Air War in Laos

Shortly before South Vietnamese troops invaded the Laotian panhandle backed by awesome American air power, a Laotian general in the area told a New York Times correspondent he did not want American aerial support. "Every time the Americans are called in to bomb, they destroy friends and not enemies," he said.

That is doubtless an exaggeration, as applied to the current zone of allied military operations in Laos. That zone is relatively sparsely settled and the targets of supporting American aerial assaults are predominantly military in the most literal sense.

But the limited nature of present air support does not negate the basic fear that underlay the Laotian general's comment. The Laotians, like their neighbors in Vietnam and Cambodia have had long and bitter experience with American bombing. Hundreds of thousands of Laotians have been driven from their homes and untold numbers of civilians have been killed and maimed as a result of the extensive use of American air power against the North Vietnamese in northeastern Laos in recent years. Villages have been destroyed and fields and forests devastated, just as in Cambodia and Vietnam.

In recent months, the panhandle region has been subjected to repeated saturation raids by American B-52 bombers and carrier-based aircraft in what has been described as one of the heaviest air assaults of the Indochina war. These raids have not succeeded in their objective of blocking Communist supply routes to the south, as the current ground thrusts against the Ho Chi Minh trail testify. But, because of their scope, their power and their lack of precision, the air attacks inevitably do inflict harm and hardship on friend as well as foe.

The President and his aides say they are acting to save American lives. This is a highly doubtful proposition; and in any case Americans must ask themselves whether they have a right to continue to sacrifice the lives and property of millions of innocent Southeast Asians in a cause to which an increasing number of Americans no longer subscribes.