

Ghosts

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Dec. 23 — How many Americans have remembered, at this season, what our country was doing at Christmas a year ago? We were carrying out the heaviest conventional bombing campaign in the history of mankind, the B-52 raids on Hanoi and Haiphong.

What was the purpose of the Christmas bombing? What did it accomplish? A year later, the answers to those questions are clearer—and harder to bear.

The implicit official justification of the bombing at the time was that it was done to obtain a proper cease-fire agreement from North Vietnam. The bombing began when Henry Kissinger had angrily broken off his talks with Le Du Tho; a few weeks after it stopped last January, we signed the agreement that Mr. Nixon said brought "peace with honor."

The question, then, is what difference the bombing made in the peace terms. We can explore that readily enough, by comparing the draft tentatively agreed in October, 1972, with the final January version.

The differences were in fact stated by Mr. Kissinger in January. The main points he argued were that the final terms (1) called on North and South Vietnam "to respect the demilitarized zone" between them, (2) required prompt establishment of commissions to control the truce, (3) referred specifically to South Vietnamese sovereignty and (4) removed the ambiguous phrase "administrative structure" to describe the proposed National Council of Reconciliation.

ABROAD AT HOME

Even to list those differences now is to invite derisory laughter. For one year of reality has made plain their utter lack of significance.

The North Vietnamese have of course trespassed on the demilitarized zone, just as Americans have winked at Article 4 of the truce agreement: "The United States will not continue its military involvement or intervene in the internal affairs of South Vietnam." Neither side had any illusion that the other would refrain from war by other means.

The International Control Commission and the joint military commissions are a bad joke. Sovereignty was a lawyer's word without practical effect. The National Council of Reconciliation has never been established, because the Saigon Government does not want to carry out the political terms of the agreement.

In short, no one can seriously believe today that the particular changes in phrasing were worth one bomb. They were empty words, as Henry Kissinger well knew when he cynically claimed them as negotiating achievements.

The real reason for the bombing, we suspected then and can be surer now, lay in Nguyen Van Thieu's objections to a cease-fire. While we negotiated after October, and then while we bombed, we sweetened Thieu by pouring immense quantities of arms into South Vietnam.

There is also the familiar Administration fear that Mr. Thieu's objections would find a politically dangerous echo on the American right, or would raise doubts abroad about our commitments. Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger bombed to prove their toughness, their manhood.

In the perspective of a year, the Christmas bombing was shameful even by the degraded contemporary standards of war and diplomacy. But why should we be made aware of that shame at a time when we want to think about happier things?

Americans are said to be a forgetful people. That quality has its advantages, but there are occasions when it is dangerous to forget history.

A public that forgets the Christmas bombing may too easily accept in future the use of such mass weapons as B-52's against targets in urban areas. To that end last winter the Pentagon did its best to conceal the human effects of the bombing. It even tried to deny the destruction of North Vietnam's largest hospital, Bach Mai, until the evidence made that too embarrassing.

We risk forgetting not only what we did in Vietnam but what we are still doing. Officials talk a good deal, these days, about a North Vietnamese build-up in the South. They say less about the American money and gasoline and arms and ammunition still pouring into South Vietnam. Its soldiers, a British correspondent wrote, use ammunition "as if they were getting it free and there was plenty more where it came from—both of which propositions are probably true."

But the worst danger lies in what we may still do. The B-52's remain in Guam and Thailand, and the budget calls for more 2,000-pound bombs this year than last. Is it conceivable, after all the turmoil in Congress and the country, that we could bomb again? It is hard to imagine, but one must put into the reckoning the man who matters now, Henry Kissinger.

Some who know Mr. Kissinger well say that he remains obsessed by the fear of showing weakness in Vietnam. He has even complained to visitors lately of a lack of American will to confront the Russians in the Middle East—oblivious, apparently, to how he helped sap that will with four more years of deception and unnecessary war in Vietnam.

This Christmas it is necessary to remember.