

LI10-- EXCERPTS ON BRANFMAN FROM BACKFIRE, BY ROGER WARNER, SIMON AND SCHUSTER

Back Fire



**The CIA's Secret War
in Laos and Its Link to
the War in Vietnam**

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In the United States, by the middle of 1967, neither the mainstream politicians on Capitol Hill nor the editors of the major

news media had actually turned against the Vietnam War. But the facts of the war, and the images brought home on the evening television news, had started to create a realization that the U.S. might have blundered in sending troops into Vietnam, and in any case would have a tough time fording an honor-able way out. American troop levels in South Vietnam had risen to 431,000, and a further ceiling of 543,000 had already been approved by the Defense Department. In the fiscal year ending in June 1967, the U.S. spent about \$21 billion dollars on the war, which was far more than it had planned (and roughly seven hundred times the cost of the CIA's Operation Momentum in Laos).

When President Johnson proposed a 10 percent surtax on corporate and private income taxes to pay for the war, businessmen began to see that Vietnam would affect them personally. College students had already begun questioning the war, for it was their generation that was being called up by the draft system and sent over to South Vietnam to fight. About fifteen thousand Americans had already died on the battlefield.

Among the very early war protesters—he had demonstrated outside the White House back in April 1965—was Fredric Branfman, a young graduate of the University of Chicago and Harvard University's School of Education. The son of a New York Garment District executive, he had grown up materially comfortable but otherwise ill at ease in suburban Long Island. Highly idealistic and strongly influenced by the civil rights movement, Branfman was attracted to the causes of brown and black people in the United States and to those of indigenous people of less developed countries. To Branfman, the peasants of the Third World seemed to possess a wisdom and an understanding of life that was conspicuously lacking to America. The Vietnam War—dropping bombs and napalm on peasants—was proof of America's alienation from itself.

To postpone induction into the military, Branfman worked out a deal with his local Selective Service board freeing him to teach in Tanzania, in eastern Africa. He taught school, wrote studies of the Tanzanian school system, and had just gotten an offer to work as an educational adviser to the nation's president. Julius Nyerere, when all of a sudden a telegram from home notified him that his draft board had

just reclassified him 1-A, eligible to serve. Branfman rushed back to Long Island and presented his draft board with his fallback plan, an offer to join International Voluntary Services in Laos. Most of what Branfman knew about Laos came from reading Newsweek magazine. He didn't know the United States was bombing there. or that the CIA was running a covert war, because Newsweek had not mentioned it. Laos was supposed to be a "neutral" kingdom. Branfman imagined it to be a charmingly backward place, full of Buddhist temples, rather like Nepal.

In April 1967, the height of the hot season, Branfman stepped off a plane at Wattay Airport in Vientiane and into the blast furnace of tropical heat. Somebody from IVS was there to meet him and they drove off in an open jeep. They were no sooner out of the airport than a Lao man ran up and poured an entire pail of water over Branfman's head and then walked away laughing. Tired and disoriented, Branfman had arrived in the middle of Phi Mai, the Lao New Year, which was celebrated with ribald jokes and water dousings on the street. A few blocks later he got another pail of water on his head.

Branfman had been told that he would be working as an IVS volunteer for the USAID department of secondary school education, writing a report on the Laotian elementary school system. Once in Vientiane he found that his job didn't exist. The layers of bureaucracy had proliferated along with the growth of the war, and his assignment was in some kind of limbo that his USAID bosses couldn't or wouldn't explain.

Branfman didn't know quite what to do—except that he couldn't quit. Being in Laos kept him out of the U.S. Army, and out of Vietnam. He had two years to go until he reached his twenty-seventh birthday, after which his eligibility for the draft would expire.

He was neither the first nor the last young American who was in Laos to stay out of the war next door. A number of Pop Buell's assistants were either IVS or former Peace Corps volunteers who wanted to avoid military service for one reason or another. But most of them became extremely devoted to the American program and a few of them upcountry even carried guns. Branfman was different.

With his assignment to study the Laotian school system on hold, he got permission to visit a village east of Savannakhet to learn about lowland Lao culture. This little village fulfilled his fantasies of lost horizons in Asia. The houses were all built on tall stilts in traditional style. Monks with shaved heads and saffron robes collected alms at sunrise and then returned single file to the wat, the Buddhist temple. Little boys tended water buffalo. and teenage girls in sarongs languidly threw fishing nets that sparkled in the sun.

Branfman attended bouns, or festivals. He sat in on classes in an elementary school. He worked on improving his Lao language skills. And he began to hear from the local people and from other Americans about the Laos war- the war that hardly ever made the news. He began to collect stories about the royalist and Pathct Lao sides, about Pop Buell and the role of the Americans who wore civilian clothes. He heard rumors about General Vang Pao throwing prisoners in pits and buying and selling opium. Branfman was only about a hundred miles from the South Vietnamese border. He was even nearer to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It dawned on him that maybe he hadn't escaped the mess of the Vietnam War after all.

He was totally absorbed with his life in the village when he received a message to go back to Vientiane. His congressman, of all people, wanted to see him.

Representative Lester L. Wolff, of the 3rd District, New York, had come to Laos on the Tour and was looking up one of his constituents. Branfman met Wolff in the office of Joseph Mendenhall, the USAID director. The congressman asked Branfman how he was doing. Branfman said he was involved with an AID education project that had turned weird, and since the congressman asked, the United States really wasn't helping out in Laos the right way. Just then, Mendenhall and a second congressman entered the office and said that the plane was ready. They were going to Sam Thong. Branfman asked if he could come along.

As they neared their destination, the pilot announced that there was a problem with the Sam Thong runway and that they would land at a nearby airstrip and take a helicopter to Sam Thong. The plane

landed, turned around, taxied, and stopped at the bottom of an incline in a bowl-like mountain valley. American men, every one of whom wore sunglasses, escorted them onto the tarmac and into the waiting helicopter. The chopper took off and then landed a few minutes later in Sam Thong, and there in a line on the runway were Meo women in full tribal regalia with Hawaiian-style floral leis. They draped the leis around the congressmen's necks.

Branfman grew suspicious. He sidled over behind a man who had accompanied them on the helicopter, who was talking with a short, balding man with glasses. Branfman knew without being told that this was the famous Pop Buell.

"How did it go?" Buell was saying out of the side of his mouth. "Fine," the other man answered in a low voice.

