

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

150dXM WXP0st

Secrecy and the War

JUL 19 1973

So now it turns out that American B52s bombed Cambodia secretly at least 3,500 times in the 14 months before the U.S. land invasion of 1970. The secrecy was instituted, by Mr. Nixon, apparently to avoid embarrassing the then-Cambodian ruler, neutralist Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who was caught in a bind between Vietnamese Communists using his territory for supply and sanctuary and Americans wanting to bomb them. There seems also to have been at least a collateral intent to avoid provoking further attacks from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. To maintain the degree of secrecy thought necessary, Air Force officers were ordered to falsify the bombing reports and other appropriate papers—such falsification is a violation of military law. This was reported to the Senate by Hal Knight, a former Air Force officer, and confirmed by the Pentagon. It remained for Defense Secretary James Schlesinger only to invoke the familiar multi-purpose rationale used for years to justify all challenged military operations: it was done to protect the lives of American soldiers still stationed (then) in South Vietnam.

With a cease-fire agreement already made in South Vietnam and with the end of bombing in Cambodia presumably less than a month away, there may be less than a total commitment in Washington to press this latest case of Indochina deceit. Possible violations of military law in respect to falsification of reports, however, cannot be ignored. Besides prejudging the case, Air Force Chief of Staff General George Brown quite missed the point by saying that Mr. Knight is not guilty because he did not have the requisite "intent to deceive" those who had a "security need-to-know." The more central question is whether those who had that "security right-to-know," i.e., those who ordered the falsification, had an intent to deceive. After all, General Brown was Seventh Air Force commander in Sai-

gon, and Mr. Knight's superior, at the time of the secret raids. The Pentagon now says that the falsified reports were fully authorized by President Nixon and then-Defense Secretary Melvin Laird. It would be somewhat reassuring—in circumstances involving falsification it cannot be entirely reassuring—to learn from the current Secretary of Defense whether he feels that in certain conditions the falsification of reports is justifiable, or whether he feels the matter to be worthy of his attention now at all.

Could the Vietnam war have been prosecuted without broad official dissimulation and deceit? If the United States had felt compelled to report in full and timely fashion the dimensions and implications of its acts, would it have been possible to continue them? We think not. Successive presidents expressed in their policies the consistent judgment that the American people could only be brought to support the war if the facts about it were kept from them. These chief executives thought that the obligation to protect the national interest, as they perceived it, was in effect too important to be made hostage to the people's full understanding of what it would entail. Thus was a whole series of military operations undertaken that could not have been mounted, or conducted in the same way, if the public had known the real implications of them at the time: the dispatch of South Vietnamese guerrillas into North Vietnam, the provocative missions of American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, the secret bombing of Cambodia, and who knows how many others that may still be shrouded in secrecy. Some would conclude from this that democracies are unfit to conduct a limited war, and the only way to bring them along is to trick them into it. Others would say that a democracy cannot successfully conduct a limited war unless the people are offered a full and persuasive explanation of why the nation must fight.