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Washington: The Hidden War in Laos

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 26—In his definitive foreign policy speech of last Nov. 3, President Nixon said: "I believe that one of the reasons for the deep division about Vietnam is that many Americans have lost confidence in what the Government has told them about our policy. The American people cannot and should not be asked to support a policy which involves the overriding issues of war and peace unless they know the truth about that policy."

Well, you can say that again about President Nixon and his policy in Laos. He has withheld the truth about important U.S. military operations in that country. As he is de-escalating the war in Vietnam and claiming a lot of credit for it, he is escalating the war in Laos and not releasing the facts about it.

The result is that the President and the United States Senate are now arguing about U.S. military actions well known to the enemy in Laos but officially withheld from the American people. In fact, State and Defense Department officials have testified in executive session about what our "advisers" and airmen are doing there, but they have claimed executive privilege on this testimony and have refused to release it to the public.

All the Nixon Administration has conceded publicly is that it has certain "advisers" in Laos and has authorized high-level bombing of part of the enemy's supply trail that runs from North Vietnam through Laos into South Vietnam.

In addition to these high-level bombing raids, however, U.S. airmen have been flying fighter support missions for the Laotian Army in the Plaine des Jarres and even closer to the North Vietnamese and Chinese borders; training the Meo mountain tribesmen to fight the North Vietnamese and the Laotian Communists; and according to some Senators, concealing the identity of the American military assistance by transferring regular armed services personnel to the Central Intelligence Agency, and assigning military supply missions to non-military U.S. private airlines.

Goldwater's Candor

It should be noted that a great deal of information about U.S. military action there has been printed, much of it by Henry Kamm of The New York Times. The main issue is not so much about the facts, but about the right of the Administration to try to conceal the facts even after its own officials have confirmed them in private Congressional hearings.

Here, for example, is an exchange between Senator Barry

Goldwater of Arizona and Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri in the Senate on Feb. 25:

Goldwater: Does the Senator mean that the United States has troops in combat in Laos?

Symington: It depends on a definition.

Goldwater: I mean Americans engaged in fighting on the ground.

Symington: I am not in a position to answer any questions . . . in open session at this time . . . because the transcript has not been released as yet on any meaningful basis. . . .

Goldwater: The reason I ask is that it has not been any secret that we have been flying fighter-support missions in support of the Laotian army up on the Plaine des Jarres. The Senator, I know, has known about that for a long time. If the information is classified, I will not press the point. . . .

There was another sharp debate in an executive meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee today over this same issue of what information Senators have the right to request and what information the executive branch has the right to withhold. During a private interrogation of Dwight J. Porter, who has been nominated Ambassador to Korea, Chairman J. William Fulbright asked about the implications of deploying U.S. nuclear weapons in that part of the world.

Ambassador Porter replied that he had been instructed not to discuss this question even with members of the Foreign Relations Committee in secret session. Senator Fulbright observed that in 25 years he had never had such a reply during a confirmation hearing and demanded to know who had so instructed the Ambassador. All Mr. Porter would say was that he had been instructed "on higher authority."

The Constitutional Question

What is happening, in short, is precisely what President Nixon himself warned against in his Nov. 3 speech. Members of the Senate are losing confidence in what the Government is telling them about Laos; members of the press on the scene are being condemned for reporting what they see, and the President and the Foreign Relations Committee are getting into a nasty confrontation over the constitutional question of what information can be withheld, released, or suppressed.

"The American people cannot and should not be asked to support a policy which involves the overriding issues of war and peace," the President said, "unless they know the truth about that policy." Maybe they should not, but they are in Laos, and the President knows it.