

MAR 7 1970

Vietnam Haunts Report on Laos

By MAX FRANKEL

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 6—

The ghosts of bitter memory in Vietnam haunt President Nixon's first formal report to the nation on Laos today.

Read one way, it is a statement that supports the critical observers in Congress who fear a further entrapment in distant war. Read another way, it

serves the Administration's contention that the lessons of the last five years have not been ignored.

News Analysis

The statement reveals much about the American involvement in Laos that has thus far been known only from the reports of enterprising newsmen. But it avoids some of the most difficult aspects of the situation, thus making it hard to balance the objectives and the risks of current policy.

The ghosts of the past run through the line of argument, for Mr. Nixon spoke of events in Laos in very much the same terms that President Lyndon B. Johnson used in speaking of events in South Vietnam:

Mr. Nixon said he had inherited a bad situation and felt bound to serve commitments and interests that his predecessors had already defined for the United States. He said that North Vietnam was entirely to blame for the breakdown of international agreements on a neutral Laos. He said American efforts were only a response to Hanoi's "open aggression" and he offered to restore the agreements if only North Vietnam would agree.

He said the American involvement in Laos was limited to the bombing of North Vietnam's infiltration routes to South Vietnam, the flying of combat air support missions on behalf of Laotian forces, the training and advising of Laotian troops by several hundred Americans on the ground and the supply of those forces by several hundred more Americans.

The air operations and "levels" of assistance have been increased only as North Viet-

President Speaks in Terms Similar to Those of Johnson

nam had increased the level of its aggression and the size of its forces to 67,000, the President said. But the number of Americans living in Laos has not increased in the last year. No American ground combat troops serve in Laos, Mr. Nixon said, and there are no plans to send any.

All this, he stated, was a pattern of aid that is limited, supportive and defensive aid, requested by a Laotian Government that Hanoi itself helped to form. The American goal in Laos is to reduce American involvement, the President said, not to increase it.

Different Names and Numbers

Change the names and some of the numbers and these formulations would read exactly like the ones that the Johnson Administration composed in the year preceding the massive American combat involvement in South Vietnam. That is why some Senators here have become alarmed and why they pressed so hard for a candid accounting from the Administration.

But in less conspicuous ways, Mr. Nixon tried also to suggest that the situation in Laos differs from that in South Vietnam in 1964 and 65, and that his approach differs from that of his predecessor:

He recalled President John F. Kennedy's formulation that the security of Southeast Asia would be endangered if Laos lost her neutral independence. But he did not define that independence as a vital American interest that would have to be defended against any challenge.

He justified American actions in Laos by citing evidence of North Vietnamese aggression, but he did not argue that past pledges or treaties required him to try to defeat that aggression at any cost.

He implied what other officials have long said outright, that the stakes in Laos for both North Vietnam and the United States are peripheral and related to their contest over South Vietnam.

And although he insisted that the bombing of the North Vietnamese infiltration routes was essential to protect American and allied lives in South Vietnam, he assured Hanoi that the combat support for the Laotians had "the one purpose" of defending the Laotian Government, and not therefore of contesting North Vietnam's control of the infiltration routes on the ground.

Some Questions Avoided

The President did not, however, deal with a series of critical questions that have been raised by members of Congress, diplomats and other observers here:

He did not deal with reports that American aid and advice had created a virtually separate army of tough Meo tribesmen and that this army, led by the flamboyant Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, has acquired a measure of independence from the Laotian Government in the choice of battle targets and objectives. Nor did Mr. Nixon discuss the degree of control Americans exercised over that army and over the air support missions flown by Americans from outside Laos.

In short, he did not deal with the principal fear of some Senators that the logic or illogic of battlefield requirements could deepen the American involvement well beyond present intentions in Washington.

Nor did the President deal directly with the widespread belief that a further North Vietnamese offensive in Laos, if it develops, would have the primarily political objective of forcing the United States to make concessions in the contest over South Vietnam.

Some officials here have said that Hanoi wishes to threaten the Government of Laos and the neighboring territory of Thailand as part of an effort

to force the United States to halt the massive bombing of the infiltration routes into South Vietnam.

Hanoi Goals Weighed

Other informed observers suspect that Hanoi wants to bargain for even larger stakes and to discredit Mr. Nixon's plan to turn over the fighting to the South Vietnamese if the Paris negotiations remain deadlocked. The threat to Laos, it is argued, is meant to prove that American withdrawal from South Vietnam without a peace settlement will not bring peace or stability to the region.

As Mr. Nixon acknowledged, the initiative in Laos is essentially Hanoi's. If his appeal for Soviet help and North Vietnamese restraint should fail, he would face some extremely difficult choices between acquiescence in Laos and accelerated military action against North Vietnam.

The problem is not that Laos could become another Vietnam, but that it is already very much a part of the agony of Vietnam.