

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

THURSDAY, AUGUST 5, 1971

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Laos: New Report, Old Story

The new Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report on Laos reveals that Washington's involvement in the formerly secret war there is far deeper, and Vientiane's contribution to its own security is far shallower, than practically anybody outside Laos had believed. The Royal Army is pathetic, lucky to muster 25 men in a battalion of 300, the report indicates, so the Central Intelligence Agency now runs an army of 30,000 Lao irregulars (1971 cost: \$70 million) who do battle against the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces fighting in the north. So many Lao soldiers have died, draft-dodged, deserted or enlisted in the Pathet Lao, however, that the CIA found it necessary to import some 4,000 Thai "volunteers" (\$35 million) to help out.

The American effort in Laos cost \$284 million in fiscal 1971, excluding funds for Thais in Laos and for the immensely expensive bombing campaigns against the Ho Chi Minh trail in the south and the fighting grounds around the Plain of Jars in the north. In fiscal 1972 the figure is expected to reach \$374 million. Economic aid is almost half again as large as the total Lao budget. In a country where per capita GNP is estimated at \$66, American spending amounts to \$141 per capita; services rendered include, if you will, the hiring of 24 Filipinos to teach Lao soldiers English. The Lao government, the report says, "continues to be almost totally dependent on the U.S., perhaps more dependent on us than any other government in the world."

And meanwhile, North Vietnamese men and materiel flow down the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces push into the third of the country not yet under their control, and the tiny country suffers the ravages of an immense war. The precise extent to which the situation there is deteriorating is described in the conclusion of the staff report, published elsewhere on this page today.

Well, what's new? The details are juicy but the thrust of the report is consistent with Mr. Nixon's major statement on Laos of March 6, 1970. He said then that the American purposes in Laos were to save American and allied lives in South Vietnam, by bombing; and to support the "independence and neutrality of Laos as set forth in the 1962 Geneva agreements," by aiding the Laotian government

"when requested." Specifying certain forms of that aid, the President said the U.S. also was conducting "some other activities." Well, now we know "other activities" included items like 14,000 sorties a month, in January, 1970, and unnumbered B-52 raids, still going on, and up.

Through declassifying the previous secret information in the Senate report, however, the President has in fact respected in good measure his earlier pledge "to give the American people the fullest possible information on our involvement (in Laos), consistent with national security." We cannot recall that any other administration ever disclosed so much about secret and continuing operations of the CIA. Unofficial reports had indicated the existence of a CIA role in Laos but there had been no official confirmation or description of it.

Mr. Nixon has not, of course, told all. In particular, he has not conceded that, as Mr. Fulbright and others suspect, funds for CIA support of Thai "volunteers" in Laos came from a defense money bill which had attached to it a Fulbright amendment banning precisely such subterfuges. If so, this is an outrage, but a predictable outrage. It would be unrealistic to think that an administration bent on prosecuting a secret war could not surmount an obstacle like the Fulbright amendment. "Let's face it," Mr. Symington said, in a secret session of the Senate which took place June 7 and whose proceedings were published yesterday, "We have been appropriating money for this war in the blind." Exactly so.

Since it is already widely recognized that the American effort in Laos is linked to the larger effort in South Vietnam and could not survive it, we doubt that anyone will be so shocked and outraged as to demand an end to American activities in Laos now. But the essential point should not be lost. By operating in secrecy and, more than that, by building an organization intended to operate in secrecy, the United States government provided itself the resources to take steps which — if it had been required to take and explain them in public — it might not have taken at all. When a democracy undertakes a policy built on secrecy, it risks falling into such a swamp that — and this is the ultimate irony — it is finally no longer embarrassed by disclosure. On the contrary, it winds up using it to plead for public understanding and support.