"Do they know anything?" asked Buell.

"Oh no. they got the usual briefing." replied the other guy. "They were told all about Sam Thong and what you people are doing here. There was no mention of Long Tieng, and they were very, very impressed."

"Good," said Buell.

Branfman realized that the plane had landed at Long Tieng, the so-called secret air base. He had met lots of Americans in Laos who talked about Long Tieng, but never anybody who had been there.

As the congressmen's tour continued, they saw the tribal soldiers and the weapons captured from the communists. They saw the schools with woven-bamboo walls and the medics being trained and all the good deeds USAID was doing. Finally, they had their audience with General Vang Pao in a small, crowded room. In broken English, Vang Pao gave his talk, which seemed well rehearsed, about leading his freedom-loving people in a fight against the communists. Vang Pao asked whether he could count on Congress for continued support. Representative Wolff said yes, that the American people admired what he was doing and would never let him down. The other congressman

was a bit more cautious and said getting money out of Congress wasn't always easy.

Each time Vang Pao got up to say something in his own language Branfman leaned forward to whisper in Wolff's ear that the general was a warlord - that he didn't really have the support of his people, that he dealt with opponents by throwing them into pits and letting them starve to death. Another American in the room overheard this and glared at Branfman, who became suddenly self-conscious and afraid.

Branfman and Wolff spent that night in another base in a kind of trailer with Playboy pinups on the walls. The congressman listened to Branfman's spiel about the injustice of America's war in Laos while looking increasingly uncomfortable. The congressman finally explained that he and many of his colleagues owed their election to Lyndon Johnson's coattails, and they couldn't afford to confront the president directly on the war, whatever they thought in private. The next morning they flew back to Vientiane together. The USAID director, Mendenhall, politely asked Branfman for a copy of anything he wrote on education in Laos, promising to read it.

On his own initiative Branfman then produced a series of reports on the Laotian school system. which had been set up in French colonial days. He proposed a radical overhaul. The primary schools should focus on producing better, prouder Laotian farmers. he wrote, rather than teaching a small gifted minority Western languages and skills. Secondary schools should be de-emphasized in favor of primary schools He sent a copy of his final report to Mendenhall.

Branfman was summoned to the office of his USAID boss. the secondary school man. His boss showed him a letter he had written to Mendenhall rebutting every point Branfman had made. The letter, which was dated the day before, concluded that Branfman had had second thoughts about his report and voluntarily withdrew it.

His boss gazed across his desk calmly and launched into the story of another IVS volunteer who was a wise guy, too. Who was also, like Branfman, trying to get out of the army. Who hadn't fooled

anybody, who got thrown out of IVS and out of Laos and into an infantry unit in Vietnam. And got killed in combat.

His boss told him to go teach English at a teacher training college outside Vientiane. Any more trouble, and he would lose his draft deferment.

Scared but still rebellious, Branfman went to his IVS supervisor and pointed out that he knew his congressman. IVS didn't want a big fight and neither did he. He said IVS could list him as an English teacher at the teacher training school, but he was going to be living in a little village nearby and setting up his own project on agricultural education. He had only eighteen months left and they didn't need to bother each other.

With the deal approved, Branfman moved to a little lowland village north of Vientiane with a wet, houses on stilts, and wattle fences around the vegetable gardens. He was the only farang there. He rented a room from a seventy-year-old peasant man who had been a samlor driver much of his life, operating a three-wheeled bicycle-powered taxi. Now he was retired. Most days the old man sat on the smooth wood floor of his house holding a piece of wood with a pin in the end, engraving tales from the life of the Buddha onto palm leaf, a traditional form of temple book. The old man hand-copied these religious stories hour after hour, in a trance.

Branfman loved the villagers. They were everything that had been missing from his own upbringing. They were gregarious and he had been a loner ever since he was a kid. They were spiritual and he was secular. They were gentle and he came from the country that dropped bombs and napalm. So he was drawn to them as people, though he was finding that their society was deeply flawed with venality, corruption, and greed.

Examples were easy to find. The name of the place where he lived, Ban Xa Phang Meuk, means "The Village of the Deep Pond." The pond was off to one side of the main lane leading to the paved road. It had some lily pads and floating weeds in the wet season when the water was high, and a fence around it. Nobody in the village was

allowed to use it for drinking water or for their draft animals. Why not? he asked. Because some big man years ago had bribed all the right officials in Vientiane and then had claimed the pond was his.

The Village of the Deep Pond—every village in Laos—had big problems. People were half sick a lot of the time with intestinal ailments from drinking dirty water, which reduced their enjoyment of life. There was no legal system to speak of, which meant that rich people could steal land. It was implicitly understood that the main incentive for working for the government was being able to steal with power behind you. The people of the village had few prospects. Young men became either peasants or soldiers. Young women were leaving to become prostitutes in Vientiane.

Branfman himself spent a lot of evenings in the bordellos of Vientiane, as many *farang* men did. The two best-known establishments were the White Rose and Madame Lulu's. At the White Rose, the women took off their clothes and did bump-and-grind dances for the customers having drinks. For a few dollars more they would do things with amazing muscular control on bananas and coins, or take the men to little rooms upstairs. Madame Lulu's specialized in oral sex. Branfman usually arrived on his black Honda motorcycle after toking up on the ganja sold openly in the Vientiane market and left the same way.

He was smoking a lot of ganja then, which was of no great consequence—the tolerant Lao had never gotten around to passing a law against it, and it was the drug of choice for his peer group. Sometimes he smoked opium, too. Being stoned helped him tune into Laos. It amplified his dislike of the war and of the inequities of the American presence. The drugs opened all kinds of physical, spiritual, and esthetic leads, and if they didn't tie them back together and make sense of the place, some of the moments were worth it in themselves. He became a familiar figure putt-putting around on his motorbike, always dressed in black, a vague sartorial statement of sympathy toward the Viet Cong—black sandals, black chinos, a black peasant's shirt from northeast Thailand. On his wrists were scores of thin white strings from attending bouns and baci ceremonies.

His main preoccupation was his self-assigned Lao-language agricultural textbook. He believed that teaching European languages in schools way out in the countryside wasn't giving average Laotians knowledge they could use. It was trying to make peasants into little versions of Westerners rather than helping them become better versions of themselves. He went into the USAID office one day and happened to see some Pathet Lao textbooks that the Meo had captured and that had been brought back to Vientiane for translation.

