

Ghosts

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Dec. 18—Two years ago today the United States Government began an episode that will live in infamy: the Christmas bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. It went on for eleven days. B-52's and other planes carried out 1,000 strikes, the most intensive conventional bombing campaign in history.

It is not a pleasant memory this season, but it is a necessary one. To this day, the men responsible for that savagery have said not a word of regret or serious explanation. In the absence of public understanding, the underlying attitudes that produced the Christmas bombing go on.

Why did we bomb? Most military actions that history comes to condemn—such as the bombing of Dresden in World War II—originated in a belief, however mistaken, that they would have a useful effect on the enemy. That is hard to say in the case of the Christmas bombing.

When it was all over, the United States and North Vietnam signed a peace agreement on the terms that had been worked out the previous October. The differences from the text published in October were of a trivial character, relating to such things as the speed of establishing commissions to police the truce—matters long since forgotten as irrelevant.

If the purpose of the Christmas bombing was to force North Vietnamese acceptance of a few empty phrases in the text of the agreement, then in a rudimentary sense the bombing was a crime of war. For one of the few agreed principles governing the conduct of war is that of proportionality, which condemns the use of military means grossly disproportionate to the political ends sought.

But there are strong reasons to doubt that the Christmas bombing was really designed to extract diplomatic concessions from its victims. Evidence published in the magazine *Foreign Policy* last summer by Tad Szulc suggests, rather, that the political purpose was to persuade *South Vietnam* to accept the truce.

Ever since October, the North Vietnamese had been pressing for signature of the agreement. But Nguyen Van Thieu and his Saigon Government had bitterly denounced it. The "brutalizing" of Hanoi, in Gen. Alexander Haig's delicate phrase, was a way of convincing President Thieu that America would remain committed to him after a truce.

There is a third possible explanation of the Christmas episode. From October on, the United States had

poured arms into South Vietnam in an effort to reassure Thieu. Having stalled on the truce in order to let that process work, Washington may have thought it politically necessary at home to obtain a few verbal concessions—however meaningless and at whatever cost—in order to justify the delay.

Whatever the reason, the bombing symbolized the determination of the United States to impose its views on Indochina—its unwillingness to allow change except on its terms. And that attitude goes on to this day.

More than half of American aid abroad still goes to Indochina. The meanings of policy are different, but

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the attitude is the same: The United States must be responsible for what happens in Vietnam.

The moral cost is even worse in Cambodia. There was a country, a civilization, among the most peaceful and beautiful on earth. Then the United States made Cambodia a pawn in its design for Southeast Asia. Look at the picture now: a ravaged country of desperate people. One sin history does not forgive: the destruction of a civilization.

A year ago some American officials troubled by the destruction of Cambodia urged Henry Kissinger to stop feeding the war, to withdraw gracefully from responsibility. He said roughly that he did not want to hear any more of that: "To lose gracefully is still to lose."

The continuing obsession with Indochina after the war lost any semblance of purpose used to be considered part of the pathology of Richard Nixon, who did not want to be seen as a pitiful helpless giant. Now, as the most fundamental American economic and political interests are threatened elsewhere, the obsession with Indochina continues to grip Mr. Kissinger. And are Congress or the country exempt from it if they let it go on?

Walter Lippmann's death reminds us of his prescient early opposition to the American war in Indochina. Mr. Lippmann was not an innocent about power. But he spent a lifetime arguing that the great must use it rationally, in their own interest and the world's.

The Christmas bombing, and the continuing American policy of war by other means in Indochina, show that Mr. Lippmann's work remains to be done. The dark forces of irrationality still deeply affect his country's foreign policy. Some day the people of Indochina will have to be allowed to make their own future. When?