

## In The Nation: The (Not Quite) Open Society

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, April 20— Much more now is known about the secret war in Laos because of the official testimony forced by the Symington subcommittee last fall and published Monday after a lengthy struggle with the State Department over "security" clearance. The testimony also was eloquent as to how even the Senate was misled for years about the extent of the Laotian involvement.

When Senator J. W. Fulbright criticized the secrecy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State William H. Sullivan, once Ambassador to Laos, justified it by saying that the United States had sought "to preserve, even though it may be pretty badly torn, preserve the substance of the 1962 [Geneva] agreements so that eventually we could have a reversion to the conditions which made those agreements possible."

### No Official Acknowledgment

The North Vietnamese, Mr. Sullivan said, had "violated strenuously" the agreements, forcing the United States to do the same thing in response. But American officials had felt the agreements might be more easily re-established if the war re-

sulting from the violations was not officially acknowledged.

This elicited from Senator Stuart Symington something of an outburst. "Here we are telling Americans they must fight and die to maintain an open society, but not telling our people what we are doing. That would seem the characteristic of a closed society. We are fighting a big war in Laos, even if we do not have ground troops there."

Mr. Sullivan: I must say, Mr. Chairman, that I consider these hearings as a very sincere token of an open society. In other words, that we are telling the representatives of the people . . .

Mr. Symington: You would not go so far as to say we were holding them because the State Department has been urging us to hold them, would you?

Senator Fulbright then quoted Mr. Sullivan's 1968 testimony, in a secret session of the Foreign Relations Committee, that the United States "does not have a military training and advisory organization in Laos." Col. E. W. Duskin, the American military attaché in Vientiane, was then asked to describe the activities in Laos of American military personnel.

Senator Fulbright: But they do not ever give them advice?

Colonel Duskin: I did not say that.

Senator Fulbright: I am asking you, do they or don't they?

Colonel Duskin: My personnel at regional level do provide advice, yes.

Senator Fulbright: Then what is an advisory group?

### Advisory Group Defined

Colonel Duskin: An advisory group, sir, is an organization that is constituted for the sole mission to provide advice to include it down to lower unit levels.

Senator Fulbright: . . . We are getting so technical with your semantics it is impossible for us to understand.

The Arkansas Senator also read portions of Mr. Sullivan's secret 1968 testimony, which mentioned bombing only by the Lao and not by the American Air Force, although the latter had been active since 1964.

Senator Fulbright: That very clearly leaves the impression that the Lao air force, not the U.S. Air Force, is doing what is being done. In going through this hearing in 1968, there was tentative probing on our part to see what we were doing, and

I would think it is a fair interpretation of this whole record that you indicated we were not doing much, if anything, directly.

Mr. Sullivan (a little later): But if there were any direct questions asked of me about U.S. air operations—

Senator Fulbright: You see, we did not know enough to ask those direct questions, and this is what I meant about quibbling about whether the U.S. role in Laos is exclusively advisory. . . . There is no way for us to ask you questions about things we don't know you are doing.

### Subcommittee Method

There is one way, of course, which the Symington subcommittee ultimately had to adopt. It sent its own agents to the field in the Philippines, Thailand, Korea, Laos, and recently to Europe; on the scene, they developed the kind of first-hand information with which the Senators finally were able to get the State Department to admit most of the facts about the secret Laotian war.

So, as Senator Fulbright observed, there does not seem all that much "to brag about on the openness of the society."