

The Reason Why

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, Jan. 21—If history confirms its promise, the most important sentence in President Nixon's second inaugural will have been this one:

"The time has passed when America will make every other nation's conflict our own, or make every other nation's future our responsibility, or presume to tell the people of other nations how to manage their own affairs."

The President would naturally resist any suggestion that this new doctrine bears on Vietnam. But others will view it as a reflection of the tragic American involvement there, as the beginning of a lesson bitterly learned.

The war is ending. At last there is reason for hope. But for Americans the fundamental questions remain: In a political and a moral sense, has it been a legitimate war? Does the end now taking shape justify the means that we have used?

The case for the affirmative has been made most strongly in the Economist of London, one of the last whole-hearted supporters of the American intervention in Vietnam and of the means employed. Thus in a recent issue the editors, examining the bombing of Hanoi over Christmas, expressed some doubts about the use of B-52's but in general continued to find the American war justified.

In World War II, the Economist said, British bombers caused terrible destruction in Hamburg, Dresden and other German cities; American nuclear bombs obliterated two cities in Japan. Those who still consider that bombing justified, the paper argued, cannot object to what has happened in Vietnam—unless they are sure the bombs have been ineffective or do not believe North Vietnam's aims worth opposing.

But the position of Britain and the United States in World War II was enormously different, morally and politically, from the American posture in the Vietnam war. To understand that difference is to see what has gone wrong in Vietnam.

Britain and the U. S. were both attacked first in World War II, Britain savagely bombed and the United States hit without warning at Pearl Harbor. For the British the war was literally a struggle for survival; it was never quite that for Americans, but it was a fight against powers whose victory would have meant a world turned against us.

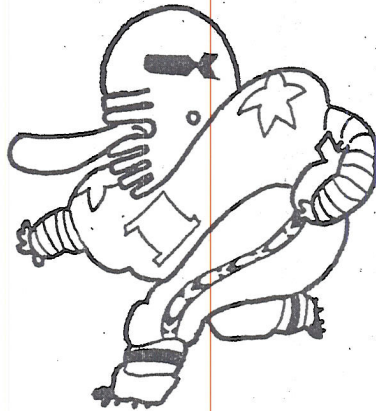
Even under those extreme circumstances, many thoughtful people have condemned what was done to Dresden and Hiroshima—have denied that the undoubtedly legitimate end of the Allies' war justified those means. And the circumstances were not at all of the same kind in Vietnam.

AT HOME ABROAD

Not one North Vietnamese bomb or shell has ever landed in American territory, or ever could. No one but a fantasist could suggest that the United States was fighting for its own survival. Since the Nixon trips to Peking and Moscow, no one can argue seriously that America has fought in Vietnam to stop a "world Communist movement" from enslaving humanity as Hitler would have. No, this was an argument between Vietnamese, and the U.S. intervened from half a world away.

Those who support intervention would still say that it was justified, because the Communist side of the Vietnamese argument was trying to impose its view by force and we acted to preserve the freedom of the others.

That would be a fair argument if we had ever offered the people of



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South Vietnam a choice. To do so we would have had to put to them, in the early 1960's, a question like this:

The United States is ready to help South Vietnam stay out of Communist control. If it does, it will have to drop several million tons of bombs on your country. Nearly half your population will become refugees, and it will change from a land of villages to one of shantytown cities. We shall have to spray poisonous chemicals on five million acres of your land, bulldoze almost another million acres, destroy half your hardwood forests and much of your mangrove. Nearly two million South Vietnamese will be killed or wounded. And at the end your country will be divided again, between two dictatorial regimes. Would you like us to help?

That question was never asked. The national election that should have been held under the Geneva agreement of 1954 was never held, because it appeared that Ho Chi Minh would win. With an ill-defined end, and by the most terrible means, we arrogantly made Vietnam's conflict our own.