He had no way of knowing that Edgar Buell, Bill Lair, and others of the inner circle had been aware of these Pathet Lao textbooks for years, had studied them carefully, and had modeled their own nation-building educational programs on similar principles. Nor did he have any way of knowing how upset the old-timers were at the changing course of the war, at the Shackley-era innovations. The layers of bureaucracy had multiplied, and Branfman was in the outermost layer, far from the core.

Branfman began reading the Pathet Lao textbooks. He was stunned. The textbooks were everything he had thought of doing and more. The whole curriculum was in the Lao language, not the language of *Farangs*, taught about Laotian history, not French history. And they taught about different crops, the seasons for planting and harvesting, and other agricultural topics.

The Pathet Lao, Branfman decided, were already doing what he had been trying to do, only better. So why am I doing it? he asked himself.

Staring at the Pathet Lao textbooks, Branfman discovered that he felt no intrinsic loyalty to the American program in Laos. Why are we fighting the people who know more than we do about educating the peasants properly?, he wondered. He had hoped to educate himself in Laos, but he was only getting more confused.

He knew something about Lao culture and village life, but next to nothing about the Laos war. There were more news stories about Vietnam in the papers every day than about the Laos war, even in Vientiane. Nobody knew what was going on because it was supposed

to be a secret war. There were rumors of colossal battles up north, of CIA air bases, and of bombing, but they existed in a strange atmosphere of information deprivation. Nobody seemed to know anything.

When Fred Branfman finished his two-year IVS tour in mid-1969, he went to France. Behind him, in Laos, the agricultural textbook he had written gathered dust on USAID shelves. He didn't care. He was a free man, and now that he had reached his twenty-seventh birthday he was free of the military draft. He had moved on to the next stage, an assignment from himself to understand the Laos war.

An article in Le Monde had caught his attention. A journalist named Jacques Decornoy had visited the Pathet Lao liberated' zones in Sam Neua and reported firsthand on the U.S. bombing. Decornoy had even interviewed the dashing, pencil-moustached Prince Souphanouvong in the prince's home in a cave. It was the first eyewitness report by a Westerner of the people on the receiving end of the bombing, and though largely ignored by the American media, it shocked and inflamed Branfman, who was instinctively convinced that the bombing was immoral. There was a Pathet Lao delegation in Paris. and Branfman traveled to see them in the summer of 1969, to try to convince them to let him travel in their liberated zones. He wanted to see for himself whether the bombing story was true, and to do something about it if it was.

To his great disappointment the Parhet Lao delegation in Paris would not let him in the door. Probably he looked too weird, with his black peasant clothing, baci strings on his wrists, and bush of wiry hair. Perhaps they had also heard the rumors from their Soviet-bloc friends in Vientiane that Branfman was a CIA operative in antiwar disguise, for he had often been seen entering the U.S. embassy in Vientiane to speak to the younger political officers there. He had also befriended some Soviets in Vientiane, and some Americans were convinced he was KGB, but that was the price of talking to everybody—nobody knew how to categorize him.

He got passed on from one Laotian to the next in Paris. until he met Kong Le, the tiny neutralist soldier who had started the coup that

began all the trouble back in 1960. Kong Le was living in exile without much to do. except to think about his glory days. He was glad to meet a Lao-speaking *farang*. Branfman asked Kong Le whether it was true that he could make himself invulnerable to bullets. Kong Le replied that he had led his men in many battles and never been hit by a bullet, so Branfman could draw his own conclusions. And then Kong Le launched into other stories of his magical powers while Branfman listened attentively. Kong Le's superstitions were typical of the Lao villagers whom Branfman had gotten to know outside Vientiane.

The two men got along well, and they went together to a bar on July 20, 1969. the day American astronauts landed on the moon for the first time. They watched the historic event on TV. the descent to the lunar surface and the feet climbing down the ladder to touch on lunar soil.

Kong Le, who was sitting on a barstool next to Branfman, said, "Now they'll believe me."

Who will?" asked Branfman.

Kong Le said, "When I was the leader of Laos, I visited the NASA Space Center in your country. I told them that there was life on other planets. They were very polite to me, but they didn't believe me. I could tell they didn't believe me. But now they will."

Fred Branfman nodded to show agreement. But he decided then and there to leave Paris to pursue his investigation into the war.

He went back to Vientiane and found that the Saigon press corps had arrived there, hot on the trail of the so-called secret war and eager to confirm the burgeoning reports and rumors of heavy American bombing. It was the largest American media presence since the Geneva accords of 1962, and some of the younger journalists belonged to the new breed, angry at the U.S. government and determined to expose its misdeeds.

In response to their queries about the bombing, the press attache at the U.S. embassy in Vientiane replied, "At the request of the Royal Laotian Government. the United States is conducting

unarmed reconnaissance flights accompanied by armed escorts who have the right to return fire if fired upon."

This bland announcement had been in use since 1964. Not one word had changed over the years. And even though it was an open secret that the United States was bombing in northern Laos, and the bombing had been mentioned in news stories, the lack of official confirmation by the embassy created a doubt that was hard to resolve. Even for Branfman, the U.S. government's denial that it was bombing created confusion. It gave him the oddest feeling, to be back in the capital of Laos and not know what was going on out in the countryside. It was the same old problem of information deprivation

The Laotians themselves were not much help, since he couldn't get permission to travel to the war zones, and the people from the war zones were kept upcountry in refugee camps. Then in late September 1969, a young journalist friend of his, Tim Allman, who was stringing for The New York Times, came to him and said that some refugees who had been living in the Pathet Lao zones had been brought to Vientiane. Allman wanted to know if Branfman would come along and help interpret.

They got on Branfman's black Honda motorcycle and putt-putted as though on any other normal day through the streets of Vientiane, past the American embassy and then past the Pathet Lao compound nearby, then the police station on their right, up Lang Xang Avenue ("The Avenue of the Million Elephants"), Vientiane's Champs-Elysses. They negotiated the traffic circle around Vientiane's ersatz Arc de Triomphe, known as "The Vertical Runway," because it was made with the concrete stolen from a project to lengthen the airport; and they went off on a radial avenue toward That Luang, a national religious monument with an oddly shaped blue spire surrounded by white crenellated walls.

Before the monument spread a huge parade ground where public ceremonies were held. Near the center of this open space stood a sala, a large open-sided building with a multi-tiered roof like a temple. They saw several hundred Laotian peasants sitting and standing

inside, holding little bundles. Branfman parked the motorcycle and he and Allman walked up the steps.

