

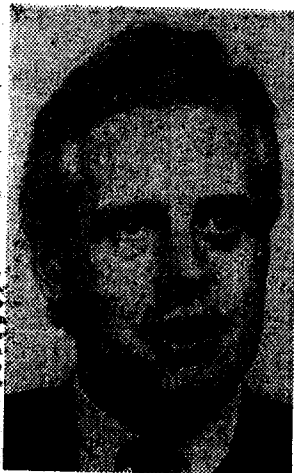
Von Hoffman

Unconscionable Actions in Laos

Washington

THE ARMY IS spending \$3 million on prime-time TV spots to sell young men on joining up. This may be the ultimate test of Madison Avenue's efficacy. Who knows, maybe they can do it. If they could sell lung cancer, why shouldn't they

be able to merchandise a bullet in the head or loss of a leg?



Nicholas Von Hoffman

What might these ads contain? They could have General Westmoreland doing a voice-over about pride in the military uniform while the video shows us reruns of those American soldiers disguised as civilians sneaking into Cambodia. Then they might cut to Melvin Laird snickering about the incident at a press conference.

If it exists, there's another piece of film footage that would go nicely with the pride in the uniform spiel: shots of the dead American soldier stuffed into a South Vietnamese uniform being bootlegged back across the border from Laos.

When the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia it was some days before the Russian people were let in on it; the same holds for us. We had a better chance of learning what was going on by tuning in on a shortwave radio and dialing Hanoi or Peking than Washington. The Pentagon had embargoed its shame.

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WITH LAOS IT had done so for years. The lying, the misrepresenting, the playing cute with words and technical expressions had been going on for 15 years. In the spring of 1959, when we'd already been in Laos for four years, Walter S. Robertson, Eisenhower's Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, told a House subcommittee that we were subsidizing the entire cost of the Royal Laotian Army "for one sole reason, and that is to try to keep this little country from being taken over by the Communists."

Ten years later, William H. Sullivan, Nixon's deputy assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, told the Senate we were secretly bombing Laos in order to re-establish operation of the 1962 Geneva agreement concerning that country's neutrality. This week's line is that we're doing it to save our boys' lives.

In all likelihood we violated Laos' neutrality long before Hanoi did. We can't be absolutely sure because most of the halfway reliable information we have about what goes on in that country comes from the other side. Washington has never come clean about the allegations that the CIA has pulled two coups d'etat there and has twice given out completely fraudulent stories that Laos was being invaded by North Vietnam when it wasn't. That was in 1959 and in 1961.

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WHAT IS BEYOND dispute is that in 1964—seven years ago—the United States began aerial heavy bombardment of Laos. The best estimates hold that we've dropped more tonnage on this poor country than on either North or South Vietnam.

Trampled on and invaded by Vietnam, North and South, Thailand, China and the United States, this innocent country has been turned into the Belgium of the Far East, decimated and ruined because it had the misfortune to set on strategically interesting terrain. Decimated isn't too strong a word. The best figures we have say that 600,000 people or one-quarter of the Laotian population have been turned into refugees by our bombardment. One hundred and fifty thousand were turned into wandering, homeless wretches in 1969 alone.

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THIS IS THE reason for the mystery. Shame. This is the reason for embargoes on the news, for trying to keep reporters and TV cameramen out. Shame. They're ashamed and they don't want the world to know what they've done.

Washington Post Service

