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# The Confusion Over CIA's Role In Laos Weighed

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WASHINGTON — Is the public debate over the Central Intelligence Agency's military role in Laos jeopardizing its primary information-gathering assignment in this big — still bad — world?

Has the time been reached when senate and other critics of the Laotian involvement should more carefully define their terms and targets?

Should somebody, perhaps even the President, help clear confusion in the public mind about CIA operations, without compromising its vital tasks?

The feeling in the Senate today is that the big intelligence agency, created after World War II to improve this important and largely secret function of government, should not be carelessly, perhaps inadvertently damaged.

CIA Director Richard C. Helms, a career official, has made staunch friends on Capitol Hill by his candor and cooperation. Most lawmakers recognize that some clandestine operations are necessary and that such operations don't remain secret if talked about.

## Cuba Fiasco

But, remembering the CIA-run Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba, those most concerned are determined to make sure the agency is not misused.

Finally, there appears to be some feeling that formal or informal limits or guide-

lines should be adopted in the CIA-Laos debate.

Senate Democratic leader Mike Mansfield, an Asian expert long concerned about U.S. involvement in Laos, is one who thinks "some terms ought to be defined."

The Foreign Relations committeeman is quick to defend the fundamental role of the CIA, while regretting its apparent military operational assignment in Laos.

"I have great faith in Dick Helms," Mansfield said in an interview. "Not to criticize clandestine operations as such, it is too bad they are being undertaken in Laos. They represent a counter-effort against counter-forces which have stayed in Laos regardless of the Geneva agreement."

Sen. Albert Gore (D-Tenn.) also a Senate Foreign Relations Committee member, said he had found Helms and the CIA "completely candid."

He reflected an understanding in the Senate that the civilian agency has been performing essentially a military task on orders of the National Security Council.

## Ground Rules

Sen. Jacob K. Javits (R-N.Y.) said that the Foreign Relations Committee has been "having trouble getting certain information." One thing that is "not acceptable," said the former World

War II officer, is "refusal without a reason."

Javits also said he felt that the ground rules affecting CIA activities should be disclosed except when the "paramount national interest" is involved.

Mansfield points out that the North Vietnamese have long had forces in the northeastern areas of Laos, along the Ho-Chi Minh trail along which the communists move troops and material into South Vietnam. And he notes that because the United States has been bombing that area, both countries have in effect been ignoring the 1962 Geneva accord.

What some senators do not say, but what is generally accepted as fact, is that a small group of their colleagues who constitute a CIA "watchdog" subcommittee have been informed all along about the agency's Laotian role. And the CIA's training activity in the struggle to keep Laos from being overrun by the communists has been widely reported in news dispatches.

But questions about the role of the CIA in such crisis spots are easier to ask than to answer — especially in the kind of specifics which could "blow" its badly thinned out worldwide cover.