Branfman went up to the first man he saw and said, in Lao, "Hello, how are you? And where are you from, by the way?" The man said he came from the Plain of Jars. "How long have you been here?" Branfman asked. "You just got here this morning? Oh." And then he asked whether the man had ever seen any bombing. The man said he had seen bombing every day and drew an L in the dust to show how he and others had entered a cave, hiding there from the planes. Branfman thanked him and passed on to the next man. "Hello. How are you? Where are you from, please?"

It wasn't the words that got through his defenses. It was the facial expressions of the people there, the tones of voice. The horror crept up on him slowly. A man mentioned almost casually that his son had been killed in the bombing. His quiet expression of pain was more piercing than if he'd screamed.

The people in the sala said that their families had lived on the Plain of Jars a very long time. Generations. Their timeframes were vague, and so was their accounting of the oxen and water buffalo that they owned. They were imprecise, but that was typical of their culture and it was obvious that they were telling the truth. Now they were in poverty and had nothing except what was in their burlap bags. They'd been wrenched out of their environments and they were subdued and terrified.

Branfman asked. "When did you start seeing planes?" The answer came, "In 1964. But we didn't know what they were. We didn't know who was dropping bombs on us or why." When Branfman asked what the bombs were like, the refugees explained that there were many kinds. Some bombs made fire on the ground, others made big holes, and there were bombies like this— a man produced a dud antipersonnel bomblet the shape of a pineapple, with hundreds of little pellet holes in the side. "Oh," said Branfman, still moving around the sala, interpreting for Allman, who was taking notes.

A barefoot young man dressed in white shorts and a white undershirt began to walk beside them, listening and sometimes adding comments in Lao. He had narrower eyes and lighter skin than most—an ethnic Chinese. He said his name was Ngeun and he was a trader who had traveled around the Plain of Jars. Everything Ngeun said tallied with what the other refugees said, but the others looked to him for corroboration on specific dates and factual details. Ngeun spoke knowledgeably of T-28s, F-4s, A-1 Es, and other models. He said the bombing had begun in May 1964 and had built up gradually until August 1969, when the bombs had started falling like rain.

'Were there North Vietnamese around?' Branfman asked. Ngeun said no. 'How did you feel about the North Vietnamese?' asked Branfman. Ngeun answered that they were the reason the bombing was happening, and for that reason, he didn't like them. Ngeun added, 'But when these villages were bombed there were no North Vietnamese or Pathet Lao around. The soldiers know how to hide in the forest. The villagers who lived in the open clearings got killed.'

Branfman kept himself under tight control. So did Allman, who was nodding, scribbling notes, taking it all in, and staying detached.

Branfman gave Allman a ride back into Vientiane, dropped him off, then drove to the Lao-style house he rented, where he let Western longhaired travelers stay for free. The house was full of young backpackers touring the temples, buying dope in the marketplace, and catching the scene at the White Rose and Lulu's. It wasn't until that evening, when he sat and thought about it, that the enormity of his government's deception hit him in the gut. The bombing was still going on. Laotians alive that day would be dead by tomorrow. As his anger rose at the thought of villagers being blown up by bombs, he felt his old identity, the old confused Fred Branfman, blowing up too.

Beginning that evening, and over the succeeding days—when he brought an ABC television crew to That Luang, and then a procession of other journalists, interpreting for them, forcing them to bear witness— Fred Branfman went through a crisis of transformation. His sense of who he was, of what he knew about the world, his understanding of reality and his sense of what it meant to be an

American, changed. He didn't care what happened to him anymore. He identified with the Laotians in the war zones as though he was on the ground looking up while the bombs were raining down.

All he wanted to do was stop the bombing. That was all. If that was how the world worked, if America had lied about the bombing for five-and-a-half years, dropping bombs on Laotian villagers, not just bombs but napalm and cluster bomb units, slicing and dicing and frying and burying people alive in caves, he didn't want to belong to America anymore. No more giving the Embassy the benefit of the doubt, no more pretending that the Americans were the good guys. He had to stop the bombing.

But then he realized he couldn't stop the bombing until he understood where the bombs had come from. Who dropped the bombs? he wondered. The U.S. Air Force? An F-4, that must be a jet, he thought. Where would that come from? Who decides how many bombs to drop? Who decides where to drop them? Who ordered this? Does Congress know? Does Nixon know?

He was completely bewildered. It made him feel stupid and inadequate, being in Laos and not even knowing the basics of the war. He felt as helpless and as innocent as a newborn child.

In Vientiane one morning in December 1969. Fred Branfman picked up a copy of the newspaper and read that a billionaire from Texas had loaded a chartreuse-colored jet with canned turkey dinners and was flying to Laos. The billionaire, whose name was H. Ross Perot, was stopping off at the North Vietnamese embassy in Vientiane to get a visa and landing rights, and planning to fly on to Hanoi to deliver mail, gifts, and the turkey dinners to American prisoners of war in time for Christmas.

Dumbfounded, Branfman accompanied a bunch of journalists to the press conference the night the plane arrived.

Perot turned out to be a short, folksy, dynamic fellow who called the newsmen by their first names as soon as they'd been introduced. like a Rotary Club president. The regular reporters lobbed easy questions to him— what kind of Christmas presents was he bringing to

the POWs- what were his chances of getting permission to fly in to Hanoi, and so on. Nobody focused on what Branfman perceived was the central mystery, and that was why he found himself standing up and saying to Perot. "Sir, my name's Fred Branfman. I understand we should care very much about the American pilots being held prisoner in North Vietnam. As an American I can understand that concern. But what I don't understand is that there are thousands of Asians being killed right now, and you don't seem to have any concern for them."

Testily, Perot answered, "Fred, of course we should share concern on that issue, but that's not what this trip is about. This trip is about our boys, the POWs in North Vietnam. Next question, please."

Perot and his people kept a wary eye as Branfman followed them around Vientiane. He wasn't exactly hard to spot, with his black Viet Cong—like outfit, bushy hair, and baci strings around his wrists.

Perot went to the Pathet Lao office in Vientiane, and from there to the North Vietnamese embassy, where he was told that his plane wouldn't be allowed to land in Hanoi. The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese didn't believe that Perot could be serious about helping American prisoners of war when their own prisoners of war were being mistreated, too. This led Perot to make a brief visit to a prison camp for North Vietnamese soldiers in Laos toward the end of December 1969.

