

Another Million Laughs

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20—We are at another of those increasingly commonplace passes in current history when events have outstripped burlesque. Morning after morning, Page One reads like a lunatic's romp put together by the Marx brothers' script writers.

There is the case of General Lavelle, the Air Force commander in Vietnam. He bombed as he pleased, sometimes in violation of orders. When Gen. Jack D. Ripper in the holocaust-burlesque, "Doctor Strangelove," nuked the Russians on his own authority the Pentagon was outraged with the movie.

They said it was an absurd, unfair portrait of sober Air Force reality. They said you just couldn't fool the good old ultra-computerized-for-one-hundred-per cent-safety control system.

They said it couldn't be done. And so, this being the high-burlesque era of President Lyndon B. Nixonger, General Lavelle did it.

For making monkeys of his superiors, not excluding Lyndon B. Nixonger, the general had to take his punishment, of course; and the punishment—remember, this is burlesque—was retirement on \$25,000 per year, substantially tax-free.

General Lavelle's surrender to the catastrophic-comic spirit of the age is not surprising when we consider the absurdities with which he was surrounded there in Saigon, a place where they used to turn the corner almost every day, unless there was light that day at the end of the tunnel, which was even better than a corner-turning.

Most recently in Saigon, General Thieu, who carries the ball for freedom out there, as they undoubtedly say in the National Security Council, has caught the spirit of things.

The other day he abolished elections in the hamlets and finished closing down most of the press. As humor it was sophomoric in its lack of wit and subtlety: Make war to save freedom by establishing dictatorship. Low-grade stuff, but it is the year of the buffola gag goosed to life with canned laughter; we don't take to elegance.

What next in the Lyndon B. Nixonger struggle to bring American blessings to the whole darned world? The guesses will seem ridiculous now. Just wait six months, and you will read them as fact on Page One. General Thieu will probably, soon now, assume the title "Generalissimo," thus claiming equality with those other great dictators we support in freedom's cause.

Is it improbable to anticipate that before the year is out—though not until after the election, of course—the Air Force will begin bombing the

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United States? It is almost inevitable. Professor Kissinger will make dramatic flights from Paris to Washington for futile negotiations aimed at stopping the willful Americans from their wanton non-cooperation with Generalissimo Thieu's regime.

"Nonsense!" the noble hawk will cry. Of course it's nonsense. It would not be such a certainty if it were not nonsense.

Nonsense is our fate, and maybe our doom. We listen to ostensibly intelligent men talk like Woody Allen, and smile not, for we are so accustomed to ostensibly intelligent men speaking comedy that we assume they must be saying something.

Examples abound. "After the war is over, I believe that history will show that air power helped bring the North Vietnamese out of the shadows of intransigence into the light of meaningful negotiations," said an Air Force general in a speech quoted in this paper the other day. Does it sound trenchant? If so, you have quit listening a long time ago. Anyone who believes that a meaningful negotiation, lit or darkened, is what results when a B-52 unloads on him is in for the biggest joke since the children gave him the exploding cigar for Christmas.

The burlesque is not all in Asia. Let us not forget the Republican National Convention, nor the insouciant Mr. Stein, chief economist to the President, telling us we are kidding ourselves if we think beef prices have gone up, because he has figures that show otherwise.

Democrats like burlesque, too: Nixonger's first name, after all, is Lyndon. Right now Senator McGovern is getting hero's applause from the bowling classes for saying that while a corporate executive can deduct a \$20 martini lunch from his income tax, the workingman cannot deduct his humble bologna sandwich.

Bologna sandwich? Surely the Senator is having a joke. (Bologna sandwich; baloney. Get it?) Not since World War II has the American workingman had to lunch on bologna sandwiches, except by perverse choice. Today's bologna eaters are the paupers, unemployed and similar misfits whom the workingman is likely to dismiss as welfare bums, while backing his union's struggle to keep them excluded from membership.

Tomorrow some celebrated politicians will promise us a wonderful future again, and we shall believe them. Again.

Bombs away! In the best of causes, of course.
