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It Tolls for Thee

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LONDON, Nov. 22 — George Orwell could not have improved on Defense Secretary Laird's phrasing in the announcement of renewed American bombing in North Vietnam. There was not even any bombing in it—just “protective reaction strikes.” They had been made against “missile and anti-aircraft gun sites and related facilities” in response to “attacks on our unarmed reconnaissance planes.” It all sounded so clean and just.

But of course bombing is not clean. The Air Force accounts of bombing military targets in North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968 sounded surgically precise. But not very surprisingly, many of the bombs turned out to have hit non-military buildings and killed civilians.

Nor is the ground for retaliation so clear. Those “unarmed” American reconnaissance planes are escorted by others armed with rockets, cannon and bombs. It does not seem altogether astonishing that North Vietnam should object to such overflights.

The American claim, consistently denied by the enemy, is that the Vietnamese agreed to the reconnaissance in 1968 in return for suspension of the bombing. Did they agree to almost daily overflights, of that kind?

There is bound to be skepticism also about Mr. Laird's assurance that the new bombing did not go north of the 19th parallel. An American wants to believe assurances by his own Government. But it was that Government, to take a recent example of deception, that said it would not fly close-support

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missions in Cambodia and then blandly proceeded to do so.

Retaliation may not, indeed, be the real reason for the renewed bombing raids, or the only one. Reports from Washington say a prime military aim was to hit at stockpiles of supplies ready to move south.

Why should any of this bother us? Isn't it natural to bomb enemy supplies? What difference does it make if the nature and purpose of an American military action are covered by Orwellian Newspeak?

The capacity of Americans to react to events in Vietnam does seem to be at a point of exhaustion. Even the most concerned have a limit to their emotions and to their hope of affecting events. Our feelings have been numbed by all the lying and killing on both sides in Vietnam.

But the bombing episode has disturbing implications apart from any arousing of moral ardor. It indicates once again that President Nixon's goal in Vietnam is not a political settlement but military victory by another name.

The President has slowly but persistently been withdrawing American troops—a policy for which he will deserve the praise of history no matter what other blots there may be in Vietnam. But he has also warned against defeat or “humiliation.” The puzzling question has been how he expected to withdraw and win at the same time.

The sudden, massive air attacks on North Vietnam suggest what Mr. Nixon may have in mind. As U.S. ground combat troops disappear, he may count on big air strikes—all over Indochina and for an indefinite period—to keep the Communists off balance while Saigon's forces carry the burden of the ground war.

But that is a recipe not for peace but for indefinite war. It would require huge American installations and expenditures for uncountable years, as well as the maintenance of South Vietnam as an armed camp.

The only way to peace in Vietnam is by political accommodation. A surprise attack such as the bombings may have real tactical advantages. But it may also focus attention wrongly on short-term goals instead of the necessary long-term objective of American policy: a political settlement that leaves Vietnam to the Vietnamese.

The retaliation, as officially described, was for the downing of an American reconnaissance plane with the apparent loss of two lives. To respond to that with 28½ hours of bombing by large numbers of aircraft was, to put it with restraint, grossly disproportionate.

Americans' tolerance of such acts done in their name is a particularly disturbing result of the Vietnam war. As Stuart Hampshire, the English philosopher, wrote recently in *New York Review of Books*, we have chosen to match the calculated cruelty of the guerrilla in our methods of war and thus have inevitably brutalized ourselves.