Branfman went along with the reporters to the prison camp for North Vietnamese soldiers. The gates opened and there was a big yard inside with a bunch of prisoners in the hot sun. Perot made a beeline for the prisoners and the journalists all followed him. Perot walked right up to them and stopped, and everybody gathered around him. The North Vietnamese prisoners were all looking sullenly at the ground.

"Howdy!" Perot exclaimed in a loud voice. None of the prisoners looked up. He turned to his interpreter and said, "Tell them I'm Ross Perot, an American citizen. We come here as friends."

The outside world was receiving plenty of news coverage of Laos, thanks in part to Tim Allman, who was now freelancing for a number of major news-papers and magazines, and Fred Branfman, who hired himself out as an interpreter to incoming newsmen and provided them with ready-made stories. With the press clamoring for greater access, the embassy set up one of its scripted visits to Sam Thong—"dog and pony shows," as Buell called them.

Branfman and Allman were on the planeload of reporters that showed up. While Buell gave the reporters his usual pep talk, which was more optimistic than his letters home, Allman and two other reporters hiked over the road Vim Lawrence had built connecting Sam Thong to Long Tieng, the so-called secret air base. No newsman had gone there since 1962, before the Geneva accords. They stayed in Long Tieng for an hour before Tom Clines, the base chief, caught up with them and had them flown out to Vientiane. To the journalists, the breaching of Long Tieng's secrecy was a milestone in the coverage of the war. Clines and Buell didn't give it much thought. They had more important matters on their minds.

In Vientiane, Fred Branfman was trying his best to understand the air war but without much success. His main problem, still, was U.S. government secrecy, which kept him from witnessing the bombing and convinced him that his government had much to hide. His anger at the U.S. government, and his deepening friendship with Ngeun, the Lao-Chinese refugee from the Plain of Jars, radicalized his feelings even further. By then Ngeun had dropped his earlier criticisms of the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese and was starting to praise them, apparently from direct experience. To Branfman, the lack of credible information from his own government made it easier to believe Ngeun, and to believe that the so-called enemy were actually heroes, liberators. If his own government was doing wrong, it made a certain kind of sense to assume that the other side was doing right.

But of course nothing was simple, and Branfman knew it. He decided that he couldn't find out much more about the bombing by talking to refugees. The next step was to talk to pilots. The American planes were based in South Vietnam and Thailand, and the Thai bases were off-limits to the press. On a freelance assignment for Dispatch

News Service, an agency that represented an antiestablishment alternative to the regular wire services, Branfman went to the Danang air base in South Vietnam.

At Danang, he began to learn about different aircraft and munitions, and about the air war's many-layered deployment of planes. Roughly speaking, there were light spotter planes at two thousand feet; propellor-driven bombers, attack planes, gunships, and gunship helicopters at five thousand feet; jet fighters and reconnaissance aircraft at ten thousand feet; B-52 bombers at thirty thousand feet, and airborne communications planes coordinating the bombing of Laos circling overhead all day and all night even higher than that.

Branfman was starting to understand the technical aspects of the bombing, but he had not escaped his moral abyss. He stayed up on evening drinking beer with a bunch of friendly pilots. They were nice young guys, sincere and dedicated, and he couldn't help liking them. The next morning, on the runway, one of them said, "Well, I'm off to bomb Laos. Wish me luck." He stuck out his hand. Numbly, Branfman shook it.

In his quest to get at the heart of the air war. Fred Branfman went to Bangkok, to look up a man named Jerome Brown, who had helped choose bombing targets for the U.S. embassy in Laos. The targeting officer, who had retired from the air force, agreed to talk as long as Branfman didn't use his name in print.

Brown sketched a reasonably accurate portrait of the air war bureaucracy, and of the institutional reasons a secret program with bombs to spare and planes that flew too fast was turning pans of Laos into rubble. He also explained why such powerful weaponry wasn't winning the war, even though it was doing a lot of damage: the overreliance on expensive, fast-moving jets instead of practical, low-speed propellor planes: the futility of trying to stop trucks in heavily forested terrain. He explained the tendency of pilots to drop bombs where craters already existed and to hit civilian villages because they were far easier to spot than enemy troops hiding in the forests. Based on the interviews, Branfman wrote a three-part series on the U.S. air war for Dispatch News and sent it off in November 1970.

By then Branfman had been a catalyst in most of the major exposes of the Laos war. He had been a source of information and a goad to action to his friend the freelancer Tim Allman, who helped break open the story of the covert war. (Subsequently, Henry Kamm took over the Laos story for The New York Times and became the war's most insightful reporter.) Branfman interpreted for Sydney Schanberg, who would later win a Pulitzer Price for reporting from Cambodia, and he gave help informally to Seymour Hersh, who had already won a Pulitzer in South Vietnam; both men came through Laos looking for leads. For the three major television networks. Branfman suggested story ideas, set up appointments, and translated for their correspondents, including Ted Koppel and Bernard Kalb. He fed information on the bombing to Jack Anderson, the muckraking columnist in Washington, and to the staffs of Senate committees. He befriended, and got encouragement from, antiwar activists who passed through Vientiane en route to Hanoi, such as Daniel Berrigan and Noam Chomsky.

Branfman also helped blow Tony Poe's cover. A former USAID Refugee Relief officer who had worked with Poe had been ostracized by Pop Buell and others after testifying candidly to Congress on the problems of the war. Branfman introduced the man to Mike Morrow, the founder of Dispatch News Service. Morrow wrote the first story on Poe, published in September 1970.

It was accurate on the major points, such as the CIA's intelligence forays into China, even if it did claim that Poe was married to a Yao princess. The story, together with Poe's loss of effectiveness from drinking, resulted in his being transferred out of Laos.

Inevitably, Branfman came to the attention of the U.S. embassy in Vientiane. Ambassador Godley became convinced that Branfman was an agent of the Soviet Union. During December 1970 and January 1971 events occurred that left Branfman feeling isolated and afraid. A U.S. embassy official paid a menacing call on Ngeun, who had been quietly collecting refugees' drawings and stories about the bombing of the Plain of Jars. By then, Branfman knew that Ngeun had been trained as a Pathet Lao soldier and political cadre. Branfman was careful not

to ask whether Ngeun was still working for the Pathet Lao, and he decided he'd rather not know.

