

# The New York Times

Published every day by The New York Times Company

ADOLPH S. OCHS, *Publisher 1896-1935*  
ARTHUR HAYS SULZBERGER, *Publisher 1935-1961*  
ORVILLE E. DRYFOOS, *Publisher 1961-1963*



FEB 5 1971

## Wider War in Laos?

The strategy of widening the war territorially in Southeast Asia in order to reduce the American involvement defies all logic. Yet the Administration, having chosen that route in Cambodia, has had to argue that that strategy is succeeding. In the process, it may have convinced itself that the war should be widened further—into Laos.

The benefits of military action in Southeast Asia have always loomed larger to Presidents Nixon and Johnson than the obscure and incalculable risks that might follow. Both Presidents have preferred advisers who favored military solutions to those who argued the other side. Progressive isolation from contrary advice has been inevitable. Nothing else could explain the fact that an invasion of Laos, considered too risky when there were almost 550,000 American troops in South Vietnam, should have received consideration when American forces are being reduced to half that number.

Staff studies in the mid-1960's indicated that as many as four American divisions—close to half the peak American combat strength in South Vietnam—might be needed to close the Communist supply route through Laos. Brief land incursions across the border to blow up roads and supplies would add little if anything to the destruction imposed by air attack.

Neither air attack nor in-and-out ground incursions can deprive Communist forces in South Vietnam of essential supplies for one principal reason. The supplies from North Vietnam consumed by Communist forces in the south are small in total daily tonnage. Although they move by truck part way, they are carried on the backs of porters for weeks before reaching Communist troops at the front. This is the bottleneck of the Communist supply system, yet the most difficult part to find and intercept. The tonnage needed to keep this bottleneck more or less full is so small that destruction of part of the larger flow further north has little effect.

The game is not worth the candle. For the danger, as in Cambodia, is that the Communist reaction will force allied troops to return again and again. Ultimately, Saigon may find itself spread thin at home by fighting in Cambodia and Laos as American forces withdraw.

Vietnamization of the war in Cambodia and Laos, as a result, will hamper rather than aid Vietnamization of the war in South Vietnam. Pressure on Washington to slow American troop withdrawals would be inevitable.

President Johnson, despite his penchant for military escalation, saw the benefits of neutral governments in Cambodia and Laos and the dangers of entrapment in a territorially wider war by invading those countries. The fact that South Vietnamese forces rather than American units may be entrapped changes matters little when Saigon's units depend on American air and logistical support.