

The Air War in Asia—and Its Cover-Up in Washington

By HERBERT MITGANG

WASHINGTON — It is not easy to hide a B-52. Nor is it possible to conceal—as anyone who has flown over the jungles of Vietnam in a helicopter can plainly see—the moon-craters caused by each plane's thirty-ton bombload. Long after the war is a dying memory, these holes in the landscape of four countries in Southeast Asia will remain as reminders of the American way of life and death.

Just two months ago, President Nixon told the public that United States armed forces had successfully completed the destruction of enemy base areas along the Cambodian-South Vietnam frontier, and that "all American troops have withdrawn from Cambodia" on schedule. Today, with Vice President Agnew again on the road selling the Nixon Doctrine of presumptive withdrawal, Americans are back over the skies of Cambodia strafing and napalming far beyond the border sanctuaries. But nobody in the Administration is asking for time to tell that to the public on television.

Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, a former Air Force Secretary who is Washington's most knowledgeable authority on the bombing escalation and its cover-up by the Government, is willing to tell it: "If Americans are flying over a country,

attacking it with bombs or other ammunition, it leaves a semantic problem . . . I believe you ought to say there are no combat ground troops, or that air is not included. Otherwise, it is misleading . . . At the same time that this Administration has been openly de-escalating its military strength in South Vietnam, we have been escalating the air war secretly."

Slipstream of Fables

As chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad, Senator Symington is assembling a strongly documented record of this nation's policies caught in the slipstream of past errors and present fables. It is worth plowing through the 1,500 pages of censored transcripts for their disclosures as well as their deletions. For the transcripts dispute the Administration's line that present combat is designed only to protect American forces in South Vietnam; rather, American funds and air power are being used to prop up mercenaries and regimes.

The revelations about the half-hidden air war amplify what correspondents on the scene have discovered. Ironically, the pattern of public disclosure works backwards in Washington. "We are pleased when the press breaks the truth-

ful facts on its own," says a subcommittee staff member. "It cancels the excuses by the State and Defense Department to censor the hearings for non-security reasons."

Senator Symington's subcommittee finds that the Nixon Administration withholds information in these areas: the increase in combat sorties being flown by the Air Force and Navy over northern Laos—politically motivated missions for that government as distinct from operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to halt infiltration into South Vietnam; facts about the bases in Thailand from which certain missions continue despite the recent announcement that one base there was being closed; the added millions of dollars it costs to fly B-52's all the way from Okinawa and Guam against targets in Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Air Support Missions

Early this month Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird acknowledged that American jets were bombing in support of Cambodian ground troops on missions to "destroy personnel" (that is, people). The Pentagon attempted to extricate the Secretary by inventing a new phrase—"ancillary effect"—to cover situations where American bombing is not in support of American troops but benefits

one of this country's client regimes in Indochina. Even these evasive admissions would not have occurred without steady pressure from the Symington subcommittee.

What has now become clear is that the United States is bombing three countries—South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia—from a fourth, Thailand. Pentagon sources say that last month 7,000 attack sorties took place over South Vietnam alone. These are not milk runs; more than 3,000 planes and helicopters have been shot down and thousands of fliers killed since the start of the Vietnam war. Uncounted hundreds of thousands of civilians have perished under the weight of bombing that exceeds by far the tonnage dropped in all of World War II.

In the September issue of *The Atlantic*, historian Barbara Tuchman recalls how Chiang Kai-shek "preferred to rely on the air power of the American Fourteenth Air Force" because it gave him a surrogate to fight Japan while he hoarded his own military capacity "for use against internal enemies." The delusions of bombing grandeur toll a familiar death knell a quarter of a century later in Indochina.

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