The walls were closing in. Other acquaintances were called in for questioning, and strange characters showed up at his door. A Tass correspondent in Laos offered Branfman assignments for Soviet magazines. Branfman said no. A shady South Vietnamese sought him out for information on the antiwar movement. Branfman rejected that, too.

He had never felt so worried before, nor so powerless to control his own destiny. All he could do was to try to ensure that nobody else got in trouble because of him. He moved into a bungalow by himself near the Lang Xang Hotel, where most of the journalists stayed. As the South Vietnamese invasion of southern Laos got under way, he held forth every evening in the bar at the Lang Xang for the newsmen who had flooded into Vientiane hoping to cover the invasion from the Laos side.

He talked for hours every night, and the newsmen listened. They didn't know much about Laos, and he knew the cities, towns, and villages, their population size, which side they were on. He knew the names of military units and the air bases in Thailand and South Vietnam from where the planes were launched. He knew the names of the spirits in the body and the names of Buddhist holidays. There were Americans who had more breadth and depth of knowledge about Laos than Fred Branfman, but none of them was so aggressively accessible to journalists; and there was nobody else so single-mindedly determined—so fanatically obsessed—to stop the bombing.

At eleven o'clock on the morning of February 12, 1971, four days after Lam Son 719 began, Laotian government security police found him at the Lan Xang Hotel. They were friendly and apologetic. As they drove with him to the central police station, one of the policemen turned to him and asked, 'Why are the Americans angry at you?' Branfman replied that he could guess. but he wasn't sure specifically.

The policeman said, "The Americans told us to go over and pick you up."

“Did you know where I was living?”

“Yes, Bungalow Number Nine.” The policeman said he had gone there earlier in the morning, but hadn't gone in because Branfman wasn't home.

Climbing the stairs inside the police station, they passed the USAID Public Safety Office. Branfman pointed to the door and raised his eyebrows quizzically. One of the policemen smiled and nodded assent.

In midafternoon they brought him down from his cell. They showed him the order of expulsion, Arret Ministeriel No. 25, which was directed to officials throughout royalist Lao government areas and said that he was forbidden to enter Laos. The order, which was written in French, was signed February 4, 1971, and stated that his expulsion had been announced at a government cabinet meeting on January 20. It identified him as 'Prebery' or "Predy' Branfman, of the International Voluntary Services.

Branfman took the ferry across the Mekong to Nong Khai, Thailand, and then the train to Bangkok.

A week and a half later he stood at a lectern on a stage at Yale University, in New Haven, Connecticut, at an antiwar teach-in. He had never spoken in public before but found that the words came easily.

In thinking of the air war. (he said] one image to keep in mind is that of the typical Laotian village. Ten to twenty bamboo huts, a Buddhist temple, a school, a few hundred head of cows, buffalo, pigs, rice farmers, their wives and grandparents, kids; that's about it. Tonight, as for the last seven years, hundreds of millions of dollars of the world's most sophisticated weaponry hover over these villages.

Laos is automated warfare. Laser-guided bombs striking water buffalo; three-million-dollar jets bombing bamboo houses, infra-red scopes and complete radar sets tracking a man plowing his field. Life for the villagers is very simple. The oriental subtleties which have traditionally delighted Westerners do not apply. Life becomes a cliché: You live through it ... or you die.

They're hiding in holes in the ground or caves, or trenches dug in the hills. They sit there unless they have to leave. Only they have to leave fairly frequently because they have to work enough to survive; they have to try to grow enough rice to eat at night.

Refugees have lived under this bombing for five years. Tonight hundreds of thousands of rice farmers of Laos and Cambodia are still living under the bombs, still huddling in holes, still being killed when they go out, still praying, as one old refugee man told me he did, 'Oh please. don't let the planes come anymore, don't let the planes come anymore, oh please.'

This bombing is militarily indecisive. It doesn't stop the guerrillas, it doesn't kill the guerillas. It's true that it hinders the Communists, as any total war would. It does divert resources, it does kill potential porters, destroy food supplies, demoralize civilian population and create refugees. It does slow the guerillas down. But the question that has to be asked is: what happens in the years to come when the bombing does not bring victory?

I think we must oppose this war, for moral reasons. If any of our concepts of decency, morality, humanity have any meaning at all, we must not rest until this is stopped.

But also we must oppose this war for what it reveals about our own society. We are a people schooled in the belief that authoritarianism is the greatest threat to our way of life.

It is an irony of fate that the most recent wielders of totalitarian power are our own leaders.

By raising the subject of the automated air war, Branfman injected a new vigor into the antiwar movement, which had been losing steam with the steady announcements of troop withdrawals from Vietnam. Pleased and surprised at the reaction to his speech, Branfman moved on to Washington, D.C. where Dispatch News Service gave him a desk and a telephone in a corner of a basement room. He slept on a couch in the office. He called up all the antiwar people he had met in Vientiane. He wrote pamphlets, articles, and op-ed pieces. He briefed journalists and congressional staffers.

He was in the audience on April 22, 1971, for a hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on refugees. The chairman, Ted Kennedy, had gotten the runaround from then-Ambassador Bill Sullivan back when the senator had taken the Tour. Now it was payback time. Kennedy's staffers had been talking with Branfman, and they arranged an ambush.

At the hearing Kennedy asked Sullivan why the State Department had obstructed the committee's efforts to get information on the bombing of civilian villages in Laos. Sullivan offered an artfully constructed excuse for the delays and denigrated the accuracy of the bombing surveys Kennedy was citing. When the senator broke in to ask whether he was familiar with Mr. Fred Branfman, Sullivan said yes, he was. Kennedy called out, 'Mr. Branfman?' Branfman stood up, wearing a cheap suit, the only one he owned. 'Yes, sir?' he said.

NBC-TV carried the exchange on its evening news that night. Kennedy was the star of the segment, challenging the executive branch to start telling the truth. Sullivan's frustration showed on his face. Branfman seemed quiet, polite, and reserved, but there he was, on TV screens in living rooms across the country. "There is good evidence the United States has been carrying out the most protracted bombings in history in Laos." Branfman declared.

He had been a fringe character in Laos. At home, in the States. Fred Branfman was rapidly becoming a major opposition player.

"U.S. AIDE DENIES LAOS BOMBING IS A MAJOR CAUSE OF REFUGEES," ran a newspaper article headline the day after Sullivan clashed with Fred Branfman on Capitol Hill.

