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Tea and Sympathy

By ANTHONY LEWIS

A man in upstate New York, concerned about American planes bombing the dikes in North Vietnam, wrote a letter recently to President Nixon. He got an answer from the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, John Richardson Jr. As an example of contemporary official logic it deserves a wider audience.

"The United States has used great restraint in its bombing policy," Mr. Richardson said. "The water conservancy system of North Vietnam is not a target in our air efforts supporting South Vietnam's defense against North Vietnam's invasion.

"We are, however, hitting military and military-related targets such as North Vietnam's communications and supply systems. In some parts of North Vietnam the only dry ground is on the tops of dikes. Roads used for supply convoys often run along the tops of the dikes. Similarly anti-aircraft weapons are placed on or adjacent to dikes. In some instances, therefore, in carrying out attacks on military and military-related targets, dikes have been hit. The dikes themselves, however, have not been the targets.

"We have no desire to weaken the water conservancy system of or add to the suffering of the North Vietnamese people."

How would Americans feel if, somehow, they were on the receiving end of such logic, such sympathy? If an enormously greater power that had been bombing them for seven years said it had no desire to add to their suffering? If the water mains in Chicago and Philadelphia had been damaged and a spokesman for the bombers said solemnly that the Americans had unfortunately put the mains under roads used for supply convoys . . . ?

For most of us such a reversal of fortunes is beyond the imagination. We cannot put ourselves in the position of people whose survival depends on mud dikes, who have no place to put a road except on top of them, who build and rebuild them by hand—carrying mud in baskets, without even a wheelbarrow.

But is it conceivable that those whose duty it is to explain American policy in Vietnam do not understand the consequences of that policy? When John Richardson Jr. writes about the "great restraint" of American bombing policy, is he aware that the United States has dropped on Indochina more than three times the tonnage of bombs used against Germany and Japan in

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World War II? Or does he derive such facts from his mind?

Does Mr. Richardson ever feel nauseous when dictating sentences such as: "We have no desire to . . . add to the suffering . . . ?" Is he consciously cynical when he says that we are not bombing dikes, only the roads on top of them? What about the Pentagon spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, who a while ago argued that herbicide was good for the Vietnamese economy? *

The Richardsons and Friedheims of Washington would say that they do not make the policy; they only follow orders. Along with thousands of others, they faithfully serve a President who says that, unless North Vietnam moves substantially toward accepting our terms, "there will be no reduction of the bombing." Not ever.

All that is true enough. The question is why so many men have followed such orders for so long. Why is it that one cannot think of a single person in either the Johnson or Nixon Administration, high or low, who resigned directly and publicly because he was no longer willing to take part in the calculated destruction of the peasant societies of Indochina?

There are Americans, millions of them, who are aware of the moral consequences of their country's actions in Southeast Asia. They are a discouraged and bewildered group of people. They write and ask what they can do: They petitioned, they have voted, they have written their Congressmen, they have demonstrated. And nothing changes.

A few will find the courage to give of themselves in new ways. At this moment two groups are fasting in protest against the war. The Rev. Paul Mayer, a Roman Catholic priest, and ten other persons at the New York Theological Seminary have taken no food or drink except water for a month now. Eleven inmates of the Danbury, Conn., Federal prison have done the same for three weeks.

Most of us would not find such action possible. All we can do is to witness—to keep listening, to write letters, to care, to vote. Those are modest enough demands as the country returns from its holiday to work and politics. We can let the publicists for the American war, and their masters, know that we understand.

Included in same column,
New Orleans States-Item 7 Sep 72
(filed Comment):

* . . . economy? More recently, speaking about the 1965-67 American effort to start forest fires in South Vietnam, Friedheim said: "In no sense was it an attempt to destroy all the forest. It was an attempt to clear the leaves from the trees."

The Richardsons . . .