

NIXON AIDES HOLD TO VIEWS ON LAOS

They Use Agnew's Phrase
of 'Orderly Retreat' but
Acknowledge Doubts

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WASHINGTON, March 21—Administration officials continued to maintain today that the quickening South Vietnamese withdrawals from Laos represented an "orderly retreat," not a rout, and that the gains in the operation still outweighed the losses.

But in private they acknowledged that a series of difficult and embarrassing questions have arisen. They suggested that some answers or clarifications might be forthcoming tomorrow evening when President Nixon is to be interviewed on television by Howard K. Smith of the American Broadcasting Company.

For the time being, officials confined themselves to repeating Vice President Agnew's statement in Boston Friday that "contrary to reports that you noticed the last day or so in the papers, this was not a rout—this was an orderly retreat."

They also called attention to White House and Defense Department statements Thursday stressing the degree of disruption of the Communist supply trails in Laos.

Nixon Remarks Recalled

Officials said they were unable to reconcile the present military situation, including the rapid loss of fire bases by the South Vietnamese, with President Nixon's statement at his news conference on March 4 that "General Abrams tells me that in both Laos and Cambodia his evaluation after three weeks of fighting is that—to use his terms—the South Vietnamese by themselves can hack it, and they can give an even better account of themselves than the North Vietnamese units."

Mr. Nixon also said that Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, United States Commander in Vietnam, had reported, "Now in southern Laos and also in Cambodia, the South Vietnamese on the ground by themselves are taking on the very best units that the North Vietnamese can put in the field."

After discussions with Ad-

ministration officials several questions remained unanswered.

Why are South Vietnamese and United States military spokesmen in Saigon beginning to suggest that the Laos operation is already in its planned final phase? Earlier this month official sources told of plans for the South Vietnamese Army to remain in Laos until the monsoon season early in May. Was there a failure in military intelligence in the assessment of the North Vietnamese capability to strike back? Did allied intelligence anticipate Hanoi's extensive and virtually unprecedented use of tanks?

How were the North Vietnamese able to regroup not only in southern Laos but also

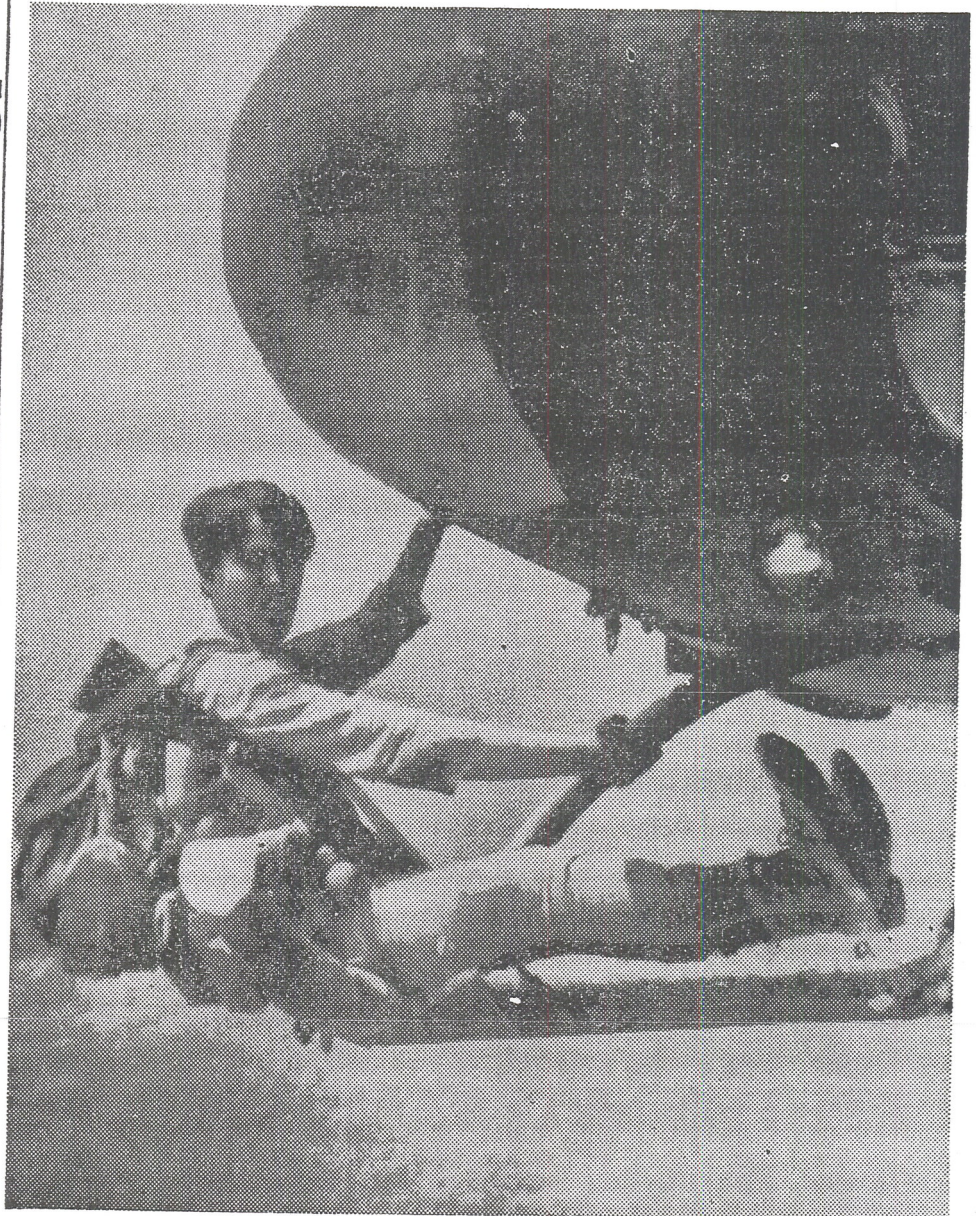
in northeast South Vietnam around Khesanh and how was Hanoi able to bring forth enough gunners and equipment to shell Khesanh despite the careful sweep in that area by American and South Vietnamese forces before the Laotian incursions?

Are there indications that the North Vietnamese plan to attack United States positions such as Khesanh after the Laotian operation is completed, or even before? Some Government analysts here are inclined to answer privately in the affirmative.

If American positions are attacked, what is likely to be the United States response?

In this connection, officials

noted Mr. Nixon's statement at the news conference that, "If I determine that increased infiltration from North Vietnam endangers our remaining forces in South Vietnam at a time when we were withdrawing, I would order attacks on the supply routes, to infiltration routes, on the military complexes, and I have done that in the past. I shall do so again if I determine that such activities by North Vietnam may endanger our remaining forces in South Vietnam, particularly as we are withdrawing."



DANGER SEAT TO SAFETY: A South Vietnamese soldier, perched on a landing skid of a U.S. helicopter, rides back to Hamngi during pullout of troops from fighting in Laos. U.S. pilots report that, in some cases, they had to kick off soldiers who clung to skids.

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