

No salvation in silence to brutality in Vietnam

LONDON—An American banker who took a Christmas holiday in Europe said afterward, with rather a dazed air, "People kept asking me why we were bombing Hanoi. I did not know how to answer, or explain why people like me could not do anything about it."

The experience must be a common one. For many of the most informed and international-minded Europeans, the ones likely to have American friends, are revolted by what the United States has done in Vietnam. When they speak out, it is with a special feeling of bewilderment or even betrayal that a country they admire could do such things.

America has few better friends in Britain, for example, than Alastair Buchan, for many years director of the Institute of Strategic Studies, then commandant of the Imperial Defense College now professor of international relations at Oxford. Buchan wrote to the Times of London recently to express "the anger and contempt which President Nixon's resumption of aerial bombing in North Vietnam arouses in this country, most particularly among those of us who admire the achievements and respect the values of American society."

"This cruel act of technological bad temper," Buchan said, illustrates "the way in which the use of crude and often barbarous short-term expedients has continuously undermined the original objective of the United States in Southeast Asia, the development of a group of viable, independent states." And he said it showed how shaky were the claims by President Nixon and his staff to a new diplomacy of "patience and flexibility."

Love and shame

There are millions of Americans who would understand those mixed feelings of love and shame for their country—because they share them. But for these Americans there is an added torment: The sense of frustration at their inability over so many years to affect the policy of their own government.

"Most of us are all but swamped by a sense of overwhelming hopelessness," a nun writes from upstate New York. "Nothing seems to have any effect: Not demonstrations, not votes, not letters, not petitions. So we look at each other, shake our heads and experience anew the anguish and frustration of the dead end."

'But what can I do?'

"This is my country and they are my bombers. But what can I do to stop them?"

For that feeling of powerlessness to lead to bitter resignation is all too understanda-

ble. Americans have always believed that they had a responsive government, and especially one sensitive to humane considerations. It is a strange sensation to find oneself believing that that government is now on the side opposed to humanity and truth.

It is the United States that has tried for nearly two decades, and is still trying, to divide Vietnam, which has been one country

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for hundreds of years. It is the United States that progressively escalated the number of men and the violence of weapons in the war. It is the United States that even now, in the negotiations, is fighting against efforts to free political prisoners from the notorious cruelty of Saigon's jails.

The greater courage

Even with sympathy for the men who fly American planes, and for their wives and families, one has to recognize the greater courage of the North Vietnamese people who have been their targets. One of the terrible ironies of Nixon's Christmas bombing offensive was that the intense antiaircraft barrage thrown up around Hanoi, which for the first time reached B52s, in a sense saved America from a worse sin: The extermination bombing of a city with no means to defend itself against our technological war.

But the pain of understanding all that, and feeling powerless to stop it, should not lead any American to give up the attempt. The handful of Germans who risked all to conspire against Hitler saved that bit of their country's honor, as one Solzhenitsyn brightens the name of the Soviet Union.

Americans still have what the good Germans did not: The freedom to speak out against brutality. Frustration is inevitable among those who understand, but not silence. While Congress sits, every American who cares can and should write to his or her representative. While Americans prosper, they can give money to rebuild the hospitals their bombs have destroyed.

Too late?

An American businessman, a man usually given to understatement, said the other day that it was too late now to save the honor of the United States. "We have killed our six million," he said. "What do we do now? Build monuments, I suppose."

But there is still more killing to prevent. Solzhenitsyn has had ample reason to despair, but he said: "Mankind's sole salvation lies in everyone making everything his business."