

The Lavelle Case

The hearings by the Senate Armed Services Committee in the case of Lieut. Gen. John D. Lavelle have left the most important issues involved in the controversy in totally unsatisfactory suspension. The censure of the general, together with a virtually blanket clearing of all other persons and echelons, has all the earmarks of a coverup. Making one officer the scapegoat for more widespread wrongdoing would be an injustice in any case; if the intent is to wipe out the traces of a more serious deception, the matter would assume grave national importance.

General Lavelle, in a letter to Senator John C. Stennis, has categorically denied charges that he had been conducting "a massive, private air war" over North Vietnam. He insisted instead that he had been encouraged by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird himself to undertake those air strikes which were counter to what was then understood by the American people and by Hanoi to be official White House policy.

Allowing for misinterpretations of orders and particularly of conversations relating to such orders, the general's letter nevertheless raises fundamental questions which have apparently been skirted by the Senate committee. The issue has ceased to be merely whether one high-ranking officer, with or without the knowledge of some of his superiors, ignored restrictions imposed by civilian authority. Two even more serious questions must now be answered.

Were the allegedly unauthorized strikes actually carried out at the suggestion of the top military command, in disregard of national policy?

Or were the strikes, in fact, authorized by the same civilian authority that maintained a public posture of prohibiting such action as part of its effort to lend credibility to its peace negotiations in Paris?

If the Joint Chiefs of Staff should be found to have encouraged General Lavelle to ignore White House policy, with the obvious risk of torpedoing the Paris talks, this would be tantamount to a military takeover of the American Government's peacemaking powers.

If the Joint Chiefs, on the other hand, acted in concert with civilian authority to pursue one military policy while publicly proclaiming another, then the American Government would stand exposed of an attempt to deceive its own people rather than the opponent at the conference table who, after all, knew what was happening in his own country.

The seriousness of such a possibility makes it imperative to determine whether Mr. Laird, if he did indeed encourage General Lavelle's air strikes, did so on his own or with White House approval.

If General Lavelle's recollections are accurate, they would prove the nation extremely vulnerable either to government by deception or to a military takeover of American foreign and defense policies. Thus the worst possible outcome of these hearings would be to sacrifice General Lavelle in order to divert attention from a truly serious threat to American security.

Given the military's penchant for recordkeeping, it should not be difficult to recover the minutes of the conversations and the messages cited by General Lavelle. At the very least it would be shocking if, in an age of a terrifyingly delicate nuclear balance, military policies are being transmitted into instructions so vague as to allow widely divergent interpretations. At the worst, the integrity of the American Government and the future of this nation's international credibility are at stake.

The case of General Lavelle cannot be allowed to rest until all the facts have been placed before the public. If the worst suspicions are borne out by those facts, the entire executive and military leadership of this Government will have to defend and explain its actions before the ultimate court of the American people.