

The Incursion Issue: Pro and Con

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 2—Several times American field commanders and rear-echelon planners have unsuccessfully requested authority to mount a ground thrust into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

As seen by some senior strategists here, primarily military but with a sprinkling of well-placed civilian officials, the arguments for such a move have become more

New Analysis impelling and the objections less so. The primary objectives of a drive into Laos, they say, would be to keep North Vietnam off balance and unable to stage major offensives as the American troop withdrawal continues and to improve South Vietnam's ability to protect itself, particularly 18 to 24 months from now when the vast bulk of United States ground and air power has been withdrawn.

These planners point out that Saigon is not being provided any substantial force of bombers to continue striking truck convoys along the Ho Chi Minh Trail once the Americans are gone.

"But if Hanoi is put on notice that the South Vietnamese are capable of ground thrusts across the trail," said one analyst, "it would be forced to pile its guards up and down the trail, and, more important, would have to face the danger that any future large-scale offensive in Cambodia or in southern South Vietnam might be imperiled by having its supply lines suddenly cut off from the rear."

Whether the current operation in the northwest corner of South Vietnam involvement on a move into Laos or not, there are growing indications that the Nixon Administration may well approve limited forays into Laos, as it did last spring into Cambodia.

It is understood that Gen. William C. Westmoreland, when he was commander of American forces in South Vietnam, insisted for some time on holding the Mannan outpost at Khesanh, about five miles east of the Laos border, as an ideal jumping off point for an opera-

Push Into Laos Was Barred on Several Occasions in Past

tion against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

This is a complex of two-lane roads and paths over which North Vietnam sends war supplies and reinforcements to its military units in southern Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam.

According to the most plausible theory about the operation now under way in South Vietnam, it was conceived as a two-stage affair.

The first would employ several thousand South Vietnamese from Khesanh, west to the border of enemy forces and to set up blocking positions in case Hanoi should decide to send fresh units south through the demilitarized zone straddling the border between North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

If this move was successful, permission might then be given for a substantially larger Saigon force, backed by heavy American air support, to move into Laos for a brief assault on the trail and its way stations, truck parks, storage sites and other facilities.

Military men say that if it is decided to establish a precedent for South Vietnamese ground assaults against the trail in Laos, it makes more sense to do it soon, while sizable American air power is available to provide close fire support and logistical help. And if such operations are to be carried out this year, they add, the best time would be during the current dry season, which lasts only about three more months in southern Laos.

Over the last few years the military has been repeatedly turned down on such requests for a variety of reasons.

Such a move, opponents said, would require sizable participation of American ground units and would only widen an already difficult-to-control battlefield.

The disruption of supply could be bypassed by the North Vietnamese either by shifting their supply routes farther west toward the Thai border, or by increasing supply by sea to

Cambodia and hence overland to their troops.

An overt move into Laos, the opponents warned, might undermine the useful facade of a neutralist regime there, perhaps giving Hanoi's troops an excuse openly to assault the Laotian capital of Vientiane in an effort to oust the neutralist government of Premier Souvanna Phouma.

But proponents of a Laotian campaign insist the situation has changed dramatically over the last several months.

Since last summer, they say, the South Vietnamese have demonstrated in Cambodia that they can operate independently of American ground troops, especially if American air support supplemented their own.

Since the coup that ousted Prince Norodom Sihanouk as Chief of State in Cambodia, that country's ports have been closed to enemy supply ships, although they concede that North Vietnamese probably would try to move their overland supply lines westward toward Thailand if routes closer to South Vietnam — painstakingly built up over a period of many years — were subject to repeated harassment on the ground.

These men concede that North Vietnamese troops have for some time had the ability to overwhelm the defenses of Vientiane but presumably have desisted for fear of a world outcry at open aggression in another state. Hanoi has denied it has troops outside its borders. The protests also suggest that Hanoi might fear that Thailand would send her regular forces into a battle so close to her territory.

Military planners say that while it would take somewhat more than a Vietnamese division to stage a raid and then pull out, it could take anywhere from three to five divisions to try to block the trail permanently. Thus, most military men prefer an in-and-out operation, at times and places of Saigon's choosing.

One officer, without commenting on whether current operations might be extended into Laos, declared: "Even if nothing of that sort happens now, we've already put a tremendous scare into them, forcing them to assume this could happen at any time; and that is not without value."