

NY Times FEB 20 1975

# The Fear Of Truth

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Feb. 19—A group of Senators and Representatives is scheduled to fly off this weekend, at the State Department's suggestion, for a ten-day visit to South Vietnam and Cambodia. They will be accompanied by high State and Defense officials, and on the scene they will get the usual official guidance.

The scenario calls for this group, like so many others over the last fifteen years, to be persuaded that all will be well in Indochina if only there is a little more American aid, a little more involvement. But an unscheduled drama is developing over the trip. The story well illustrates how the obsession with Indochina has distorted the American official mind.

One Congressman who agreed to go on the trip is a freshman Democrat from Iowa, Tom Harkin. Mr. Harkin happens to know something about Vietnam. He was a Navy pilot there. Later he came back as an aide to the Congressional group that discovered the tiger cages—the loathesome cells, built with U.S. aid, where the Thieu Government kept political prisoners.

Representative Harkin said he would bring along as his staff aide and interpreter Don Luce, who spent ten years in Vietnam and knows it about as well as any American. He would be useful

The State Department made no formal objection to Mr. Luce, as indeed it could not. But Assistant Secretary Philip Habib made clear his displeasure, and conservative Republicans on the delegation protested. If Don Luce went, they said, they would not. At this writing the issue is unresolved.

That grown men should be so afraid of a voice other than their own may seem ludicrous, but Justice Holmes observed long ago that men naturally try to suppress opposing views. But the Constitution, he said, operates on the theory that free access to all ideas is most likely to lead to the truth. The zealots of American policy on Vietnam want to limit access because they fear the truth.

■

## ABROAD AT HOME

*'Justice Holmes  
observed long ago  
that men naturally  
try to suppress  
opposing views.'*

especially, Mr. Harkin said, because ordinary Vietnamese would talk more freely through him than through an official interpreter. But Mr. Luce is critical of the Thieu Government, which heartily dislikes him and forced him out of the country.

Truth is not the only casualty of the long official obsession with Indochina. Another is respect for law. Here again an example is at hand. It is much more important, really, than the childish if revealing attempt to tell a Congressman whom he may have as an assistant.

Two years ago Congress wrote into law language designed to end the role of the American military in Indochina. Section 30 of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1973 reads as follows:

*"No funds authorized or appropriated under this or any other law may be expended to finance military or para-military operations by the U.S. in or over Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia."*

The United States is now running an emergency airlift of ammunition to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. These are some of the characteristics of the operation:

- U.S. Air Force C-130's are being used, with the official insignia painted over.

- The Air Force lends the planes, without charge, to a corporation called Bird Air. It flies what its head, William H. Bird, calls "sorties" from Thailand to Cambodia.

- The Air Force provides fuel for the planes, and all maintenance.

- About half the crews have been recruited from the Air Force active reserve. Mr. Bird says he believes the men are getting reserve credit for making the runs.

- Most of the other crew members are former Air Force men, many of them recently off active duty.

Those details were given in a report from Bangkok by Richard Blystone of The Associated Press. The New York Times correspondent in Phnom Penh, Sydney H. Schanberg, described the airlift as "technically being handled by civilian contractors but actually run from beginning to end by the American military."

A lawsuit filed in the Federal District Court in Boston challenges the Cambodian airlift as a military operation in flat violation of the 1973 statute. But why should it take a lawsuit to make officials of the United States Government comply with the law?

The obsession with Indochina has done terrible things to the standards of official behavior in this country over the years. Men otherwise committed to honor and law have become inured to cheating and suppressing the truth. What is to be thought of an end that requires such means?