



Don't Blame CIA For Laos Crisis

WASHINGTON — Before rising congressional temper about the presence of Americans in Laos runs its course, fault is certain to be laid at the doorstep of the Central Intelligence Agency. In part, this is because the agency cannot answer back.

But the CIA is also a convenient target because it has become a synonym on the far, far left for everything wrong with our foreign policy and inimical to our ideals. Some academic circles will believe anything about the CIA provided it conforms to the picture of a department of government out of control, responsible to none and bent upon destroying democracy all over the world.

In the argument over Laos, there are points to be won on the issue of secrecy—and the bewildering and contradictory communiques from the White House over casualties. But there are also—alas—points to be won by suggesting that our difficulties in Laos are the responsibility of the CIA. And it is this easy argument which is refuted by an examination of recent history.

We are in Laos, so history tells us, because President Eisenhower ordered us there and Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon acquiesced in turn. Thus, no partisan points can be scored by those who wish we weren't there and who fear the consequence.

In fact, it was John F. Kennedy who put the CIA into Laos to replace some 800 American military advisers, ordered out by the Geneva Accords of 1962. It became immediately clear that North Vietnam had no intention of withdrawing its troops, though many were put into civilian clothes. On a much reduced scale, the United States did the same thing.

Both the United States and North Vietnam then proceeded to aid "their" side of South Vietnam from the Laotian sanctuary. The North Vietnamese used Laos for a supply and regrouping area, and we used its airfields as bomber bases.

So the trouble with Laos is Vietnam. The two cannot be separated. Yet a discussion of the CIA role in Laos is instructive if only because it proves what Vietnam proves—that a tiny commitment has a way of growing.

CIA's intelligence job in

Laos was relatively simple—to count the number of men coming down the long jungle paths from the north. The operations job was more difficult and more important—to preserve the Laotian government as one that would continue to ask us to bomb the trail in Southern Laos.

If we couldn't bomb the trail, the war in Vietnam—it was thought—would be immensely more difficult, though, as CIA officials have privately conceded for some time, the bombing in Laos isn't working any better than it did in North Vietnam.

But in order to preserve a Laotian government which would ask us to bomb its country, the CIA had to find an army. A local strong man was ready to provide one—and so the escalation began—armies provoke armies. When CIA's army got strong enough to drive the Pathet Lao out of the Plain of Jars, the North Vietnamese began a counter buildup. By last year they were able to put 25,000 additional men into the field and drive the CIA into the corner in which we now live in Laos.

It is not a comfortable corner. The possibility of a deal between the Laotian government and the Pathet Lao would revoke our permission to bomb the trail—or to use Laotian territory at all.

The moralistic bombast of John Foster Dulles brought us into Vietnam. That error—continued on a low level by Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy—was compounded by Lyndon Johnson's attempt to make that moralistic bombast—"aggression," "the Free World"—a basis for all-out war. And Richard Nixon now has the job of trying to get American troops off that sticky ground. It has been a mistake—a ghastly mistake—but it must be faced squarely and not blamed on the CIA.