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Is There No Sense of Decency?

By ANTHONY LEWIS

WASHINGTON—One of the highest-ranking American prisoners in North Vietnam is James Mulligan, a Navy captain who was shot down over Vinh on March 20, 1966. His wife, Louise, has waited for six and one-half years now with astonishing strength, wisdom and even humor. As many Government officials have learned, she is a rare person so courageous and so straight that she makes one ashamed of one's own petty worries.

Louise Mulligan was in the audience at the Statler Hotel here last week when President Nixon spoke to the families of prisoners and men missing in Southeast Asia. Most of the audience rose and applauded when he finished, but she stayed seated and silent. She saw no reason, as she put it, to applaud a man who had continued this terrible war for four more years.

After the President's speech Mrs. Mulligan went out of the ballroom to telephone a friend. When she finished, she noticed a man watching her—the only other person in the hall. He was carrying a walkie-talkie with a receiver button in his ear, like the Secret Service men who accompany the President. As she walked out, she heard him say into the sending unit, "She is now leaving the hall. . . ."

Mrs. Mulligan told some of the other wives about her experience, saying how ironic she thought it was that we were supposed to be fighting for democracy in South Vietnam and then found things like this happening at home. Two of her friends later saw the man who had followed her, and went up and asked who he was. He replied that he was a postal inspector.

What was done to Louise Mulligan is about par for the course in official Washington today—par for political decency and for candor. Even disagreement with President Nixon's policies cannot prepare one for the atmosphere of this city: It is ugly. It is shameless.

The President's appointments secretary is accused of helping a program of nasty political sabotage. One would expect an inquiry or a detailed cate-

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gorical denial of the charges. But no.

The White House press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, dismisses it all as "hearsay" or evidence from unidentified sources. In other words, grave charges against the man who guards the door of the President will be ignored unless they are proven as they would have to be in a court of law. If that standard applied, virtually no corruption would ever be officially investigated.

There are too many sawdust men in Washington now, men with nothing inside—no limits of character to what they will do for political ends. If it works, if you can get away with it, do it: That is the only standard. The standard was displayed in that speech by the President to the prisoners' families.

At one point Mr. Nixon reached out to introduce the subject of amnesty for those who refused to fight in Viet-

nam. To grant amnesty, he said, would be "the most immoral thing I could think of." The sentiment was nicely judged for that audience. What the audience mostly did not remember was Mr. Nixon's statement last January that after the war "I for one would be very liberal with regard to amnesty."

A second passage laid it down as the duty of "opinion leaders" in this country "to stand by the President of the United States when he makes a terribly difficult, potentially unpopular decision." That is the Nixon version of American democracy: Our President right or wrong, bringer of promised peace or destroyer.

Then at the end came this promise: "There is nothing that I want more than to bring your loved ones home and I will never let you down." That from the man who made the prisoners a political issue and thereby assured that the North Vietnamese would use them for bargaining purposes. That from the man whose concern for Nguyen Van Thieu, however the bargaining with Thieu turns out now,

kept the prisoners in their camps for four more years.

A Republican who held high office under President Eisenhower remarked the other day on how he disliked visiting Washington nowadays because he found the atmosphere so unpleasant. Dwight Eisenhower could be politically tough, but it is impossible to imagine him tolerating the slippery and the corrupt. It is impossible to imagine him promising to end a war and then continuing it with increasing destructiveness for four years. But then he was a man who had a sense of proportion and of humanity.

The great moment of the Army-McCarthy hearings came back to me recently—the day when Joseph N. Welch, the Army counsel, responded to an act of meanness by Senator Joseph McCarthy by asking him: "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?" The question really sought a judgment from the American people, as it would if it were put to the men who hold power in Washington today.