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Shame on Earth

By Tom Wicker

HAMLET, N. C., Dec. 25—The barbaric bombing we Americans are inflicting on a faraway nation of Asia does not echo loudly here in this small Southern town, where few see the Eastern liberal press that President Nixon so disdains. Television news on the local channel provides more of the natural devastation in Managua than of the American-made havoc in Hanoi.

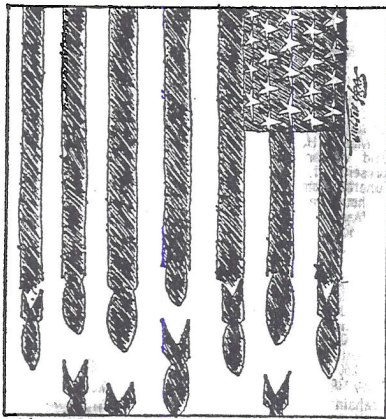
The headlines tell of the "pause" in the bombing a generous President ordered for Christmas; and viewers of the Washington-Green Bay football game saw a smiling Henry Kissinger watching the gladiators at play. But the pause is accompanied by the pledge that the full weight of death and destruction will be resumed as soon as the celebration of the birth of Christ can be got out of the way, and the Men of the Year enjoy their football while thousands suffer and die at their unchecked decision.

Not even those "hard-nosed" and "practical" men who believe in the efficacy of war should rejoice on this Christmas Day. For the renewed American slaughter of Asians probably will not have much more effect on the war in the South than it did when it was tried before; even at the higher level of destruction to which Mr. Nixon has escalated our aerial assault, there is little evidence to suggest that an agricultural society, dependent primarily on manpower, outside supplies and zeal, can be bombed into submission—although perhaps into obliteration.

In one week, in fact, Mr. Nixon has created about 10 per cent more P.O.W.'s and M.I.A.'s than the North Vietnamese already held; in the same week, the Air Force lost an average of almost two B-52's a day out of a total of only about a hundred said to be operational at any one time in the Indochinese theater. These extraordinary losses suggest that the North Vietnamese, so far from being cowed, are as always responding to escalation with strong new measures of their own. That is the history of this unwinnable and unspeakable war.

For those of us engaged with it in one way or another since it became a "hot war" in the early sixties, what is happening has a deadly familiar ring. In the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, too, the truth emerged only gradually, if at all—just as, in this instance, the White House insisted it was bombing to forestall an expected North Vietnamese offensive, until sources in South Vietnam disclosed that no one there expected or believed the North Vietnamese now could mount such an offensive.

IN THE NATION



Milton Harris

With the lie thus exposed, White House leaks—which are all over the radio news broadcasts here—have made it known that Mr. Nixon will bomb and keep bombing until North Vietnam agrees to negotiate in "good faith." How logical that used to sound when Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk said it! But it did not work for them—and why should bombing a people make them want to deal in good faith, particularly if they are convinced that the other side—our side—has not itself bargained in good faith?

Besides, suppose brute force does work this time. Suppose Mr. Nixon could send his bombers wave upon wave over Hanoi and all of North Vietnam, until at last he subdued an exhausted Government in Hanoi, which had been abandoned by Soviet and Chinese regimes concerned more for trade with the United States than for allies or Marxist solidarity or political decency. Even suppose the breakdown of negotiations is the fault of Hanoi, although available evidence more nearly suggests the opposite. Even so, do the American people want scorched earth, might-makes-right policies carried out in what once was their good name?

Is it really the American mission to bomb other nations into submission to our rule? If it is, why not send in our fleets and armies and take over North Vietnam? Are we Americans entitled to bomb and kill and maim and destroy, in order to impose an American order on the world, or even on Southeast Asia?

If so, if Mr. Nixon is in the right about that, then suppose the B-52's fail. Suppose they cannot make Hanoi come to the negotiating table and bargain in what the President calls "good faith." Should he then move up to nuclear weapons? Is there any limit upon Richard Nixon's entitlement to pursue victory in Vietnam—only so many deaths, so much destruction, this weapon but not that?

But if Mr. Nixon has given the orders, it was the American people who conferred on him the power to do so; and if he is the Commander in Chief, it is the American people who pay the taxes to supply the forces he commands. The political climate of the nation, the attitude of its people, permit almost without protest these massive assaults on another people. So on this Christmas Day Americans should not eat their turkey happily or watch their children at play or sing the old devout carols as if there were peace on earth or goodwill toward men.

There is no peace. There is shame on earth, an American shame, perhaps enduring, surely personal and immediate and inescapable. Whatever happened in Paris, it is not they who in willful anger are blasting our cities and our people. It is we who have loosed the holocaust.