

Nation suffers a moral blindness, sees no wrong in bombing raids

The Vietnam war has generated so much dishonesty and moral blindness through three administrations that the nation now appears to consider these normal. So there is no particular outcry over the disclosures that numerous "protective reaction" raids on North Vietnam have been staged, to let American fliers bomb what they wanted to bomb, when they wanted to bomb it.

These unprovoked attacks were staged in violation of stated American policy, of the military rules of engagement arising from that policy, of the "understanding" by which the Johnson Administration's bombing campaign had been stopped and the Paris peace talks started in 1968, and of simple honesty.

It is not yet clear that high civilian officials in the Nixon Administration knew of these staged attacks, but high military officials seem to have known. That no one in authority is particularly upset about the matter is suggested by the facts that General Lavelle was not court martialed but permitted to retire at three star rank, and that the Pentagon has said no further "active investigations" are being made.

One group that certainly knew these illegal, staged air attacks were taking place is the North Vietnamese government; its officials keep up with what is in the American press and therefore they knew all along that deliberate attacks were being officially reported by the American government as "protective reaction."

There must have been some laughter of the cynical variety in Hanoi, therefore, when the Nixon Administration solemnly accused the North Vietnamese of violating the "understanding" when their forces crossed the Demilitarized Zone last spring; for the violation was of an

"understanding" Hanoi knew to have been already violated — and repeatedly — by the American Air Force. The revelation of these American violations also put in proper perspective President Nixon's remarks in his May 8 speech about the "outlaw" government in Hanoi.

Given their experience, moreover, it is not hard to see why Hanoi is not impressed by such Nixonian proposals as the one to have President Thieu resign a month before elections would be held to settle the matter of power in Saigon, or by Washington's insistence on a cease-fire agreement before an American withdrawal. Little the North Vietnamese have seen in American conduct since the Eisenhower Administration thwarted the all-Vietnam elections promised by the 1954 Geneva Accords can have disposed Hanoi to trust American proposals or pledges.

This is one of the simple facts of the Indochina war, yet something many Americans are unwilling to grant — the other side simply does not trust our word, and has little reason to do so. That is a major reason why "peace offers" that seem reasonable to Americans, accustomed to thinking of their country and government as trustworthy and propagandized into regarding all Communists as unconscionable liars, are often spurned or ignored in Hanoi. That is their own kind of "protective reaction."

At some point, any negotiated settlement between them is bound to rest on trust; but Washington mistrusts Hanoi's proposals as leading to a Communist takeover in Saigon, and Hanoi equally mistrusts Washington's offers as cloaking plans for continued American power and influence in Indochina.