

Sergeant vs. Generals

An inspiring modern fable might well have told the story how a lowly sergeant caught the generals in the act of falsifying the records after they disobeyed the President of the United States. In this historic fairy tale, the sergeant would have triumphed over the awesome preponderance of rank. The brass would have been sternly held to account. The system which allowed such flagrant defiance of civilian policy by the military would have been reformed. The sergeant would have received the public thanks of the President.

Such stories, of course, do not happen. Sgt. Lonnie Franks must suspect this, now that he has learned that his disclosures of the illegal bombing strikes against North Vietnam by Maj. Gen. John D. Lavelle have been dismissed by the Air Force, even though the illegal action has been acknowledged. Nor has any persuasive answer been given to General Lavelle's extensive testimony claiming that he had actually been encouraged by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense to bomb, counter to publicly proclaimed Presidential policy.

The fact that Sergeant Franks, and all future concerned low-ranking Davids confronted by law-breaking Goliaths, have been taught that you can't fight the Pentagon may not come as much of a revelation to political pragmatists. But leaving aside the starry-eyed might-have-beens of an inspiring modern fable, the American people could rest more easily if those Senators, who briefly pursued the Lavelle case, were not to let it drop quietly into a file marked "official whitewash."

The question of civilian control—or of the credibility of Presidential policy pronouncements—is not to be left lightly to a debate between the sergeants and the generals.