

NYTimes

A

DEC 22 1972

French Comment

PARIS—There was a time not very long ago when one Guernica, while not actually provoking an offensive against barbarity, caused nausea in the West when the West discovered it was capable of the worst against mankind. It was already a case of airplanes massacring a civilian population, a case of airplanes dispatched by a foreign power to support dictatorship.

Since then, perversion has made headway. Today it has reached a new high in a North Vietnam covered with "big cemeteries under the moonlight." A hundred B-52's and hundreds of fighter-bombers unleashed night and day on the network of tightly knit webs of Delta villages—it is hard to imagine what this represents in terror, in blind murders, in atrocious physical and psychological mutilations.

The fact that the center of Hanoi has not been—or not yet been—annihilated is not reassuring: the heart of the capital which has long been evacuated has less population left than the immediate suburbs and the countryside, which is swarming with peasants, and also with children, with old people, with the inactive population from the cities dispersed among straw huts.

To cover this dense crowd of civilians with a carpet of bombs is perhaps not to exterminate a people, but it is to undertake a succession of localized exterminations. It is to put to sword and fire the houses and the huts, the hospitals, the schools, the shops and the cooperatives.

The American leadership believes that the era of contempt which they have entered without troubled conscience will be succeeded by the era of surrender of their adversaries. But the latter have toughness of mind because they have the intelligence which grows from pride. These people who call the Americans "the Huns of the Twentieth Century" have just published, in French, a very polished anthology of their most ancient poems.

But Mr. Nixon, on the other hand, is right: he is right in believing that hospital, hut and rice field must be destroyed, because it is from there as much as from military command posts that the resistance draws its ideals and its men. Mr. Nixon is translating this reality into his own language as "Communist offensive."

If he dared go to the very end of his logic, he should now bomb Saigon. A priest there has just let it be known that for the past ten days hundreds of prisoners have gone on a hunger strike at the capital's Chi Hoa prison. They are "politicals," picked up in the street by General Thieu's policemen or jailed because they are wrong-thinking Catholic or students disgusted with the dictatorship. They have dared ask for the freedom of their people and for the end of the massacres.

Perpetually in search of victory, Mr. Nixon is thus led to give harder and harder blows everywhere because his enemies are everywhere. In the view of many he still is given the benefit of tentative explanations or of justifications, because he has been re-elected and because the United States is not a totalitarian country. But may one not question one's self about the exact value of those liberal mechanisms which have been bypassed, betrayed as they have been by the logic of an imperial system and deviated from their original meaning to permit such abomination, the crushing of a small country that could well have been spared promotion to the rank of martyr?

This commentary appeared in yesterday's editions of Le Monde. Translation by the Paris bureau of The Times.