it as a war but as a gaming board; its bombs are merely signals to them and its deaths have nothing to do with life.

So although War may not yet be claimed as Peace, what is the tactical difference between that and the new American doctrine that War Brings Peace? Not much.