

Laos: View From the Pentagon

FEB 25 1971

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24—The Nixon Administration, along with everyone else here, recognized today that the long fuse of antiwar protest was smoldering agin in Congress and on the campuses, fanned in part by the skimpiness of the information from the battlefield in Laos and the spreading impression that all is not well there.

Merger
News

The Pentagon's response was a 90-minute news conference on the course of battle, offering some modest and vague claims of success and some careful warnings that more tough fighting lies ahead. Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird finally ended the exchange, long before the questions had run out. As both the Secretary and some of the reporters made plain, concern about the Government's "credibility" was once again in the air.

The result was at least a better picture of the battlefield and the difficulty of trying to sever North Vietnam's many supply routes through the tangled Laostian jungle. Mr. Laird did not acknowledge any setbacks or betray any anxiety about the South Vietnamese forces now committed inside Laos, but he did preface his briefing with a extensive lecture on how important it was for Americans to "face up to realities" about Indochina.

Mr. Laird, in turn, demonstrated that the Administration was again facing its own reality about the war — the intimate connection between battlefield news and popular impatience with the war. For a week after the South Vietnamese push into Laos, President Nixon's critics here felt at once frustrated and disarmed. His confidence last week that he was striking another blow for quick disengagement had been difficult to challenge despite the widespread fear of more costly involvement.

The Temper Changes

In just a few days, however, the temper of the capital changed. There was the news of severe casualties in one South Vietnamese battalion. There were announcements of new "protective reaction" bombings at key supply points in North Vietnam. And there were indications that the South

Vietnamese main column had stalled or stopped considerably short of its objectives in Laos.

There had been no good explanation of the objectives of battle and there were thus no real measures of success or failure. Reporters in the war zone had difficulty getting near the main units.

The "teach-in" — organizers on American campuses swung into action. Senate critics, including the Democratic aspirants for the Presidency, renewed the calls for ending the war by resolution of Congress. John W. Gardner swung his "people's lobby," Common Cause, into action. Once again recognizing its vulnerability, the White House had to devise its own "protective reaction" campaign.

"Whatever the day-to-day reports may indicate," Mr. Laird insisted, "the unassailable fact is that U.S. involvement in the war in Southeast Asia is going down, down, down, and we continue to follow that policy."

Then, with Lieut. Gen. John W. Vogt Jr., director of the Joint Staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, interpreting the battle area maps, he tried to give the most favorable possible reading of the current situation.

Although President Nixon said last week that the battle for the trails in Laos could wholly defeat Hanoi's ambitions in Indochina, the Pentagon briefers suggested today that a new battle in Cambodia, involving even larger forces for both sides, should perhaps be regarded as more important.

The South Vietnamese have paused on the push into Laos, they said, not because of any blocking action by the enemy, but merely to take stock of the enemy's possible counteractions. The casualties, they

said, though severe for one of Saigon's units, were running 7 and 8 to 1 in favor of what are called the "friendlies" and American helicopter losses in Laos were really no worse than at comparable periods last year.

Mr. Laird said the only purpose of the Los push was to disrupt North Vietnam's supply movements and this was being done. Supply movements had been reduced, he said, but he did not know by how much and refused even to estimate whether by a quarter, by half or more.

By way of specific achievements in disruption, the Secretary cited the blockage of one major supply trail (Route 92) and the cutting of a 150-mile gasoline pipeline from North Vietnam about 25 miles from its southern terminus. He said some of Saigon's units were also harassing points near the junction of Route 92 and another major supply route, 914, but refused to estimate the degree of disruption thus achieved.

American air power was not impeded by the weather, the officials said, and would be a major factor if North Vietnam felt the need to divert supply traffic to more exposed routes farther west.

Elements of at least six regiments, meanwhile, have been added to the North Vietnamese forces defending the trails and give every indication of an intent to fight. The shift of these forces into Laos suggests that Hanoi was not deterred by allied warnings last week that the South Vietnamese may also move directly against North Vietnam.

It took a long and sometimes heated interrogation to get these official reports on the record. Whether they will satisfy the now restless critics was doubtful.