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24 Nov
Secret War in Laos 70

To the Editor:

The confusion of many Americans about events in Laos demonstrates Washington's determination to avoid a principal error in Vietnam: letting the public know what is happening.

This is covert warfare, punctuated by occasional accidental glimpses which reveal the thousand bombing sorties per day, the hundreds of thousands of refugees, or the occasional loss of American lives — phenomena only grudgingly admitted after much prevarication.

It is a war controlled not by the Congress but by the Executive and its instruments. The White House has even succeeded in deleting from the 1969 Laos hearings enough information to render the public record virtually meaningless except to a few specialists. It is indeed a Secret War.

Fittingly, a Secret War should have a Secret Army. This the C.I.A. has been running through General Vang Pao for years. But now a hitch has developed—most of Vang Pao's C.I.A.-trained and financed Meo mercenaries have been killed.

Various observers have reported on the small group of survivors, teenage boys and old men. Edgar Buell, the American A.I.D. official closely associated with the Meo, put it bluntly to Robert Shaplen: "In a few weeks 90 per cent of the new recruits will be dead."

Now the Nixon Administration, still without authorization, has found a substitute for the dead Meos: Cambodian soldiers, also trained under the C.I.A., supplied with American arms, and operating in the territory of the semi-independent Prince Boun Oum of Champassak. (News story, Nov. 9). Perhaps because this C.I.A. operation is an illegal intrusion, violating the 1962 Geneva agreements, no one is bothering to inform the Lao Premier, Souphanna Phouma, much less the U.S. Congress.

The cold war goal remains—to "stop Communism," regardless of cost to the target country. Laos provides the newest model for future counter-insurgency operations — plenty of bombing, transportation of civilians, manipulation of mercenaries, negligible American casualties, but above all, secrecy. And, of course, dead Asians.

JONATHAN MIRSKY

Assoc. Professor, History & Chinese
Dartmouth College
Thetford, Vt., Nov. 13, 1970

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