

Press Freedom in a Nonwar

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS—The argument about the news embargo at the start of Laotian operations has become as ridiculous as it is bitter and distorted. What is wholly forgotten is the fact that American and other reporters in Indochina have been permitted to operate with a freedom, not to say abandon, that would have seemed paradisaical to their older colleagues of World War II.

Successive United States commanders in Southeast Asia got themselves into a tighter and tighter bind by never daring to impose true military censorship on their area for the usual reasons of security and the saving of lives. The explanation for this was obviously that we drifted gradually into the war, never declared formal hostilities, and presumably didn't recognize any individual event, such as the first sizable arrival of American forces, as justifying this customary precaution.

Consequently the effort simultaneously to control and not to control the news media in Indochina has been self-defeating. Correspondents and photographers from papers, agencies and television have wandered all over the place with ingenuity and audacity, gathering information sometimes remarkably exact, sometimes partial and consequently distorted, and sometimes inexpertly deduced from inaccurate rumor.

The press, thank heavens, tends by nature and professional training to be hostile to authority and skeptical of revealed wisdom. It proudly resents any restrictions it fancies may hamper its work. It disbelieves official briefings by authorities who were not themselves witnesses to what they

IN THE NATION

discuss. And it vigorously fights attempts to guide its conclusions or opinions.

All this having been said, the business of fighting history's greatest nonwar is grim for everyone concerned and especially for the troops. It was insane of the U.S. military establishment never to have had the courage to establish reasonable, effective military censorship in the theater.

This is especially true when considering that this is the first televised conflict. Undeliberate distortions of an over- or under-focused camera lens can and do have profound political effect—especially when it is only on our side that both TV cameras and receiving sets exist.

Military censorship is a nasty, cumbersome business and political censorship, except for security purposes, is always inexcusable in a democracy. What I mean by political censorship for security purposes is something like withholding information about the site of coming diplomatic conferences in order to protect the participants.

During World War II there were many violations of the system's principle. For example the United States and Britain immorally and needlessly agreed to ban publication of news that Turkey (then a neutral courted by the Allies) had started to persecute Christian and Jewish minorities, a fact the Turkish Government was easily able to censor at home.

But on the whole military censorship worked fairly. General Eisenhower came to trust correspondents

so totally that he confided his plans for the Sicily invasion long before it happened.

Reporters soon learned it would be both foolish and unpatriotic to attempt to smuggle out (by code or other means) news that might jeopardize soldiers' lives. And the public uncomplainingly accepted this, remaining so completely democratic despite necessary press limitations that the British, for example, voted the victorious Churchill out of office before the war with Japan ended.

The latest fuss about an information gap in Indochina is essentially unjustified. It would be idiotic to have movements of troops and supplies disclosed in too much detail ahead of time and to have precise intentions pinpointed to an enemy who might otherwise be thrown off balance. It would be immoral to risk American or South Vietnamese lives simply in order to give a play by play description of impending actions.

The issue of press freedom has often been confused in discussions of the Indochina nonwar. Mass media correspondents should indeed be free to report with total freedom what is going on in a critical episode of history and mass media commentators should be free to comment critically.

But temporary restraints must be placed upon observers when premature disclosure of pending events might endanger their success and swell the casualty list. This seems so obvious that it shouldn't require mention but the half-baked protest occasioned by the Laotian curbs—resulting to a large degree from the half-baked information system prevalent in Southeast Asia—makes clarification necessary.