

10 MAR 1970

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U.S. Plans to List Casualties in Laos

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President Nixon has ordered the secretaries of state and defense to follow a new policy of reporting publicly all American personnel casualties and aircraft losses in Laos.

The White House decision — announced last night — partially draws back the veil of secrecy that has shrouded U.S. operations in the Southeast Asia kingdom since 1962.

From now on, the United States will report personnel casualties and plane losses in Laos in the same way that such information is released on the Vietnam war.

One official referred to the President's new policy on Laos as one of "full disclosure." It is not, however, as was made clear when White House Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler once again said he could give no dollar figure on how much the United States is spending in Laos and did not anticipate any change in this respect.

Blasted by Fulbright

The White House statement came after a day of Senate debate on U.S. involvement in Laos. Sen. J. William Fulbright, D-Ark., chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, accused the administration of "an awful lot of ducking and dodging in Laos."

Republican Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania said Democrats are looking for a political issue in the debate over Laos.

Sen. Stuart Symington, D-Mo., said the administration "is releasing bits and pieces of information on Laos which do not give an accurate picture of the war out there."

Sen. Alon Cranston, D-Calif., said a number of Americans had told him they were sent into Laos from South Vietnam with orders to say they had gotten lost if they were captured.

The President's decision to re-

lease more information appeared to be a reaction to a rising crescendo of press inquiries and Senate attacks on the U.S. involvement in Laos.

In the past, information about the U.S. role in Laos has been handled amid the tightest possible security, and all U.S. casualties there have been lumped with those in Southeast Asia as a whole.

27 Listed as Lost

Ziegler made known the new policy after an unusual delay of nearly 2 1/2 hours in the regular 4 p.m. White House news briefing.

The lid was partially lifted by the administration itself over the weekend when the White House admitted that one U.S. Army officer died and 25 American civilians were killed or missing in Laos due to "hostile ground action."

But the administration still held to the fine semantic point that there is a difference between "hostile ground action" and American combat action. The White House still insists that no American has ever been killed in Laos during ground action and that no ground combat forces are stationed in Laos.

Nixon said in a statement released Friday that 1,010 Americans were stationed in Laos in a noncombat role. He said no Americans stationed there had ever been killed in ground combat operations.

Ziegler said last night, the purpose of the administration is to discuss completely the U.S. role in Laos and told reporters the President is ordering the following procedures:

o "He is directing the secretary of defense effective immediately to inform the American public about all aircraft losses and military air personnel casualties in Laos once the search and rescue missions are complete. In the past, these losses have been part of the Southeast Asia report.

o "Casualties resulting from protective reaction missions along the South Vietnam and Laotian border and involving U.S. personnel conducting operations in South Vietnam will continue to be reported as a part of the South Vietnam casualties.

o "The President has ordered that any casualties that result from hostile enemy actions of U.S. personnel stationed in Laos will be reported. This refers to advisers, personnel involved in training and logistical support."

Ziegler said during 1969 — since the Nixon administration took office — there were six civilians stationed in Laos in a supporting role who were killed as a result of hostile action. He said the names of the six would be released by the State Department.

Two hours later, the State Department disclosed the names of the six men, three of whom were identified as Air America pilots and three as members of International Voluntary Services.

They were Arthur Stillman and Dennis Mummett, of IVS, killed on Aug. 5, 1969, in an enemy ambush near Ban Nong Keun; Chandler Edwards, of IVS, killed in an enemy ambush on April 24, 1969, at Ban Soukhouma; J. C. Merkel, Air America pilot, killed Feb. 18, when a sniper bullet struck his helicopter over the Plain of Jars.

William J. Gibbs, Air American pilot, killed near Nam Bac on May 13, 1969, when his helicopter was struck by hostile ground fire and crashed; and Ralph S. Davis, Air America pilot, killed on Aug. 19, 1969, when the small fixed-wing plane he was flying was struck by hostile ground fire and crashed in the southwest part of the Plain of Jars.

Air America is a contract company which often has been described as a covert operational arm of the Central Intelligence Agency. IVS is a Peace Corps-type organization generally thought to have no connection

with U.S. intelligence operations.

Ziegler said that in addition to these six men, one military officer, Army Capt. Joseph Bush, described as a military attache at the embassy in Laos, was killed in February 1969 in an exchange of fire with North Vietnamese commandos. His death had been publicly confirmed by the White House on Sunday.

In Temple, Tex., the widow and parents of Bush said the government never tried to keep secret the location of the 25-year-old captain's death, the Associated Press reported.

Carol Bush, 24, said she had known "all along where Joe was. And when he was killed the

International Voluntary Services
government made no attempt so far as I know, to keep it quiet that he had been killed in Laos."

Ziegler said the "policy" and this policy which the President is stating today clearly shows the intent of the President to inform the American people of the scope of U.S. involvement in Laos and his intention to keep the people informed of U.S. activities in Laos."

It was disclosed over the weekend by the administration that aircraft losses in Laos, including helicopters, have been on the order of 400. It is also known that the number of American personnel missing or dead in Laos since 1962 is about 400, although these casualties have been included in the Southeast Asia casualty reports. These were air casualties.