

Second half of two-part editorial; first part, "Back to the Table ..." filed POWs.

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...but Who's in Charge?

The case of Gen. John D. Lavelle, who was relieved of his command of United States Air Forces in Southeast Asia last March for exceeding his authority in ordering attacks against North Vietnam, raises the most serious questions about the effectiveness of civilian control over the American military.

General Lavelle has acknowledged to a Congressional committee that he "probably" went beyond the rules of engagement in initiating strikes against military targets in the North under the guise of "protective reaction." The White House recognized the seriousness of this breach of discipline when it relieved the general of his command and demoted him into early retirement.

Still unanswered, however, is the question of how the Air Force was able to conduct unauthorized strikes against North Vietnam for four months—from last November to March—without detection and correction by higher authority in Saigon or Washington. It is particularly disturbing that in this instance, as in the Mylai affair, grave violations of the rules of engagement received no discernible attention from the high command or from the Commander in Chief until an enlisted man alerted a member of Congress to the situation.

Now that the President himself has extended the air war to include strikes close to North Vietnamese population centers and to the Chinese border, it is especially important that the American people and Congress receive firm assurances that this country's awesome military might is under effective civilian control. Congress cannot responsibly let the matter rest. The punishment of General Lavelle can be regarded as only a first step toward resolving the far-reaching questions raised by his disciplinary lapse.