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Pentagon credibility suffers in statements on Vietnam war

WASHINGTON—Occasionally, we have been able to compare the secret messages that come into the Pentagon with the public pronouncements that go out. The discrepancies have been dismaying.

Here are the most serious contradictions:

—Ever since the U.S. withdrawal from Cambodia last June official spokesmen have repeatedly denied that American ground troops have crossed into Cambodia or Laos. The truth is that MACSOG teams, composed

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of U.S. special forces and South Vietnamese rangers, have made several raids into both countries ending in November. The secret messages referred to the Cambodian raids by the code name "Salem House" and identified the Laos incursions as "Prairie Fire."

—In sworn testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last October, Administration witnesses stated that less than 50 Americans had lost their lives as a result of enemy action in Laos since 1962. A secret summary of the MACSOG casualties alone, dated March 6, 1970, listed 77 Americans killed and 37 missing in Laos. Scores more were lost on clandestine missions after March, but we have been unable to get the secret figures.

—During last year's U.S. drive into Cambodia, spokesmen at first stated and later denied that a principal objective was the capture of COSVN, the secret North Vietnamese headquarters. The truth is that Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, in a secret message to Gen. Creighton Abrams, specifically urged COSVN's capture. Abrams thought he knew where COSVN was located, because the Army had intercepted radio messages from the North Vietnamese command center.

Crack troops quickly zeroed in on the location but found no sign of the headquarters. By continuing to monitor enemy radio transmissions, the Army frantically chased but never caught up with COSVN. Army intelligence finally concluded that the North Vietnamese had set up their mobile radio transmitters a safe distance from the secret headquarters, with runners to carry the messages back and forth.

The Defense Department's credibility has sunk so low, meanwhile, that you can't believe a story until the Pentagon has denied it.

WASHINGTON WHIRL

President's analyst—For years, America's psychiatrists have been receiving millions in public subsidies for their training. Now the Nixon Administration has proposed cutting off the money, and the headshrinkers are in an uproar.

The American Psychiatric Association is quietly organizing a massive lobbying drive, complete with a letter-writing campaign, to

... Press secretary Ron Ziegler, the ex-Disneyland guide and junior account executive who campaigned for Richard Nixon and tagged along with him to the White House, is beginning to learn how to speak English. At first, reporters had trouble translating the advertising lingo he picked up plugging toothpaste at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. But slowly Ron has learned to talk like a bureaucrat. White House communications czar Herb Klein can lay claim to being the deepest member of the President's staff. At 53, he still loves to go scuba diving.

Nixon's brother—President Nixon's brother Edward, a Navy helicopter pilot, has been telling friends this story about the phone call he got from his brother after he rescued two girls from Puget Sound in a Navy chopper not long ago. "I called to congratulate you," said the President. "That's funny," said Ed. "I rescued someone a few years ago and the President didn't call me then."

SST lobby—We reported in an earlier column how corporate lobbyists manipulated White House and Transportation Department aides to line up votes for the controversial supersonic transport plane. Even Transportation Secretary John Volpe accepted an assignment from the SST lobby to bring pressure upon his fellow Italian-American-Republican from Massachusetts, Rep. Silvio Conte. Volpe made several appeals to Conte who, nevertheless, helped lead the House fight against the SST.

get Congress to restore the money. A private memo marked "urgent" was sent this month to all the association's district branches outlining the campaign and including a sample letter. "You should not send the attached letter as written," the memo cautions, "for it would let the Congressmen know that this is an organized write-in." So far, the APA hasn't called upon the psychiatrist with the most influence in the White House. President Nixon's own analyst, Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker, told us he hadn't been asked to participate in the lobbying, although he had contacted the President on other issues of interest to the profession.

Flying dog—Congresswoman Edith Green, D-Ore., who gets lonely on her flights home to Oregon, had her staff survey the airlines to find out whether her five-pound Maltese dog, "Melita" could ride with her. It took a call from Northwest's Washington office to its Minneapolis headquarters to get the answer: Yes, the poodle can fly free.

Inside the White House—Presidential assistants John Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman, known inside the White House as "The Prussians" because of their cold efficiency, are both mild-mannered Christian Scientists in private . . . Haldeman touted the record, "Jesus Christ Superstar," with White House aides before it became a national hit . . . Haldeman keeps his hair close cropped, Prussian style. But his 18-year-old son, Hank, wears his hair down to his shoulders