

Purpose in Laos: A Shorter War

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Though the official rationale has often been given before in the Indochina war, it was put forward again today without apology or reservation: The purpose of widening the war is to shorten it.

That was the reason why the Johnson Administration undertook the bombing of North Vietnam, a calculation ultimately abandoned as mistaken. That was the reason,

too, for the Nixon Administration's surge into Cambodia last May, a move that, with fingers crossed, is tentatively regarded now as a success.

And that was the essence of all the reasoning offered here and in Saigon today for the allied thrust into Laos. By pushing the frontiers of combat into Cambodia and Laos, it is felt, the South Vietnamese can buy time for reconstruction and political consolidation on their own territory and can also deny to the North Vietnamese the chance to rebuild a menacing coalition with indigenous southern elements.

Success, the argument runs, would further complicate Hanoi's already difficult supply problems and greatly postpone its chances of major attack in either Cambodia or South Vietnam. Failure, it is said, could be costly to the South Vietnamese but would not leave them much worse off for the long run than inaction.

The idea for the push into Laos is said to have been President Nguyen Van Thieu's. But President Nixon takes clear responsibility for his own endorsement and appears to have managed the affair in a way that minimizes his own risks.

Last April, after President Nixon ordered the incursion into Cambodia, he delivered to the country an apocalyptic address suggesting a giant test of will and fortitude. This time he said nothing directly and let his aides portray the incursion as merely a large but limited tactical exercise. Indeed, when the operation first took shape 10 days ago, Mr. Nixon conspicuously went for a rest in the sun in the Virgin Islands.

In the week that followed elaborate censorship on press coverage of the event is now acknowledged to have built up an unwanted sense of drama. There is no evidence so far, however, that the period of official silence masked any hesitation or unscheduled change of plans. And the week-long speculation about an attack into Laos, although apparently unplanned, served the Administration's purpose of fully preparing the country for the move.

The Democrats, led by their National Committee and by former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, were quick to stake out a position of critical skepticism today. But their purpose was not so much to incite a calm public against the policy as to express underlying uneasiness.

In the military area, hardly anyone here was prepared to question the President's tactical judgments. There was no question of the desirability of choking off enemy supply movements, if that were shown to be possible, even for a limited time.

On the legal side, even Mr. Nixon's critics conceded that he had observed the letter of legislation adopted last year to forbid the use of American ground forces in Laos. In terms of international law, no one was disposed to quarrel with the Administration's use of the traditional concept that invasion of neutral territory is permissible in self-defense when the host government proves unable to curb the menacing activity of another belligerent.

Nor could the United States be legally charged with violation of the 1962 accord on Laotian neutrality, whose provision for the withdrawal of all foreign forces was never observed by North Vietnam.

Helpless and Frustrated

As for politics, the most dovish members of the Senate, led by Senator J. W. Fulbright, described themselves as essentially helpless and frustrated. They have long urged the President simply to withdraw under any agreement that protects the departing American forces, without trying to provide for the long-run viability of the Saigon Government and its army. But he has rejected that approach and defended it with

the promise that American ground troops will continue to be withdrawn.

Mr. Nixon did not add to his influence in Congress by again refusing to consult its members before the move into Laos. But it is doubtful that those who question the premises of his Vietnam policy could have been swayed to support a tactical extension into Laos.

There is little chance that American casualties will increase dramatically as a result of the operation. Nor is there much likelihood that the President's pattern of withdrawal FROM Vietnam will be hindered by it.

The only real misgivings heard around Washington related to the larger concept of continuing the war — even after Americans disengage from ground combat — that is served by the thrust into Laos.

Further Sacrifice Seen

When leading Democrats assert that the way out of Vietnam does not run through Cambodia or Laos, they are saying that two precariously neutral countries of Indochina are being progressively sacrificed to the defense of South Vietnam. They are also saying that enlarging the field of combat, and the paths of destruction, is only a further mortgaging of American air power, supplies and money for the indefinite future.

They are saying that if, in retaliation or frustration, Hanoi should move its forces even deeper into Laos toward Thailand or should reopen some of the infiltration routes through the demilitarized zone along the border between North Vietnam and South Vietnam, then American air power would have to rain destruction on an even larger area.

In all, the reaction here bore a remarkable resemblance to the reaction to the latest manne excursion to the moon. There was much less excitement than during previous escalations. There was a vague feeling that the mission may have value in the sense of redeeming prior investments. And there was an underlying doubt about whether the long-range purpose and price would ever prove to have been worthwhile.

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QUIET TIME: Americans sit around tank in South Vietnam two miles from Laotian border

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