

More Vietnam Myths

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, May 5—One of the nightmare aspects of Vietnam for Americans these days is the sense of *déjà vu*. We have been through it all before: the donimo talk, the Presidential heroism, the reliance on American air power to replace a South Vietnamese will to fight.

The old myths are dusted off to provide new reasons for a policy that has not worked over seven years: It is a global Communism we are fighting. The enemy is stubborn, unfair, immoral. Worst of all, he has broken international agreements.

Thus President Nixon has insisted that the Communists' current offensive is "in violation of the understanding that they had reached with President Johnson in 1968, when he stopped the bombing of North Vietnam in return for arrangements which included their pledge not to violate the demilitarized zone." The offensive, the President also says, "is a clear case of naked and unprovoked aggression across an international border."

So many distortions and untruths are wrapped into myths of that kind that it is difficult to sort them out.

The full record of the negotiations that led to the 1968 "understanding" has not been published. There remains disagreement among American experts on whether the North Vietnamese ever accepted the idea of U.S. reconnaissance flights continuing over North Vietnam after the bombing stopped. It is agreed that American negotiators tried to include language recognizing a right to such reconnaissance; the disputed question is whether the other side ever accepted that interpretation.

But, in any case, Richard Nixon as President long ago publicly disavowed the 1968 understanding. Daniel I. Davidson, a member of the peace talks delegation in 1968, has just analyzed the affair for *The New York Times*, concluding that it was Mr. Nixon who "first repudiated and breached the understanding."

To summarize the history briefly, Mr. Nixon resumed heavy bombing of North Vietnam in May 1970 at the time he ordered the invasion of Cambodia. He or his aides invented the term "protective reaction" for the raids. At a press conference on Dec. 10, 1970, the President said he wanted to state his own "understanding" about the bombing of North Vietnam:

"If . . . the North Vietnamese by their infiltration threaten our remaining forces, if they thereby develop a capacity and proceed possibly to use that capacity to increase the level of

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fighting in South Vietnam, then I will order the bombing of military sites in North Vietnam."

In short, Mr. Nixon said he would feel free to bomb the North whenever the military situation in the South looked difficult. And he did.

That was tantamount to calling off the 1968 understanding that ended American bombing, whatever its precise scope. To complain now that the present offensive violates that understanding is like one side changing the rules in the middle of a game and then denouncing the other as immoral for violating them.

As for the "clear case" of "aggression across an international border," history makes it anything but clear.

The Geneva Conference of 1954, the last definitive international legal forum on the question, treated Vietnam as one country. It recognized a "military demarcation line" but agreed that this was "provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary." The line was to last only until a national election in 1956.

As President Eisenhower frankly said, the United States decided to block the election—because the Communists would have won it—and to build up an anti-Communist government in the South. It was the United States that divided Vietnam, not the Vietnamese or the French.

Of course two very different societies have developed in the two Vietnams since 1954. There are real fears of Communism in the South, and antipathy to the Northerners. The North conceives of itself as fighting a civil war.

The irony is that a few years ago we could have made a settlement with the Communists that gave hope for an autonomous South Vietnam. The Vietcong leaders had real regional feelings and, most experts feel, would not have been mere agents of the North. But endless years of war have given the North a dominant role.

The one thing that is clear from the anguish of the last decade is that the United States is an alien element in Vietnam. All the blood and treasure we have spent have not given the South Vietnamese, with a 500,000-man army that is by far the best equipped in Southeast Asia, the will to resist on their own a North Vietnamese force that we estimate at about 110,000. And so we go on with a policy of mass destruction, clouded by myths.