

Laird and Rogers, Explaining Drive, Disarm Still Skeptical Critics on Hill

By JOHN W. FINNEY

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 9—The Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense went to Capitol Hill today with the message that the incursion into Laos would insure American troop withdrawals from Vietnam and shorten the war.

They left the Congressional Vietnam critics, while still skeptical, disarmed for the moment over the intervention. In the process they seemed to modify the previous Administration commitment that American troops would be largely removed from a combat role in Vietnam by this May.

In a coordinated Administration campaign, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird was assigned the mission of explaining the operation to the generally friendly Senate and House Armed Services Committees. Secretary of State William P. Rogers was given the somewhat more difficult assignment of briefing the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"We have not widened the war," Mr. Laird said before television cameras outside the Senate Armed Services Committee. "To the contrary, we have shortened it."

The operation in Laos, the Defense Secretary said, "will insure the success of Vietnamization and make possible the withdrawal of additional American troops."

Mr. Laird predicted that the Administration would meet or beat its goal of withdrawing 50,000 more troops by May 1, reducing the number of troops in Vietnam to 284,000. Mr. Rogers, who appeared before the cameras outside the Sen-



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South Vietnamese infantrymen approaching the Loatian border on Route 9 on Monday at start of the incursion.

ate Foreign Relations Committee, offered the additional prediction that American troops "by and large" would be out of a combat role in Vietnam by the middle of this year.

Scott Gives View

At the White House, meanwhile, the Presidential press secretary, Ronald L. Ziegler, said that 40,000 to 50,000 combat troops would remain in Vietnam after the scheduled withdrawals were completed in April.

Mr. Ziegler did not offer a precise definition of the duties of the remaining combat troops. Other troops remaining in Vietnam after May 1, Mr. Ziegler said, will be artillery units and infantrymen with the assignment of protecting American installations.

When the Rogers and Ziegler statements created some confusion, Senator Hugh Scott, the Republican leader in the Senate, appeared in the press gallery there to explain that it would be "midsummer" before American troops were largely withdrawn from a combat role. Speaking on the basis of information that he said had been supplied by the White House, Senator Scott declared that while some 45,000 ground combat troops would remain in Vietnam after May 1, it was expected that their number would be reduced to "a very bare minimum" by February or March of 1972.

As recently as Jan. 29, Mr.

Rogers said that by May 1, "we will have our troops largely out of the combat role."

The apparent Administration move to soften its previous commitment, in the opinion of some State Department officials, stems from a concern that the operation in Laos may prove more prolonged and less successful than hoped, thus complicating the withdrawal program.

Operation Schedule

Mr. Laird said that the Laotian operation was "going forward on the schedule the South Vietnamese Joint general staff and commanders in the field outlined—it is on time."

But after the Laird briefing, both Senator John Stennis, the Armed Services Committee chairman, and Senator Henry M. Jackson, a senior Democrat on the committee, warned that the South Vietnamese troops might run into what Senator Stennis described as "real trouble" in Laos.

Senator Jackson said he expected some "heavy fighting" as North Vietnamese troops put up a "strong stand."

"This will be a good test" of South Vietnamese combat capability, Senator Jackson said. "If South Vietnamese troops can't carry out this kind of operation, it puts into question their ability to defend their own country."

Both Mr. Laird and Mr. Rogers said that the Admin-

istration, in compliance with Congressional restrictions, had no intention of sending American ground combat troops into Laos if the South Vietnamese ran into trouble.

Approval from Senators

The operation in Laos, as explained by Mr. Laird, drew general approval from members of the Armed Services Committee.

Senator Stennis said that, "undoubtedly there has been a turn of events for the better," and predicted that the operation, "if successful, could be the one that cut the jugular vein."

Senator Jackson said "this particular operation should have been carried out five or six years ago."

From the Foreign Relations Committee, Mr. Rogers said he found "a very constructive" response, with several Senators describing the Laotian intervention as "a wise move."

Senator J. W. Fulbright, the committee chairman, said the Secretary made the point repeatedly that "the President has made very clear that the Administration is acting in a way that we consider to be in the national interest."

Senator Fulbright said that he had "very grave reservations" that the operation was in the national interest, but beyond that, in contrast to his past outspokenness, he refrained from further criticism.