

William F. Buckley, Jr.

The Morals of Vietnam Bombs

THE SWEDES ARE PUZZLED that Mr. Nixon has suspended the conventional exchange of ambassadors between the two countries. All the Prime Minister of Sweden did was link the American bombing of North Vietnam with Nazi massacres in World War Two and describe the bombing as a "form of torture" reminiscent of atrocities committed at Katyn, Lidice, and Treblinka.

One would think that the problem is exclusively Swedish, i.e. that in Mr. Olof Palme they have a prime minister, presumably very gifted in other matters, who is however incapable of orderly thought when it comes to Vietnam. After all, the obsession has been with him for a very long while. It was five years ago that he marched side by side with North Vietnamese in the demonstration against — well, southern resistance to North Vietnamese demands, is the only historically objective way of putting it.

But it isn't a Scandinavian disease. Perhaps Mr. Palme, whose country permitted Nazi troops to march back and forth between Finland and Norway, is psychologically ill at ease with the historical fact that Americans fought to save Europe while the Swedes practised nude bathing, or whatever. But that is a narrow observation, because it hardly disposes of Mr. Palme's American counterparts, who have no inferiority complex about the Second World War.

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CONSIDER MR. WILFRED SHEED, a learned and morally acute, if not acutely moral, novelist and critic, a man of exquisite gift for distinction. He wrote last Sunday: "To some of us, this war is the greatest sin we ever expect to find ourselves involved in, and our private spiritual lives are comparatively trivial next to the task of stopping it."

I would not have believed such a sentence could have been uttered at the LBJ Unbirthday party in Chicago in 1968 by Paul Krassner. But there it is. I had not known what escalation meant until discovering from Mr. Sheed that there are forces in the world, let alone forces Mr. Nixon has been loosing, which are capable of reducing private spiritual life to triviality.

What do these people see and read and whom do they mix with? Miss Pauline Kael, the movie critic, may have given us the clue to the polarization about which we have heard so much. At a meeting of the Modern Language Association during Christmas, Miss Kael offered this introspection: "I live in a rather special world. I know only one person who voted for Nixon. Where they (i.e. the Nixon supporters) are I don't know. They're outside my ken. But sometimes when I'm in the theater I can feel them."

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SUCH A PRÉSENCE as Miss Kael occasionally feels, sitting anonymously in a theater with her, wrote a letter last week to the New York Times. It says, really, all there is to say.

"I do not want to argue about the political wisdom of our active participation in the tragic Indochina conflict, about the correctness of the domino theory or the skill of our military operations. But one major issue is simply beginning for scrutiny and clarification. It is the moral aspect of this particular war.

"Let us suppose for a moment that East Germany has invaded the Federal Republic, with a formidable array of the most modern Soviet arms, under the guise of helping local Communists and with the avowed aim of overpowering the existing regime. Villages would be burned, provincial capitals reduced to shambles by devastating artillery fire, servants of the government summarily executed and relatives of West German soldiers killed.

"Moreover, parts of Switzerland and Denmark would be occupied to better infiltrate the war zone. On top of it all, they would pretend that there are no East German troops in the West.

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"ARMED SUPPORT of West Germany in such circumstances could be found too risky and strategically unadvisable, as during the Hungarian and Czechoslovak tragedies of the last decade. But — except for the Communists — scarcely one voice would be raised to condemn our possible intervention as immoral, all loss of life and prisoners of war notwithstanding.

"Comparisons are never perfect. U.S. stakes in Europe are much higher than in Southeast Asia, and so are the risks. Yet, the fundamental issue is the same: Shall we or shall we not come to the help of friendly nations invaded by totalitarian neighbors? And if we do, can our action be called immoral?

"All wars are brutal and inhuman. But 130,000 people would not have died during a single raid in Dresden if Hitler had not invaded and devastated half a dozen European countries, killing millions in the process. Not a single bomb would have been dropped on Hanoi if they had not invaded and devastated South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia."