

U.S. Pays for Phantom War

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The Central Intelligence Agency pays combat flight bonuses to Laotian pilots not to fly combat missions. U.S. military aid pays the salaries of Cambodian soldiers who do not exist.

These are some of the Catch 22-style paradoxes of the American military role in Southeast Asia after the Paris accords and after the U.S. troop withdrawals.

They are cited in a congressional staff study on Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand in the aftermath of the peace treaty. The report was prepared for the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on U.S. Commitments Abroad headed by Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.).

The report reflects a somewhat relaxed government sensitivity on programs, U.S. dollar expenditures and

special international agreements in Southeast Asia that until recently were heavily battened in secrecy.

The matter of the CIA bonuses for the Laotian pilots is a new quirk of the war's twilight period. It results from the Laotian cease-fire agreement with its stricture against military activity.

"We were told that the Lao Air Force wants to comply with the cease-fire but that the military region commanders, especially in the south, continue to call for air strikes," report the authors of the study, Foreign Relations Committee staff investigators James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose.

"In order to encourage the air force not to fly, therefore, the United States is making monthly lump sum payments to pilots even if no combat missions are flown."

The two investigators confirmed from U.S. authorities that while the CIA once financed Laotian flight salaries from its own budget, the money now comes from the Pentagon and the CIA station in Vientiane acts as paymaster.

The phantom battalion problem in Cambodia goes back to the beginning of the large-scale American military assistance program there more than two years ago.

American military spokesmen in Phnom Penh at first made little of the matter. Later there were studies conducted under U.S. auspices. One senior American military official issued cameras to Cambodian commanders in 1971 to verify the existence of their troops, whose salaries are paid out of U.S. military and economic aid. The

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cameras were never recovered and the issue never resolved.

Now it is reported by Moose and Lowenstein that "there is no greater mystery than the size of the Cambodian government's armed forces." U.S. estimates of the Khmer Republic fighting force vary, in Washington and Phnom Penh, from 150,000 to 275,000, the report asserts.

The chief of the U.S. military equipment delivery team in Cambodia put the effective strength at 275,700. The defense attache's office put it at 261,518. The Joint Chiefs of Staff briefers in Washington put it between 175,000 and 190,000. State Department officials estimated the Cambodian fighting strength at 150,000.

"Phantom" Soldiers

Cambodia's minister of information told the Senate investigators that when the Cambodian military payroll has stood at 300,000 there may have been as many as 100,000 "phantom" soldiers.

The underlying concern over the phantom battalions of the Khmer Republic is corruption. Generally the salaries of the phantom troops are pocketed by high-ranking Cambodian military officers, a fact that has been acknowledged both by U.S. and Cambodian authorities.

Another twist of the military payroll problem in Cambodia, according to the report, is the non payment of salaries to bona fide soldiers.

"One recent example, which was brought to the attention of the chief of the military equipment delivery team by other embassy officials, involved one entire region in which, as of the second week in April, soldiers had not yet been paid for the month of March," the report says.

Whatever the size of the government army in Cambodia, the report says "all analysts agree" within the U.S. intelligence community that the number of North Vietnamese troops still in Cambodia number about 5,000. Of these only about half are targeted against the forces of the Lon Nol government. The burden of the war against the government has been taken up by

the Khmer Rouge (Cambodian Communist) movement.

From a paltry force of some 2,000 when the Indochina war spread to Cambodia in 1970, the Khmer Rouge force has grown to a present strength of about 50,000, according to U.S. intelligence estimates cited in the report.

Of Cambodia, the report says: "The Khmer insurgents are growing in strength and confidence and moving from success to success. The Phnom Penh government, although it has the arms, seems to have neither the resolve nor the skill to contain them. If they cannot, their own fate will be sealed and the balance in South Vietnam could be substantially affected."

U.S. Force in Thailand

In Thailand, the report asserts, the American military presence has stayed at a level of more than 44,000 personnel—the strength to which it was raised during the Communist spring offensive in South Vietnam last year. Previously the U.S. presence was down, by joint government agreement, to 32,000.

At the same time, the level of U.S. military aid to the Thais, widely assumed to be in the range of \$60 million annually, was more than twice that amount in fiscal 1972, according to the report.

The additional aid was in the form of special and excess U.S. military equipment designed, as one agreement stated it, to "improve the military readiness and capability of the Royal Thai armed forces."

In the past the primary justification given by administration officials for U.S. military aid to Thailand has been the Communist insurgency in the north and northeast regions of that country. The other rationale, rarely stated publicly by U.S. or Thai officials, was that the military aid was a trade-off for the use of Thailand as a staging ground for the air war in South Vietnam and Laos.

The insurgency has made modest but steady inroads, according to the report. Current U.S. estimates put the total number of armed Communist terrorists in Thailand (population: 35 million) at about 7,500. Of these, some 2,000 Communists in the south are targeted

at the Malaysian rather than Thai government.

In the new report, administration censors permitted for the first time publication of the number of Thai "irregular" forces deployed in Laos at U.S. government expense to fight the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao. As of April that number was 17,330, although it went as high as 21,413 in September, 1972.

Thai "Irregulars"

In fiscal 1973 the United States allocated \$116.7 million to pay for the Thai expedition-

ary force in Laos; in fiscal 1974 an additional \$107 million is being sought to finance the Thai "irregulars."

Publicly the administration has maintained that the Thais in Laos are volunteers, to avoid problems with a Senate prohibition against U.S. financing of "third-country" military operations in Indochina. But the public fiction of the Thai troops as "volunteers" has worn thin.

As Lowenstein and Moose report: "We learned for the first time that in addition to

being recruited, encadred, and paid through the Thai [military] chain of command, the volunteers themselves had all heretofore been Thai who had served in the Thai armed forces."

The staff report drew a severely pessimistic picture of the prospects for genuine peace in South Vietnam.

"If the United States thought that the leaders in Hanoi would abandon their lifelong objectives or that President Thieu would be willing to risk the tenuous secu-

rity won for him by the United States, we may have miscalculated badly," the investigators asserted.

The prospect ahead in Vietnam over the next year is the option that the North Vietnamese may be forced to choose, failing an effective agreement. The report calls it a "kind of warfare somewhere between low-level harassment and a full-scale offensive . . ."

This has been the posture of the war in South Vietnam for most of the quarter century that it has endured.