

Secret War in Laos --Senate Disclosure

Envoy's Hidden Operations

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The United States is engaged in "heavy escalation" of its air war in Laos which President Johnson secretly began in 1964 while trying to de-escalate the war in Vietnam, a Senate inquiry shows.

When the American bombing of North Vietnam ended on Nov. 1, 1968, U.S. air power shifted to hit the predominantly North Vietnamese troops in Laos, the record shows. The U.S. bombing of Laos was reported to have doubled in May 1969 and nearly tripled in August.

A Senate foreign relations subcommittee headed by Senator Stuart Symington (Dem.-Mo.) made public yesterday the censored results of a six-month struggle with the executive branch over releasing testimony taken last October about the secret U.S. involvement in Laos.

It shows that by agreement with Laotian Premier Souvanna Phouma, after the Vietnamese Communists quickly violated the 1962 Geneva accords on Laotian neutrality, the United States began violating them too, in 1964, "in appropriate response." The U. S. share of this decision has cost "bil-

lions of dollars," and over 200 American lives.

Under the covert operation conducted since 1964, the American ambassador in Vientiane virtually has operated as co-commander of the war in northern Laos: He controls a U.S. mission of air, ground and intelligence advisers which coordinates American and Laotian air and ground operations in northern Laos; arranges for the training (primarily at American bases in Thailand) of Lao troops, and supplies American military and economic funds to Laos which are larger than the Laotians' own contribution to their nation's economy.

The Laotian Premier "made it clear that he wanted us to say as little as possible" about American military action in Laos, testified William H. Sullivan, former ambassador in Laos and now assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Symington's subcommittee on U.S. commitments

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abroad salvaged 237 pages of censored transcript after more than 100 meetings with State Department and other officials.

President Nixon pierced the censorship deadlock when he disclosed on March 6 a few selected portions of U.S. activities in Laos, emphasizing that they began under "two previous administrations."

INVOLVEMENT

But the new record shows that the war in Laos involves far more than "1040 Americans . . . stationed in Laos," as the President's guarded statement said. That is only the tip of the iceberg. The hearings disclose, as sub-

committee sources put it, that "tens of thousands" of Americans are involved in the Laotian war — in air combat, in training, advisory, supply and intelligence work — operating from Thailand, from South Vietnam and from U.S. aircraft carriers at sea.

Symington expressed the hope, in making the transcript public, that it will help prevent "another Vietnam."

No conclusions or findings accompany the report, partly because it is incomplete. In making it public, the subcommittee staff prided itself on finally gaining release of 90 per cent of the transcript. But chief consultant Walter H. Pincus stated in a covering letter that the public's "right to know" is still being abused to avoid "embarrass-

ing" past administrations or officials for reasons unrelated to national security.

Censorship took out of the transcript all summary figures on costs; every reference to the Central Intelligence Agency's operations which include training, equipping, supplying and directing the "clandestine" army of up to 36,000 Meo tribesmen in Laos commanded by Major General Vang Pao; all references to the use of Thailand's forces in Laos; details on U.S. air operations from Laos; figures showing the escalation of American air strikes in Laos during

bombing "pauses" or the halt in the air war against North Vietnam, and other critical facts.

There are "two wars" in Laos: One is what began as a "civil war" in the north, in which the main Communist forces are the constantly increasing numbers of North Vietnamese troops (This is the air and ground war in which the American embassy mission in Vientiane is deep-

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The Symington subcommittee was focused primarily on the war in the north. But both portions of the Laotian conflict interact with the war in Vietnam, militarily and diplomatically. As the bulge of battle has been pressed down in South Vietnam, it has risen in Laos — as it now threatens to do in Cambodia.

Sullivan said at no time has there been U.S. "written commitments to Lao defense" — and, he maintained, "no commitments" at all. Subcommittee members, however, challenged the latter interpretation. The "first U.S. reconnaissance flight was flown over the southern part of Laos May 19, 1964, after consultation with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma the previous day," he testified.

That was acknowledged by the United States on June 6 — when the first "unarmed" plane was shot down. But armed escort planes were added in the meantime, and the first of these was shot down June 7, 1964.

AGREEMENT

By agreement between Souvanna and Ambassador Leonard Unger, said Sullivan, it was decided that "firing on ground targets by the escort aircraft would not be acknowledged and would be kept out of discussion with the press on grounds of being an operational matter."

Then came the next step up the escalation ladder: "The United States began bombing of Lao territory along the Ho Chi Minh trail in early 1965," initially bombing jointly with the Royal Lao Air Force.

Colonel Robert L. F. Tyrell, chief U.S. Air Attache in Laos, and actually the U.S. air operations commander there, testified that in addition to conducting air strikes in Laos from multiple bases in Thailand, "we have had aircraft operating from Da Nang, Pleiku (in South Vietnam) . . . and also from

the Seventh Fleet."

The air operations center in Laos is "staffed by Lao and Americans," said Tyrell.

Logistics support for U.S. Army and Air Attaches in Laos has been covertly handled from American bases in Thailand, where the "cover title" of deputy chief of the American military assistance group in Thailand conceals the support function, the testimony revealed.

PERSONNEL

The testimony also showed that President Nixon's March 6 statement about the number of Americans "stationed" in Laos was a calculated term that hides the fact that other American personnel — whose number was censored out of the testimony — "drift in and out" of Laos on "temporary" assignment.

Symington, who is a member of both the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committee, and has inspected U.S. operations in Laos, was surprised to find, the testimony showed, that U.S. activities were greater than he knew.

"I was with you in October 1967," he told Sullivan, and "until this afternoon" (Oct. 20, 1969) he did not know that U.S. forward air controllers "were working with Laotian troops in the planes with them, targeting Laotian bombers." The record showed the American forward air controllers were not even requested by the Laotians, but that the U.S. "country team determined they were necessary to provide proper control for air operations."

"Symington: Mr. Secretary, are you saying that the President of the United States, under our Constitution, can supply military spotters over a period for bombing a foreign country with which there has been no request from this government for declaring war; that he also has the right to put U.S. military troops in airplanes over a foreign country . . . and direct the bombing of that country . . .?"

"Sullivan: I think that the President, several presidents, throughout the history of the country have taken acts of this type on the presumption that it is within their own authority; yes sir."