

VOICES OPTIMISM

At News Parley, He Cautions Hanoi on Talks in Paris

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Transcript of news conference
is on Pages 14 and 15.

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 17 — President Nixon said today that he would put no limit on the use of American air power in Indochina except that the use of tactical nuclear weapons was banned. He also refused to rule out a South Vietnamese thrust into North Vietnam.

In his first public comments on the Indochina war since the South Vietnamese, with American air support, entered southern Laos, Mr. Nixon was modestly optimistic about the operation so far, but said that he expected increasingly stiff resistance because the enemy forces "have to fight here or give up the struggle to conquer South Vietnam."

The President responded to a wide range of questions on Indochina that occupied three-fourths of a 40-minute impromptu news conference held in his White House office without television cameras.

Says Time Runs Out

In the session, which found Mr. Nixon in a fairly relaxed and talkative mood, he warned the North Vietnamese that time was running out for significant negotiations with the United States, but he held out little hope for a diplomatic breakthrough in Paris. [Question 17, Page 14.]

Mr. Nixon recalled his past declarations on "the policy of the President taking action if he finds that the North Vietnamese are undertaking actions which threaten our remaining forces in South Vietnam."

NIXON REFUSES TO RULE OUT WIDER AIR ROLE IN THE WAR OR A SAIGON PUSH TO NORTH

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CONFER ON ALLIED DRIVE: Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, center, greeting Lieut. Gen. J. W. Sutherland as General Abrams arrived in Quangtri, South Vietnam, on Tuesday to discuss the Laos operation. General Abrams is U.S. commander in Vietnam. Behind him, wearing beret, is Lieut. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, joint commander of the operation.

Asked about the limits of such action, he said: "We are not going to use ground forces in Laos. We are not going to use advisers in Laos with the South Vietnamese forces. We are not going to use ground forces in Cambodia or advisers in Cambodia, as we have previously indicated, and we have no intention, of course, of using ground forces in North Vietnam.

"I am not going to place any limitation upon the use of air-

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power" he added, "except, of course, to rule out a rather ridiculous suggestion that is made from time to time that our air power might include the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

"This has been speculated on for a period of five years and I have said for a period of five years that it is not an area where the use of nuclear weapons, in any form, is either needed or would be wise.

"As far as our airpower is concerned, it will be directed against those military activities which I determined are directed against and thereby threaten our remaining forces in South Vietnam." [Q. 2.]

On the military front, he said American troop withdrawals would continue on schedule this year and might well be accelerated in 1972 if the Laotian operation succeeded. Yet in response to a later question he asserted that some American troops would remain until Hanoi released American prisoners. [Question 7 and 10.]

Yet what attracted the most immediate attention here was others. [Questions 7 and 10.] the President's reservation to himself of wide latitude on the use of American air power — and his placing no restrictions on South Vietnamese forces — in the event the enemy undertook "actions which threaten our remaining forces in South Vietnam."

Wide Range of Options

Mr. Nixon did not predict that the South Vietnamese would invade North Vietnam, nor did he forecast a resumption of wide bombing of the North by American planes. But in response to several questions he left himself a wide range of options. Asked about future South Vietnamese operations, for example, he responded:

"I won't speculate on what South Vietnam may decide to do with regard to a possible incursion into North Vietnam in order to defend their national security." [Question 1.]

At another point, Mr. Nixon said the South Vietnamese would withdraw from Laos once they had achieved their present mission of cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But still later, when asked whether he would "restrain" the South Vietnamese from moving north across the demilitarized zone, he refused again to "speculate" on what Saigon might do. [Question 16.]

He added: "South Vietnam now, as we withdraw, has an ever increasing responsibility to defend itself. South Vietnam will have to make decisions with regard to its ability to defend itself."

By these and other comments, Mr. Nixon left the impression that the South Vietnamese could do what they wished on their own initiative, as long as the operation did not include Americans. But he also emphasized, at the end of the news conference, that any operation that involved a joint commitment—the use of American air support, for instance—

"could not be undertaken without our approval." [Question 25.]

In terming suggestion for use of nuclear arms "ridiculous," Mr. Nixon mentioned Hans J. Morgenthau. He suggested, in an article in this week's New Republic, that the use of tactical nuclear weapons might be one outcome of the trend of Indochina policy. Mr. Nixon said he regarded the use of nuclear weapons as both unnecessary and unwise.

Sees Inhibition at Hanoi

In discussing airpower, Mr. Nixon said he thought that the threat of renewed, large-scale bombing of the North—suspended in 1968 by President Johnson under an informal arrangement with the enemy—had inhibited Hanoi from sending troops across the demilitarized zone to attack Americans near the border.

"I think the very fact that the North Vietnamese know that I intend to take strong action to deal with that incursion means that they are not going to take it," he said. "If they do, I can assure you that—no, I don't want to assure you, I simply want to make the record clear, that I would not be bound by any so-called understandings, which they have already violated, at the time of the bombing halt." [Question 19.]

The President also sought to offer reassurances—as his spokesmen at the White House and State Department have done in recent days—that the operation in Laos would not invite retaliation by Communist China.

"As you know," he said, "the Communist Chinese have been operating in northern Laos for some time, but this action is not directed against Communist China. It is directed against the North Vietnamese who are pointed towards South Vietnam and towards Cambodia.

"Consequently, I do not believe the Communist Chinese have any reason to interpret this as a threat against them or any reason therefore to react to it." [Question 4.]

Evaluates Moves in Laos

Mr. Nixon gave a brief evaluation of the operation in Laos, about which little specific news has emerged from the scene.

The President said he had received a battle report this morning from Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, American commander in Vietnam. According to the report, he said, the South Vietnamese have cut three major "trails" leading from Tchepone into Cambodia and South Vietnam. He was equally encouraged, he said, by General Abrams's testimony that the South Vietnamese forces were conducting themselves "in a superior way" and "holding their own against enemy attack." [Question 5.]

He noted, however, that the South Vietnamese had encountered heavy resistance on the road leading to Tchepone. But he said he was not surprised, because the paths and trails that make up the Ho Chi Minh Trail represent the last remaining "life line" for the enemy into South Vietnam, and therefore "they have to fight here

or give up the struggle to conquer South Vietnam."

Pressed to define the time and scope of the operation, Mr. Nixon said, in effect, that it would last as long as required to accomplish the mission, or until the heavy rains came, at the end of April or early in May.

Mr. Nixon's assertion that the enemy must "fight here or give up the struggle" was only one of several hints that he attached great importance to the drive into Laos.

The news conference was unusual in several respects. It was one of few such sessions that the President has consented to hold in his office without television cameras, and it was called on very short notice—in order, Mr. Nixon explained afterward, to keep the number of newsmen in his office at a manageable level. About 40 reporters crowded around his

desk. The President stood behind the desk throughout.

The questioning was spirited, and Mr. Nixon seemed to welcome the give-and-take, as well as the follow-up questions, which are rarely posed at the more normal televised news conferences in the East Room of the White House. He said afterward that he would be experimenting with a variety of settings in an effort to provide a more frequent exchange of views with newsmen, including smaller news conferences with cameras, television interviews with a single reporter, conventional East Room conferences, and small gatherings similar to the one today.

The President has been under increasingly heavy criticism from newsmen and others for what they regard as his insularity, and the session may have been the beginning of a more vigorous attempt on his part to meet those complaints.
