

Pentagon Convenience

Reporting in Laos - - a Deadly Task

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Even when you get the facts on what is happening in Indochina, it's not easy to reconcile the gains with the sacrifices, but we are now coming into a new phase of the war in Laos where it is going to be more difficult even to get at the facts.

In the first place, American correspondents, who have always been able to follow the battle with our own Army, Navy, and Air Force in Vietnam and Cambodia, are now not permitted to fly with our aircraft in Laos.



They are allowed to fly with the South Vietnamese, but the Saigon forces have comparatively few aircraft, and this is a dangerous business, as the loss of four of our best battle photographers last week indicates.

Second, since no United States ground troops are engaged in the fighting, U.S. correspondents again must travel with the Saigon troops under the regulations of the South Vietnamese command, whose enthusiasm for reporting the truth is not unlimited. This is not a newspaper or television problem, but a public problem.

Chances

The reporters will take their chances and do the best they can. Twenty-six of them have been killed in this bloody war since 1965, which indicates that your chances of surviving as a fighter are better than your chances of surviving as a reporter. Also, 30 reporters and photographers have simply disappeared in Cambodia since last April, so the reporters left will go where they can.

The problem is to find out what's going on. The Pentagon has shown us maps, which are clearer than the truth. The Ho Chi Minh trail books in the Pentagon map-room like the New Jersey

Turnpike, or an umbilical cord: cut it and the baby dies.

Fact

If only it were true! The White House briefings reassure us that all will be well, that invading, bombing, and expanding the war will bring the boys back home, reduce the casualties, or at least our casualties.

Maybe it is all so.

But they cannot quite ignore the fact that many other equally serious men think they are doing the wrong thing, that they are still betting on a military resolution of the problem, still betting that Moscow and Peking will let Hanoi go down—in sum, betting on assumptions under challenge not only in Moscow and Peking but in Washington, even within the Republican party.

Faced with this conflict between what is right and what is wrong, at least it ought to be possible to agree on getting the facts, and here the Administration's record is a disgrace.

The President is a very perceptive man. He knows he is in the White House today because Lyndon Johnson lost the confidence of the people and withdrew.

Lost

Nixon came into office promising an "open" administration, and has been talking ever since about "open doors," but that is not the way things are doing now in Indochina, or even in the White House.

The President has sent his Air Force into Laos, without a single personal word of explanation.

And on top of all this, they proclaim the virtue of their bombing in Laos, assume that Moscow and Peking will stand aside, assert that they are merely providing "air cover" for the South Vietnamese, and tell the reporters of their own country to go catch a ride with the South Vietnamese if they have any doubts.

We have to ask why?

Why if they are bombing a path for the South Vietnamese in order to bring the boys back home sooner, why not let the reporters go along as before to record the facts as best they can?

Hard

It is very hard to answer these questions, particularly because in Laos the President and General Abrams actually seem to be doing no more than they say they are doing.

The difference is not in their cant but in the cruelty. They are bombing almost at the level of the European war in a miserable, pacifist country.

But rooting the enemy out of there is a ghastly business, and they don't want the facts recorded any more than they can help. No reporters allowed with us, they say, go to the South Vietnamese, which is what the four battle photographers did before they flew over an enemy anti-aircraft battery and disappeared.