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The Case of General Lavelle (Cont.)

General Lavelle was running his own private war. He and his two-star deputy not only ignored the guidelines—essentially, shoot when there was evidence of hostile enemy reaction—for raids in North Vietnam; they told Seventh Air Force pilots on some 20 missions to bomb whether there was such evidence or not. He ran his command in a way that false reports prevented internal Air Force procedures from uncovering his misdeeds. It took a lone sergeant to blow the whistle in a letter to a senator. General Lavelle then claimed the raids lay within his interpretation of the bombing guidelines, although he had not previously disclosed his interpretation to his superiors. The Air Force relieved, retired and demoted him—so far, only him. But General Ryan, Air Force Chief of Staff, acknowledges to the Senate Armed Services Committee that the same thing could happen again.

It should be noted that General Lavelle conducted most of the raids in question, six to 10 months ago, without the knowledge or consent of either Admiral Moorer, then and now chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or General Abrams, then American commander in Vietnam. The committee transcript shows that Admiral Moorer approved an escort reconnaissance mission over Quang Lang airport last Nov. 8, but not the bomb-regardless order which General Lavelle issued to his pilots. General Abrams authorized an attack last Jan. 5 on Mocchau radar station, a gray-area target later found by the Joint Chiefs not to have been on the then-approved target list. But these two raids stand apart from the 20-odd run surreptitiously by General Lavelle in January-March, 1972. We see no grounds for challenging General Abrams' nomination to be Army Chief of Staff because of the Jan. 5 raid. The Lavelle case is the heart of the matter disclosed so far.

What is at issue, in the first instance, is the vexing ambiguity of a limited war in the eyes of the men engaged in fighting it. The political reasons behind the bombing restrictions simply were not

as compelling to General Lavelle as were the targets and the risks to his men in the field. Yet in a limited war the calibration of military pressure is a crucial political factor. Hanoi was surely basing part of its judgment on Washington's worthiness as a partner in diplomacy, on how well or poorly Washington was observing the 1968 bombing-halt "understanding," then (a year ago) still in effect. General Lavelle's raids took place in a period of intense American-North Vietnamese contacts. Whether his raids, militarily negligible as they may have been, undercut whatever Henry Kissinger then was telling North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho, may never be known. But the chances of diplomatic damage in such a situation are plain.

In a deeper sense, the Lavelle case—and so many others below the General, if not above him, seem to have been involved that it is something of a misnomer to pin it all on him—raises a fundamental issue of civilian control. The system devised in the Air Force to assure responsiveness to civilian and higher-military orders broke down for a number of months. In the nuclear age, with the weapons available to local commanders, this is more than disorderly military conduct. It is a nightmare. And General Ryan says it could happen again.

"Something must be done," says Senator Stennis. We look forward to hearing his specific proposals. Some think that new control mechanisms, involving civilians or double checking, should be installed. Others note that the character of a four-star general ought to be the best guarantee of military integrity. There is also the possibility that an appropriate "message" will be sent by the manner in which the Air Force acts on the disclosures made in the current hearings—for instance, Lavelle's deputy, General Slay, contradicting his chief, says he was ordered to falsify reports. The first responsibility for assuring civilian control lies with the President, but Senator Stennis because of his position and personal stature can surely make a weighty contribution of his own.