

Ghosts

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By Anthony Lewis

Mention Vietnam now, and people react as to something in the dim past. They find it hard to believe that the war ended less than eight months ago—that only last April Gerald Ford was seeking \$972 million in aid to save Saigon. Men's ability to block the unpleasant from their minds is remarkable.

But there are things that should not be forgotten. The anniversary of one is at hand. Three years ago today President Nixon ordered the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. Over eleven days there were 2,000 strikes; the most intensive conventional bombing campaign in history.

That episode was not the most brutal of the American years in Indochina. Among worse things there was, for example, the unprovoked and unconstitutional Presidential war on Cambodia. But the Christmas bombing raises in acute form some questions of fact and law and morals to which we still need answers. That is why the anniversary has been and will be noted in this space.

Three years after the event, there has still been no considered official explanation of the Christmas bombing. Henry Kissinger indicated at the time that it was needed to force acceptance by North Vietnam of cease-fire terms. Since then, there has been convincing evidence that the real purpose was to overcome South Vietnamese opposition to a truce by "brutalizing" the North.

A recent article in The Stanford Law Review suggests that, for such a purpose, the bombing would have vio-

lated doctrines of international law designed to limit what may be done in war. The author, Sanford V. Levinson, mentions doctrines forbidding destruction "not justified by military necessity" or bearing "no reasonable proportion" to a military end.

The article considered Mr. Kissinger's responsibility, in particular, in relation to the Christmas bombing. It concludes that he has "at least a prima facie case" of war crimes to answer. But it goes on, quite rightly, to say that the real problem raised by his policies is not that they were illegal—an illusive concept in the world as it is—but "that they were immoral and, indeed, barbaric." The question, in short, is the old one of ends and means.

One troubling and still highly relevant aspect of the Christmas bombing is that, in a constitutional democracy, a few men made the decision in secret. In the last years of the war, Vietnam policy was made almost entirely by Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger in disregard of the bureaucracy and in conflict with Congress. The autocratic style remains, as is evident from what we have learned lately about the decisions to involve this country in Angola.

Another concern is the use of power without regard for elementary considerations of humanity. It is the essence of Henry Kissinger's world view that authority and order are what matter, not humanity or morals, and his view continues to define American foreign policy.

"Foreign policy requires authority," Mr. Kissinger said in a recent speech. He went on to scorn "the illusion that tranquility can be achieved by an abstract purity of motive for which history offers no example." And he said it was time for an end to "self-doubt about our example" in a nation "which has come closest of all to the ideals of civil liberty and democracy."

Americans should be proud of their country and its ideals, true enough. But those ideals have not been applied abroad lately—not in Indochina or Latin America or Southern Africa. And the irony is that idealism happens to be a good part of our power in the world. When we live up to our ideals, we gain support that no force could compel. When we ignore them, we disable our friends—and ourselves.

"Abstract purity of motive" does not solve real problems. But neither does an attempt to substitute a cynical view of society for traditional American values. Six more years of war in Vietnam were necessary, Mr. Kissinger indicated, from 1969 to 1975, because defeat would arouse a right-wing reaction in this country. It turned out that Americans cared less about blame than about ending the bloodshed.

In a briefing the other day Mr. Kissinger said a great power ceased to be great if it never did anything anywhere. Doing things is Mr. Kissinger's forte, preferably doing them on his own. He remains a hero to many Americans for that reason: because he is a man of decision in a bumbling Government.

But there is a paradox. Public confidence in American Government is disabblingly low, in part because some of the officials responsible for past abuses remain in power—and they never apologize, never explain. Why should the public not be cynical when a man whose policy destroyed Cambodia talks about American ideals? Why should Americans believe their Government when it does not even try to justify an act as infamous as the Christmas bombing?

ABROAD AT HOME

'The Christmas bombing raises in acute form some questions of fact and law and morals.'