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Behind Gen. Lavelle matter: Government was covering

WASHINGTON — The government of the United States is saying some odd things to the American people these days, and the case of Gen. John D. Lavelle and his private war on North Vietnam is only the latest chapter in a very strange story.

The government is saying to young men of military age that they can be compelled to fight in the undeclared war in Vietnam against their will, or go to jail.

It is telling its soldiers on the battlefield to obey orders or go to the stockade, and threatening its deserters who jump the country that they will be incarcerated if they come home.

There is no freedom here for men who refuse to engage in the killing when so ordered, but Lavelle, who admits to bombing

felt free to defy, or "interpret" the orders of his commander-in-chief, the President, and his other superiors, as he pleased—not know-

James Reston

ing, incidentally, that precisely at the time he started the bombing, the President had Henry Kissinger trying to open up peace negotiations with Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam in Paris.

To be fair about all this, it would be wrong to suggest that Lavelle is typical of the American general officers of his generation. Many of them no doubt admire him but very few have followed his bold personal initiative. Outside of MacArthur in Korea, there has been very little Caesarism or defiance of civilian authority in the armed services of the United States. France had much more trouble with a defeated and humiliated officer corps after its troubles in Vietnam and Algeria.

Lavelle is an exception, but he is a very important exception and how he is handled in an age of atomic weapons could be very important for the future of the armed services of the United States, trained to fight for "Victory" and now living in a more difficult and complicated time when modern arms are too powerful to be used effectively for rational purposes.

Symbol of larger problem

Lavelle is only a symbol of a much larger problem. Maybe he defied his officers —though it is hard to believe he could bomb unauthorized targets for three months without their knowledge, and if he could there is obviously something wrong with the whole U.S. intelligence system.

But even so, he has been living in an atmosphere of political trickery about Vietnam for years. The whole Vietnam policy has been seething with deception since 1963 under Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, and the astonishing thing is not that there has been some deception by generals on the battlefield, but that there have not been more Lavelles.

Still there is a fundamental question of public policy here. The government has been caught once more in an obvious deception, which it tried to cover up. And this may be the most important issue before the people of the United States today. Nobody in either party has the answer to all our problems, but it would be reassuring to feel that the government was telling the truth, even if its policies were wrong.

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and killing on his own authority, is quietly retired on a four-star general's salary of \$2,250 a month.

Reporters 'troublemakers'

The government here is also saying that reporters like Seymour Hersh of The New York Times, who broke the Mylai and Lavelle stories, and Neil Sheehan, also of The Times, who dug out the Pentagon Papers, and Jack Anderson who exposed the Administration's clumsy diplomacy in the Indo-Pakistan war, are troublemakers who embarrass the government and give aid and comfort to the enemy.

Well, it is a curious time, and the surprising thing about it is not that these things happen, but the reaction to them after they do happen.

The Congress was very gentle with Lavelle, and some members of the House Armed Services Investigating Subcommittee were openly admiring. The general is a handsome and candid man. He admitted everything, or almost everything.

He was worried about the North Vietnamese military buildup along the DMZ and recommended timely and summary action to break it up, and when he didn't get authority to do so, as the general in charge of the U.S. Air Force in Southeast Asia, he went ahead anyway.

Chain of command

As Lavelle saw it, the men under him were obliged to carry out his orders, but he