

The Big Lie Requires Big Liars

By Tom Wicker

The proper word for the Cambodian bombing story is not dissembling or deceiving or protective reaction or cover story. The proper word is lying. And this long chronicle of lies, perhaps more graphically than the Pentagon Papers, shows the extent to which lying is a respected "option" at the top levels of the so-called "national security establishment," including the White House.

For fourteen months, the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House repeatedly insisted that Cambodian neutrality was being respected, while all conspired to keep secret the fact that in 3,630 raids American B-52's had dropped more than 100,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia.

During that period, the left hand of the Pentagon lied repeatedly to the right hand, as documents were falsified to show the 3,630 raids as having been launched not on Cambodia but on South Vietnam. Only a few high officials with a "need to know" were told the truth.

(This raises the question how anyone knows what the real truth is, even today. If one set of documents was fixed, why not another? Maybe there were 5,000 raids; who knows? Were they lying to Mr. Kissinger, too? To President Nixon?)

Even after secret war became open war in Cambodia, the lies continued. Last March and last June, the Pentagon sent deliberately lying reports, concealing the Cambodian bombing, to the Senate Armed Services Com-

IN THE NATION

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mittee. The Pentagon spokesman, Jerry Friedheim, knowingly distributed the same lies to the press.

"I knew at the time it was wrong and I'm sorry," Mr. Friedheim said, when caught. He ought to be fired out of hand, but he won't be. It even appears that he may have opposed within Pentagon circles the decision

to lie to the Senate committee, which was deliberately taken at the highest level. If so, he ought to have quit out of hand, but he went along.

Of this compounded lie, Mr. Friedheim's summary judgment was eloquent. "We weren't smart enough to foresee," he said, the testimony of former Maj. Hal H. Knight, who disclosed the secret bombing and falsified documentation. They weren't smart enough not to get caught in the lie, that is; if they had been, they'd have told a different and less detectable lie.

If all of this lying was originally to fend off increased domestic opposition to the Southeast Asia war, then to cover up the original lies, it was indefensible. If Prince Sihanouk had agreed to the bombing, and the lies were to protect him from the wrath of his own people, it was indefensible. If the lying was for both reasons, it was twice as indefensible; since either way it was intended primarily to permit the President and his war machine to pursue their war without let or hindrance from anyone, least of all the American people.

Mr. Kissinger deplors the falsification of records. What did he expect, when he and Mr. Nixon deliberately ordered falsification of the facts of the Cambodian bombing? Why should majors and colonels have higher standards than the White House?

Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, expressed horror at the falsification of the records, but said that if the President had ordered him to falsify them, "I would have done it." Why should he be astonished that when some general ordered some major to do it, the major did?

Worst of all, Mr. Nixon himself appeared on national television and told the American people on April 30, 1970, that since 1954 American policy had been to "respect scrupulously the neutrality of the Cambodian people." And for five years, he said, "neither the United States nor South Vietnam has moved against" North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. This was after fourteen months of B-52 raids on Cambodia, including the sanctuaries.

This was a deliberate and knowing lie, broadcast in person to the American people by their President. Neither the claim that it was not really a lie but a "special security arrangement," nor the contention that other Presidents have done it, is a justification; both are indictments of the "security" mania that distorts national life. And this episode clearly calls into question the credibility of Mr. Nixon's television address of April 30, 1973, when he claimed innocence of wrongdoing in the Watergate matter.

But whatever history may say, Yeats had lines for all these spokesmen and generals and diplomats and Presidents:

*... weigh this song with the great
and their pride:
I made it out of a mouthful of air,
Their children's children shall say
they have lied.*