

# Lifting the Lid on the Secret

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WASHINGTON — President Nixon's decision to launch a secret aerial war in neutral Cambodia in 1969 is one of the most remarkable stories of government secrecy and official deception to come out of the Indochinese war. It has elements of big-time diplomatic politics — as well as those of a spy thriller.

And until recently, it was one of the best kept secrets of the war. Neither Congress nor the public was told anything about it for four years.

## Extended War

It also proved to be a fateful decision. It extended the war to a new country in which war still rages and the U.S. is still deeply involved.

"Cambodia," as one wit put it, "has proved to be the light at the end of the Vietnam tunnel."

As pieced together from evidence that has emerged in recent days, the story began almost immediately after Nixon moved into the White House in 1969.

Cambodia at that point, officially, was not in the war. It was neutral, and had been since 1954. But for five years North Vietnamese troops had been using Cambodian border areas as bases for attacking South Vietnam.

## Wheeler Campaign

The U.S. military had long proposed striking those areas, but President Johnson had refused to permit it — insisting on preserving Cambodian neutrality.

When Nixon took office, Gen. Earle Wheeler, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, now retired, renewed the campaign. He recommended U.S. "mili-

tary action" against the sanctuaries.

This time he found a receptive ear from Nixon's new defense secretary, Melvin R. Laird.

But Laird acknowledged last week that he had his own objectives. He wanted to begin withdrawing U.S. troops. There were then more than 530,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam.

Six weeks after he became President, in early March, Nixon dispatched Laird on a "fact finding" trip to Saigon.

## Laird Deal

From Laird's own version of events, it now appears that he went to Vietnam to cinch a deal with U.S. military leaders:

They would be permitted to bomb Cambodian sanctuaries. In turn, he would be permitted to begin a troop withdrawal program, without their objection.

In a sense, he apparently bought with bombs the joint chiefs' support for troop withdrawals.

Laird sold the package to the National Security Council, and to the President.

## NSC Secret

But the NSC insisted that the Cambodian bombing — for "diplomatic" reasons — would have to be kept secret.

The political problem in Cambodia was, indeed, sensitive.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, then Cambodia's chief of

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state, had been playing a balancing game for years, seeking to maintain his country's neutrality, declared in the Geneva accords of 1954.

But Sihanouk was double-dealing, U.S. officials believed.

He was telling them that he wouldn't mind if the U.S. bombed Communist sanctuaries near the Vietnam border, officials say. At the same time he was permitting the Communists to import military supplies through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville.

Laird and the State Department say that Sihanouk demanded secrecy if the U.S. was to bomb in Cambodia.

"We were in a position," Laird says, "where if it became a matter of public knowledge at that time, it would have to be condemned. . . ."

The administration's critics in the Senate dismiss this argument for secrecy.

Sen. Harold Hughes (D-Ola), who has led the way in exposing the secret bombing said:

"It was no secret to the

Cambodians, no secret to the North Vietnamese and no secret to the Russians.

"It was only a secret from Congress and the American people."

It is true that Nixon had ample motivation to keep the bombing secret from the American public. After a lull, the anti-war movement was then re-building to a fever pitch. It reached its peak after Nixon ordered U.S. troops into Cambodia, publicly, in April of 1970.

Whatever the motive for the secrecy, it worked.

There were only two leaks of what was going on in Cambodia over a 14-month period of intensive bombing by giant, B-52 U.S. strategic bombers — neither of which attracted much attention.

One came early in the game, on May 9, 1969 when William Beecher, of the New York Times, now a Pentagon spokesman, reported that "B-52 bombers in recent weeks have raided several Viet Cong and North Vietnam supply dumps and base camps in Cambodia."

The story, however, seemed to fall between the boards. No questions were asked about it at official White House briefings in the days that followed and the Times did not pursue it.

Another story appeared in the London Times after a reporter saw B-52 craters in Cambodia while flying on a commercial plane.

One reason the secrecy

# Indo Air War

succeeded was an elaborate mechanism set up, according to Laird, by the Joint Chiefs of Staff — on orders of the National Security Council.

## Records Falsified

The procedure included falsification of records to a point where many in the military itself were receiving false reports.

The overall code name of the secret bombing campaign was "Menu" and various target areas were identified by code names like "breakfast," "lunch and "dinner."

Orders were delivered to radar men who guided bombers to their Cambodian targets, at remote rendezvous points on Vietnam air bases.

They came in plain, unmarked envelopes and were later burned.

Deception went all the way to the top of government including at one point the President.

When Nixon ordered the ground invasion of Cambodia in April, 1970 he told the nation on television that "American policy has been to scrupulously respect the neutrality of the Cambodian people."

He made no mention of bombing attacks in Cambodia that at this point had

been under way—on his approval—for 14 months.

By this time 3620 B-52 sorties had been flown over Cambodia — and about 104,000 tons of bombs dropped.

Nixon, nevertheless, accused the North Vietnamese of failing to observe Cambodian neutrality. In fact, he used that argument as a major justification for the U.S. invasion.

The President also said: "For five years, neither the U.S. nor South Vietnam has moved against these enemy sanctuaries because we did not wish to violate the territory of a neutral nation."

## 'Combat Forces'

Laird argued that this was not a lie by Nixon because he was discussing "the use of American combat forces there . . . I am sure that it was in the context that the U.S. was going to move American military power on the ground."

Both Nixon and Laird in discussing Indochina over the years have tended to refuse to classify the use of air power, and the dropping of bombs, as "combat."

In another bit of deception, Secretary of State Rogers committed the indiscretion of telling the Senate Foreign Relations committee in early 1970: "Cambo-

# Bombing to High Court

WASHINGTON — (AP) — Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall agreed yesterday to hear arguments tomorrow on a U.S. District Court order that would halt the U.S. bombing in Cambodia.

Marshall agreed to hear the case in his chambers after the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals in New York stayed U.S. District Court Judge Orrin Judd's ruling that would have stopped the bombing at 1 p.m. last Friday. Judd called the Cambodian activities "unconstitutional."

The appeals court blocked

the ruling from going into effect pending a hearing Aug. 13, two days before the bombing fund cut-off approved by Congress.

Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D-N.Y.) and several Air Force pilots who obtained the original ruling by Judd, argued that the Congress has not authorized the current bombing and that it must therefore be halted.

Marshall received the case because he handles emergency appeals from the second circuit when the Supreme Court is in summer recess. There was no indication when he would issue a ruling.

dia is one country where we can say with complete assurance that our hands are clean and our hearts are pure." Rogers had participated in the decision a year before to launch the bombing as a member of the National Security Council.

Only a few weeks ago, in official reports to Congress, the Pentagon said there was no B-52 bombing in Cambodia between March of 1969 and April of 1970.

Jerry Friedheim, the Pentagon's official spokesman, admitted that he knew that these reports were untrue when they were sent.

Sen. Hughes said Fried-

heim is a "liar" and should be fired, but no action has been taken against him. Laird insists that he never lied about the Cambodian bombing, that he always replied "no comment" when asked about it — but that he was rarely asked.

Congress is angry over the deceptions, even many conservative senators who have long been friendly to the Pentagon.

Sen. Hughes and Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee, say that they do not believe the whole truth is out, even yet, about the Indochina air war.