

U.S. Officials Say Invasion Of Laos Is Still Possible

By **TERENCE SMITH** FEB 5 1971
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WASHINGTON, Feb. 4 — Officials continued today to hold open the possibility of a South Vietnamese strike against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos.

They cautioned against published reports that the 20,000 South Vietnamese troops along the Laotian Frontier had been ordered by the White House not to cross the border.

Reliable sources indicated that no such final decision had been made. They said there would be little military purpose in mounting a large operation merely to establish control over the uninhabited and strategically insignificant northwestern corner of South Vietnam.

The White House press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, declined to say whether the South Vietnamese units might enter Laos, but he told reporters, "You have to keep in mind that this is the first stage of the operations in Military Region I."

Military Region I is the designation for the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam, all of which border the southern Laotian panhandle.

Mr. Ziegler said the enemy had been concentrating supplies and troops throughout the

panhandle and that these posed a threat to the security of Military Region I. But asked about the plans of the South Vietnamese troops, he said. "I am not going to project what the future movements would or would not be."

Asked what the American role might be in such an operation, Mr. Ziegler said that, as a matter of general policy, American air power would be used to support South Vietnamese forces when they take action to prohibit the re-establishment of enemy sanctuaries. No United States ground forces would be used, he said.

Although the six-day news embargo on the campaign was lifted early today, spokesmen still refused to address themselves to the central questions raised by the operation:

Has President Nixon decided to authorize a South Vietnamese strike into Laos, or does the decision remain to be made?

What factors are being considered in making the decision?

Has the start of the second stage of the operation been delayed for some reason?

To all of these questions, spokesmen at State and Defense

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Concern in Congress

Meanwhile, the possibility of a South Vietnamese strike into Laos continued to stir concern in Congress. The Senate Majority Leader, Mike Mansfield, said such a strike might extend the Southeast Asian war into Thailand.

"It is not very far across the Laotian panhandle to Thailand, only a few miles," he said.

"My concern is that the fighting might spill over into Thailand, and it is my understanding that we have a pretty good commitment to the Thais."

Discussing the new campaign, Mr. Mansfield said it sounded like a "tired replay" of an earlier period in the war.

"We're hearing all the familiar names again," he said, "like Camp Carroll, the Rockpile and Khesanh," referring to abandoned American combat bases that have been re-occupied.

The Senate Minority Leader, Hugh Scott, said he had been assured that whatever military actions are taken, they would not violate Congressional restrictions on the use of American ground forces in Laos or Thailand.

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departments as well as the White House declined comment.

The spokesmen said the decision to lift the embargo had been made by Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the commander of the United States forces in South Vietnam. They insisted that the blackout had been imposed for purely military reasons.

Mr. Ziegler conceded that the embargo had caused confusion during the last week, but he said "the fact that there was no loss of lives in this operation justifies the judgment of General Abrams."