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Exposing the 'Hidden War'

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It may be debatable whether the Nixon Administration has violated the letter of a 1970 amendment barring the use of defense funds to finance "free world forces" fighting for the Government of Laos, as Senator Fulbright, author of the amendment, and other Senators have charged. The amendment contained a rather large loophole specifying that it should not bar the President from taking actions needed "to insure the safe and orderly withdrawal or disengagement of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia, or to aid in the release of Americans held as prisoners of war."

But the Administration has certainly violated the spirit of that amendment by underwriting an estimated 4,800 Thai "volunteers" who are said to be fighting in northern Laos and not in the southern panhandle area adjacent to South Vietnam.

This Administration, like its immediate predecessors, has also dangerously stretched Executive authority and strained public patience by continuing to carry on other secret activities in Laos including the use of American military men on intelligence missions inside Laos, a policy that has now been suspended at least partly because of Congressional criticism. Senator Symington told a secret session of the Senate the other day that, according to his estimates, the United States was spending at least \$350 million annually in support of the Laotian Government in the war in northern Laos—about seven times more than has been publicly acknowledged by the Administration. This is hardly consistent with President Nixon's promise of March 6, 1970, that "we will continue to give the American people the fullest possible information on our involvement [in Laos]."

By continuing to pursue the long, "hidden war" in Laos far beyond areas directly affecting the conflict in South Vietnam, the Administration is inviting fresh restrictions on its actions—like the \$200-million limitation on spending for Laos that already has been proposed by Senator Symington. By abusing the loophole Congress provided in its 1970 amendment on Laos (and Cambodia), the executive branch undermines the confidence of the legislative body and the public and encourages even more stringent Congressional limitations on Presidential action in this and other areas of foreign policy.