

Ghosts

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Dec. 19—Four years ago this weekend there began the most destructive single episode of international violence in recent history: The Christmas bombing of North Vietnam.

For eleven days, American B-52's and other planes bombed Hanoi and Haiphong. There were 2,000 strikes, the most intensive conventional bombing campaign ever carried out. It was also one of the most cynical. For the available evidence indicates that its purpose was not military advantage but exemplary punishment.

Why should we call up from our memories such a ghost of Christmas past? This is a time of change and hope for Americans. The election wrote a symbolic end to the era of Vietnam as well as Watergate. The one remaining official who had a particular responsibility for the Christmas bombing is about to leave government. The President-to-be is pledged to stay out of distant conflicts posing no real threat to American security.

But there is a risk in too easily forgetting painful experience. Those who do not learn from history, Santayana said, are condemned to repeat it.

ABROAD AT HOME

*'Beware obsession.
Beware men un-
touched by concern
for the moral
consequences of
their acts.'*

The warning is especially apt as a new Administration takes office—one with its share of men who were wrong on Vietnam. It is necessary to remember, not in order to wallow in guilt for the past but to observe wise caution in the future.

The Christmas bombing was planned by a few in secret and carried on

without any convincing explanation to Congress or the public. Henry Kissinger indicated that its purpose was to force new concessions from North Vietnam in the pending peace negotiation, but that claim was quickly proved false. When a peace agreement was reached in January 1973, it differed in only trivial respects from the terms disclosed the previous October.

One new agreement was reached after the bombing—but not published. The United States secretly promised to give North Vietnam \$3.5 billion to help reconstruct the country after years of American bombing.

The real purpose of the Christmas bombing, as outside analysts pieced

the clues together afterward, was to persuade South Vietnam to accept the truce. The Saigon Government had been furiously resisting it because it allowed Hanoi to keep troops in the South. General Alexander Haig, then Mr. Kissinger's assistant, had gone to Saigon and promised by way of persuasion that the North would be "brutalized." The bombing thus was a signal of commitment to Saigon.

The episode of the Christmas bombing was only the last of many American disasters in Vietnam, and many Administrations were responsible. But it has always seemed to me that there was a special obtuseness, moral and political, in pressing the American war effort after 1968—when every informed, realistic person knew that the United States could not impose its views on Vietnam by legitimate means.

From 1969 to 1973, when the last U.S. ground forces left, 15,387 Americans were killed in Vietnam—a 50 percent increase in the death list. The United States spent \$50 billion on the war in those years, and dropped four million tons of bombs. The human cost to the Vietnamese has not been measured so precisely, but casualties must have been in the hundreds of thousands.

And none of it made any difference. We know that something very much like the terms signed in 1973 could have been agreed in 1969, with a result no worse from the American standpoint.

For many people, the great puzzle of the period after 1968 was Mr. Kissinger. Richard Nixon might be obsessed by Vietnam, might see it as a crucial test of strength. But Mr. Kissinger, we thought, was a rational man. He spoke of the agony of Vietnam, of its damage to the American fabric. He promised his friends when he went to Washington in 1969 that the war would be over in months.

But there never really was a puzzle. Henry Kissinger was as obsessed as Richard Nixon by the need to demonstrate "strength" in Vietnam, and he did not let reality interfere. His agony was at arm's length; there is no sign that the human torment of Vietnam affected him inside, as it did so many others. Even at the end in 1975, in defiance of reality, he wanted to keep the war going. If he had his way, we would be bombing Vietnam still.

The lesson for Americans are clear enough: Beware obsession. Beware secrecy. Beware concentrated power. Beware men untouched by concern for the moral consequence of their acts.

In this forgetful country, the necessity of remembering is a lesson itself. Christmas is a time of tenderness, the more acute when we are conscious of our failings. Yet we hardly think now of what we did in Vietnam, or even worse next door in Cambodia.