

# The New York Times

Published every day by The New York Times Company

ADOLPH S. OCHS, *Publisher 1896-1935*

ARTHUR HAYS SULZBERGER, *Publisher 1935-1961*

ORVILLE E. DRYFOOS, *Publisher 1961-1967*



## No More Vietnams

A determination to avoid "another Vietnam" is the principal impulse behind the amendment to the Defense Appropriations Act barring the use of its funds to introduce American ground combat troops into Laos or Thailand. The consensus in Washington and the country on this issue was indicated by the 73-to-17 vote for the Senate rider and, even more, by the alacrity with which the White House and its supporters on Capitol Hill joined to preface the action with a statement that it was "in line with the expressed intention of the President."

The Nixon Administration would like the amendment to be taken as a show of bipartisan unity behind the President's policy in Southeast Asia. But its legislative history—especially its origin among liberal Senators of both parties who have doubts about the clandestine American military operations in Laos and other aspects of Asian policy—suggests that it represents a "reassertion of Congressional prerogatives." That is the view, among others, of Senator Frank Church of Idaho, the amendment's chief author.

For the first time teeth have been put in the National Commitments Resolution adopted by the Senate last spring. That resolution expressed the Senate's view that national commitments to use or promise the use of American armed forces abroad should be undertaken only with the prior consent of Congress.

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A constitutional issue of grave importance is involved. While Congress declares war and approves treaties, successive Chief Executives have progressively expanded the power of the President, as Commander-in-Chief, to make the nation's foreign and defense policies and to involve the country in undeclared wars. The semi-surreptitious manner in which President Johnson took the United States into a large-scale land war in Vietnam has led Congress to re-examine its own powers and responsibilities.

Congress can intervene in policy determination through control of the purse strings, but that is a more drastic remedy than most legislators favor once military action is initiated. Last week's amendment to the Defense Appropriations Act was carefully drafted to avoid impeding American-supported military operations already under way in Laos and Thailand while, at the same time, warning against their expansion into American ground combat without Congressional consultation.

The paucity of past consultation lies at the heart of the matter. It stemmed in part from the breakdown in relations between President Johnson and the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Fulbright. In Laos there has been an additional factor. American military intervention since the Kennedy Administration has taken various forms of disguise to avoid open violation of the Geneva accords—which would embarrass the neutralist government of Laos, despite prior violations by the Communists.

American bombing of the Ho Chi Minh supply trails through Laos linking North Vietnam to the South has been common knowledge since 1964. But few members of Congress have been aware of the extent of C.I.A. involvement with the clandestine army of Meo hill tribesmen, who have stepped up their operations considerably this year. American bombing in support of Meo and other Laotian Army operations reportedly has increased tenfold or more in the last six months. News reports of increased activity on the Laotian front and inquiries by the Symington subcommittee into American commitments in Asia generally have combined to stir concern that Laos might be turning into another Vietnam.

The secret session of the Senate on Laos last week has helped to allay this concern, in part through the Administration's renewed pledges not to involve American ground combat forces. The worst pitfalls of Vietnam—over-Americanization and over-militarization of the conflict—have apparently been avoided so far in Laos.

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Both sides know there can be no solution in Laos until the Vietnam war is settled. The Communists and the neutralist government in Vientiane engage in military and political skirmishing, but neither has attempted to push the other to the wall. The Communists have stayed out of the Mekong Valley for the most part. The Royal Laotian Army and the Meo forces have made no attempt to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trails on the ground.

But as long as the war in Vietnam drags on, escalation of the Laotian conflict will remain a possibility. The prohibition against American ground combat forces without Congressional consent should help stave off that possibility. More important, it establishes a valuable precedent in restoring a form of Congressional oversight that is the country's best guarantee against another Vietnam.