At that hearing Sullivan tried to explain that Branfman had extrapolated from the experience of a small number of pro—Pathet Lao refugees to reach the wrong conclusions about the bombing and the evacuation of the Plain of Jars. Narrowly, technically, Sullivan had a point, but the political tide had turned against him. The enormity of the refugees' suffering made his arguments seem petty and legalistic and untruthful.

He even began to suspect those arguments himself. A congressman from California, Pete McCloskey, went to Laos, where he got hold of an internal embassy study of the bombing that roughly confirmed what Branfman was saying about the widescale destruction of civilian targets. McCloskey then pushed the air force into giving him aerial photographs of some of the bomb damage. He sent copies to Sullivan, who was taken aback by the images of landscapes that he recognized.

With an intensity that alarmed even his closest friends, Fred Branfman had devoted every waking hour since returning to the States to the antiwar movement. He started his own organization, Project Air War. He wrote dozens of articles and was the source of information for dozens more. He made the antiwarrior's obligatory pilgrimage to North Vietnam with Tom Hayden, a founder of Students for a Democratic Society and one of the defendants at the Chicago Seven trial. Branfman married within the movement, to the sister of a South Vietnamese student activist. He edited a book of refugee accounts from the Plain of Jars, making use of drawings of the bombing collected by his friend Ngeun.

So when the Paris peace accords and the agreement between the Laotian factions were signed, and the bombing ended in Laos and Vietnam, and most people thought his job was over, Branfman disagreed. The bombing of Cambodia was still going on, and he didn't feel that he had fulfilled his promise to himself to understand why the bombing had occurred in the first place.

He flew to Bangkok, where he was oblivious to the nearby existence of Bill Lair, a man whose identity was unknown to the press and to the antiwar movement. On the bombing, however, Branfman quickly learned that the 7th Air Force had moved its headquarters out of South Vietnam to Nakhorn Phanom air base in northeastern Thailand. Its command and control apparatus, the equivalent of a war room, known as Blue Chip, controlled the remaining air sorties in the Indochina war—a couple of punitive air strikes in Laos in retaliation for communist violations of the cease-fire. but for the most part, the ongoing U.S. bombing of the communist Khmer Rouge guerillas in Cambodia.

From Bangkok, Branfman went to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, where the rightist regime held out against the encircling Khmer Rouge. Borrowing a radio from a civilian pilot he had known from his Laos days. Branfman tape-recorded the radio conversations U.S. military pilots were having on their Cambodian bombing missions. The recordings showed that, contrary to U.S. government assertions, the pilots weren't checking to make sure that civilians weren't in the way before dropping their ordnance. Branfman gave the tape recordings to Sydney Schanberg of The New York Times, whose front-page story appeared the morning that the Senate met to vote on prohibiting further bombing in Cambodia. The Senate motion passed by one vote, and it cheered Branfman to think that the information he had uncovered might have made a difference.

But Phnom Penh was getting to be a frightening place. The government security apparatus was starting to arrest people he knew; and the murderous Khmer Rouge communist guerillas were closing their vise grip on the city. Branfman went back to Bangkok and up to Nakhom Phanom, on the Thai bank of the Mekong, within sight of some dramatic karst ridges on the Laos side.

Until the war Nakhom Phanom had been a sleepy town with a few thousand people and some shops around a central square. Now with the American air base nearby, the central square pulsed with rock 'n' roll from the King Diamond, the Shindig, and other go-go bars. The Honey Massage Parlor sold raffle tickets: first prize- a woman and a room for the night, both free; second prize, a free woman for the night but the client had to pay for the room; third prize, a two-hour massage. In other red-light establishments crewcut American airmen viewed through one-way mirrors a roomful of the available women and chose them according to the numbered tags they were wearing. Hard drugs— heroin— contributed to the degradation.

Branfman, who was freelancing for Jack Anderson's syndicated column, decided to get on the base, which was off-limits to journalists, and into Blue Chip. An American Peace Corps volunteer acquaintance took him to a dope house where airmen passed off-duty hours. On a table inside were a pile of marijuana and some pills. Everyone was sitting around quietly being stoned. Branfman sat there with them,

getting high and talking a little but not bring intrusive. Everybody was deferring to one airman who didn't say much but was obviously the unofficial leader. On his second day in the dope house, the guy asked him who he was, and through a stoned fog Branfman gave his rap about Project Air War and trying to expose the bombing by getting into Blue Chip. The off-duty airman said he worked there.

On a quiet Sunday morning they went on the base, which was surrounded by a chain-link fence with barbed wire and guarded. The airman knew the outer gate guard, who waved them past, even though Branfman was wearing civilian clothes. They signed into the building that held all the electronics. They walked down a hall, and then a security policeman came up and asked Branfman where he was from. The airman told the security policeman to stop being nosy. The cop, who was about their own age, apologized. It turned out that he bought his own dope from the airman and didn't want to alienate his source.

They went into a room with console after console. There was hardly anybody around. The airman pushed a switch, and out came the live sound of birds twittering a hundred miles to the east on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Then the airman put on a tape recorded earlier that morning from another location. Branfman heard voices speaking Vietnamese. With all its acoustic, seismic, and magnetic sensors, the U.S. Air Force had a good idea where the North Vietnamese were on the Trail. It just had never been able to do much about them.

They went into another room, where Branfman was introduced as a new man just in from Saigon to a pleasant and courteous elderly officer. This man was the "bombing officer" for Cambodia, who verified targets for the pilots. Branfman asked whether the pilots ever called in before they bombed the villages. The bombing officer said, Yes, sometimes. Are they worried about bombing civilians? Branfman asked. Oh no, replied the coordinator. They just want me to check for Agency ground teams. We care about them. We don't know anything about civilians down there.

They went into a big room two stories high with a map of Indochina on one wall, showing the sorties and bombing missions under way. This was the command center, Blue Chip. Rows of

consoles faced the wall map and people sat in front of the screens talking quietly and intently on telephones. Nobody was talking loudly and they were all intent on what they were doing. Over in the corner stood a ramrod-straight air force general. watching.

The command center was a quiet place. There were no screams. There were no bodies being blown apart. There was no blood, or passion. And yet in his mind's eye Branfman saw bodies and people dying. To the uniformed men sitting at their consoles, bombing was just a pencil notation or two, a set of coordinates on a map. He was sure that it had never occurred to them that real people with wives and children died in the forests because of their decisions. He stood in the control room with the eeriest feeling that he had gotten to the very heart of the mystery, only to find nothing there.

