

Vietnam

Delenda

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By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, Dec. 22—When the Lord told Abraham that He was going to destroy Sodom for its sins, as it is said in Genesis, Chapter 18, Abraham asked, "Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" The Lord agreed that if there were ten righteous men in Sodom, "then I will spare all the place for their sakes." But there were not ten.

In that episode the Bible gave early expression to an idea fundamental to Western civilization: the worth of the individual. The story teaches also that the individual has an inescapable moral responsibility to his society, for on him may depend the salvation of all.

One of the terrible aspects of the massive new American bombing campaign against North Vietnam has been the inertness of the response in many quarters. Worst of all has been the failure of a single person in the United States Government to break with a policy that many must know history will judge a crime against humanity.

To send B-52's against populous areas such as Haiphong or Hanoi can have only one purpose: terror. It was the response of a man so overwhelmed by his sense of inadequacy and frustration that he had to strike out, punish, destroy.

An English newspaper that has taken a moderate line on the war, The Guardian, asked this week: "Does Mr. Nixon want to go down in history as one of the most murderous and blood-thirsty of American Presidents?" But it no longer matters what he wants. The facts assure that he will be so recorded.

The American imagination has evidently ceased to be stirred by the facts of bombing. When people have not

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lived under bombs, as few Americans have, they perhaps cannot imagine the continuous fear. They may not understand that bombs dropped in cities and villages kill human beings indiscriminately, the innocent with the wicked. They do not see themselves caught even hundreds of yards from the center of a B-52 raid, the concussion crushing their lungs or spewing out their insides.

The bombing that most notably evoked the sympathy of Americans was the Nazi blitz on Britain in World War II. How we admired the pluck of the British under those terrible raids.

In the nearly six years of World War II, less than 80,000 tons of bombs fell on the British Isles. Last month alone, the month of November, when American bombing was restricted because of the peace talks, U.S. planes dropped 100,000 tons on Indochina. The total through the Johnson and Nixon Administrations is now over seven million tons.

Whatever the cause, whatever the rights or wrongs of the parties in Vietnam, the means used by the United States in this war have long since passed the point when they could be justified by the end. Our war has failed the old and essential principle of proportionality, the moral doctrine that, in fighting, we must not do worse than the evil we oppose.

But what is the cause? It is no longer even arguably to "contain China," or roll back Communism, or make the peasants of Vietnam free. It is only, Henry Kissinger says, to make sure the American departure is "honorable." For that we have caused, are causing and presumably will continue to cause the most terrible destruction in the history of man.

Human indifference in the face of cruelty to others is hardly a new phenomenon. Supposedly civilized men and women said nothing while Hitler humiliated, tortured and eventually murdered millions of Jews. Freud made us see that there is an ineradicable violence in us all.

Still, it does seem remarkable that no one in the United States Government has now made himself a witness against what his country is doing. No members of the White House staff, no one in the Pentagon, no Air Force pilot. Not ten, not five, not one.

Public men always tell themselves that they do more good trying to moderate an evil policy from the inside, but at some point that self-deception has to stop. They say also that one man cannot make a difference. That may be true, but it may not; and in any case it does not relieve anyone from the responsibility of trying. That is what we learn from the story of Abraham and Sodom.