

# Terror Bombing in

the Name of Peace

How did we get in a few short weeks from a prospect for peace that "you can bank on," in the President's words, to the most savage and senseless act of war ever visited, over a scant 10 days, by one sovereign people upon another? And perhaps more to the point, what is the logic and where are the lessons of history that say we can run this reel backward after a time and proceed from terror bombing to "peace"—that there is, in other words, some rational cause and effect here, running either way?

The sad, hard answer is that while there are few conclusive lessons from history in this matter, the supposed "logic" of proceeding from bargaining to bombing and back to bargaining, in the name of peace, has been fundamental to this country's Vietnam strategy of "limited war" by "graduated response" over more than eight years and two administrations. In the beginning, it was accepted, with precious little protest, by Democrats and Republicans alike; and it was quietly acquiesced in by a good many of the people who now talk of "genocide" and "war crimes" and of the intolerable "immorality" of our current policy.

That we recite this background is in no way to suggest that we think Mr. Nixon is somehow mandated to continue to compound past follies. On the contrary, having promised us so many times to end this war within his first four years and having failed so dismally, for all that he might have learned from recent history, he is under greater obligation than any of his predecessors were to re-evaluate the mission, to reassess our capabilities, to recognize our limitations—and to change our strategy. But the change that is needed is not likely to be encouraged by denouncing the horror now unfolding in the skies over North Vietnam as something entirely new and different and essentially Nixonian. If this strategy is contrary to all we hold sacred, it would seem to follow that in some measure it always was. In short, we are not going to find it easy to work our way out of a 10-year-old war effort that has demonstrably failed of its early high hopes unless we are prepared to begin by admitting that this is so; that we are all caught up, in one degree or another, with the responsibility for a war plan gone horribly wrong; that this country undertook an enterprise it could not handle, at least in any time frame and at any expenditure of lives and resources worthy of the objective; and that it would be the mark of a big power to cut our losses and settle for the only reasonable outcome that we now must know could ever have been realistically expected.

We should begin, in other words, not simply by shouting about the immorality of what we are now doing, but by first acknowledging the tragic impracticality of what we set out to do, and the enormity of the miscalculations and misjudgments that have been made, however honestly, from the very start. For only from this admission can we proceed rationally to deal with the monumental contradiction in the administration's current strategy. The contradiction begins with the administration's seeming insistence on a fully-enforceable, guaranteed settle-

ment of the war on the old, familiar, original terms -- "freedom" and "independence" and "enduring peace" for South Vietnam; anything seriously short of that, Mr. Nixon would have us believe, would be abject surrender, the abandonment of an ally, and a "stain upon the honor" of the United States.

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Leaving aside the cliches which have come to be so inevitable a part of every serious presentation of our policy, there are two things tragically wrong about this statement of our aims, and the first is that such objectives are demonstrably unobtainable. The violent and embittered conflict that has engulfed Indochina for several decades is not going to be "settled" by any piece of paper that Dr. Henry Kissinger could conceivably persuade both North and South Vietnam to sign. That is the loud lesson of the collapse of the last peace plan; it asked too much of a situation which can only be resolved in ambiguity. Such is the conflict of purpose on both sides, in fact, that it can fairly be said that in negotiating a "settlement" we are in fact merely writing the rules of engagement for a continuing struggle for control of South Vietnam by other less openly military means.

So we are not talking about "peace," and still less about "abandoning an ally," for there can be no resolution of the fighting which will not present each side both with risks and with opportunities of losing—or winning—in large measure what each has been fighting for. To pretend that we are doing otherwise—that we are making "enduring peace" by carpet-bombing our way across downtown Hanoi with 52s—is to practice yet one more cruel deception upon an American public already cruelly deceived. It is, in brief, to compound what is perhaps the real immorality of this administration's policy—the continuing readiness to dissemble; to talk of "military targets" when what we are hitting are residential centers and hospitals and commercial airports; to speak of our dedication to the return of our POWs and our missing in action even while we add more than 70 to their number in little more than a week.

We think the American people could face the truth of how little there is we can really count on accomplishing in Vietnam—if they were to hear it from the President. But we have not heard from the President—not since "peace was at hand." Instead, we have heard from surrogates and spokesmen and military headquarters, cryptically, about the loss of men and aircraft and the alleged military significance of the raids. It is from others, around the world, that we hear about the havoc our bombers are wreaking on innocent civilians with the heaviest aerial onslaught of this or any other war. All this we are presumably doing to redeem the "honor of America" and this is the second part of what's wrong—and contradictory—about the President's bombing policy. For it is hard to envisage any settlement that we could realistically hope to negotiate which could justify the effort now being expended to achieve it or wash away the stains on this country's honor of the past 10 days.