There was no evil magician. There was no all-powerful man pulling strings. Blue Chip was just one more part of some vast network. The air force people were polite and hardworking. And the work they did was somehow not all that different from work that everybody else did. Just like Wall Street. Just like the Garment District, where his own father worked. They were doing their jobs, and nothing more.

As Branfman stood there, an air force supervisor turned around, looked at him, pointed his finger, and said, "You, who are you? What are you doing here?"

"New troop, sir, said the airman. "Just in from Saigon. I'm showing him around."

'All right," said the supervisor, with barely concealed annoyance. 'Would you guys just mind? We get an awful lot of visitors in here, and it's awfully hard to work. Would you just move over there?" He indicated a spot in the corner.

They shuffled off to the corner, watched for a couple more minutes, and then sauntered out of the building.

... Senator William Fulbright, head of The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, still held a grudge against Sullivan for his slickly evasive testimony years before. Fulbright also held up the nomination of Sullivan's successor as Laos ambassador, G. McMurtrte Godley, to be assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern affairs.

The opinion-makers of the press chimed in with their disapproval of the two nominees. Most remarkably, Anthony Lewis of The New York Times wrote a column condemning Sullivan and Godley as war criminals. The two ambassadors, Lewis wrote, "played a decisive part in what must qualify as the most appalling episode of lawless cruelty in American history, the bombing of Laos." In the Sullivan and Godley years, from 1964 to 1973, the U.S. military dropped almost two million tons of bombs on Laos, which worked out to two thirds of a ton for every man, woman, and child. Few Americans had allowed the bombing of Laos to enter their consciousness, but it was even worse than the horrors next door in South Vietnam, Lewis wrote.

He continued, the human results of being the most heavily bombed country in the history of the world were expectedly pitiful. They are described without rancor—almost unbearably so—in a small book that will go down as a classic. It is Voices From the Plain of Jars, edited by Fred Branfman, in which the villagers of Laos themselves describe what the bombers did to their civilization. No American should be able to read that book without weeping at his country's arrogance."

The columnist concluded that "Sullivan and Godley have the blood of more innocent human beings on their hands than just about anyone who has ever served as an American Foreign Service officer." That was a questionable assertion, because neither man had had the war entirely within his grasp. But a strange kind of justice had been meted out in the establishment press. Two career foreign service men had been condemned, and scruffy, rebellious Fred Branfman had been raised above them, and praised.

When the Vietnam War ended in 1975, Fred Branfman moved to California. He worked for Tom Hayden, the antiwar radical who had entered slate politics, while his wife, Thoa, looked after the

Hayden/Jane Fonda children. After that, he was an adviser to California's Governor Jerry Brown. Then he worked for Senator Gary Hart's presidential campaign until Hart self-destructed with the revelations of his sexual affairs. Politically, Branfman was moving steadily from the far left toward the center; and it became easier for some of his old critics to see that perhaps he had been patriotic all along, even if his understanding of the national interest was different from theirs.

Divorced, Branfman went back to Washington, D.C., where he started a nonprofit organization called Rebuild America. whose agenda was restructuring the U.S. economy with fiber-optic information freeways. industry-led consortia, an industrial policy for government, and so on.

Branfman remained an idealist who was always a step ahead of reality, always wanting the nation to improve itself. Shortly before the Clinton Administration came along and pushed for some of the same causes. Branfman dismantled Rebuild America. By then he was spending most of his time on a personal quest. He went on meditation retreats. He traveled to Hungary to learn from a spiritual teacher there. He went to India, and from there back to Laos and to the Plain of Jars. He visited a cave where American bombs had killed a large number of Laotians twenty years before. He felt that he had spent much of his life trying to answer philosophical questions that the Laos bombing had raised. Why does man hurt his own race? What does that say about mankind's place in the universe?

"History is usually told from the air," Branfman wrote from his travels. "We reconstruct it from the top down—as we look into the minds of leaders and discover their originally decent motivations and the constraints and pressure under which they operated. But I didn't learn history that way in Laos. I learned it in the eyes of the Laotian peasants who didn't know where America was, let alone why its leaders dropped bombs that blew their grandmothers to bits, burned their children alive, or blew the heads off their brides before their eyes. I learned it in the eyes of folks who were driven underground like animals for years, saw everything they had destroyed, and could still be more decent, loving and gentle than any people I have ever met.

"Never this century has there been so much bombing for so long in such secrecy by such a great power against so weak a people," Branfman continued. "Nine years of bombing, two million tons of bombs, whole rural societies wiped off the map, hundreds of thousands of peasants treated like herds of animals in a Clockwork Orange fantasy of an aerial African hunting safari."

He believed that the American leaden who bombed Laos acted as human monsters. "That is, they committed monstrous acts, killing thousands and thousands of innocent human beings, in violation of the rules of war. I say this without bearing personal animosity to the gentlemen in question in Laos. Indeed I see them today as rather interesting and often endearing chaps in their non-bombing Laos roles." Branfman said he admires Robert McNamara and MacGeorge Bundy, two of the original architects of the Vietnam War, for their later work on nuclear nonproliferation. Likewise, he appreciates Bill Sullivan in retirement for having pushed for normalization of relations with Hanoi. "I would look forward to spending a night on the town with Tony Poe, Secord, or any of the other boys.

... And I say this without questioning their motivation. Indeed, I am perfectly willing to admit that it was, at least in many cases, no better or worse than my own. I have been persuaded that those on the ground who really hated communism were at least as 'idealistic' as those of us who opposed the war. And I am even more than willing to entertain the notion that I, too, am capable of acting monstrously in the unlikely event that the U.S. Air Force was placed at my disposition.

"And I say this without the need any longer to make the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese more 'right' than we. Events since the war have shown that the Vietnamese and Pathet Lao probably would have behaved just as badly had they been the more powerful parties. If the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese were more heroic during the war, it was largely due to circumstance— a successful guerilla war against foreigners required doing more to secure the willing allegiance of villagers. They didn't have the technology to drop millions of tons of bombs as did we—if they had they might well have used it.

"Indeed, all these caveats are precisely the point. What is most significant about Laos is these monstrous acts were committed by decent, not evil, men."