

# The Endless War

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 4—The main issue in the latest allied offensive in Indochina is not the "news blackout" on military operations, but the policy question of why the South Vietnamese, with a million men under arms and an air force of over 600 planes, are still relying on massive U.S. air support to break up enemy troop concentrations and supplies.

The objective of scattering the Hanoi units and cutting their supply routes is clear enough. President Nixon's nightmare has always been that a smaller and smaller American expeditionary force would become more and more vulnerable to attack by any large and well-armed Communist force.

Accordingly, it is not hard to reconcile the strategy of withdrawal with the strategy of preventive strikes in Cambodia and Laos. It is a little harder to explain why the American people have to be told about the allied build-up by the Communists, whom the news blackout is supposed to fool. But why so much U.S. air power?

The experts at the Pentagon have been saying that South Vietnamese pilots and maintenance men now compare favorably with their American counterparts, that North Vietnam has about 91 MIG-21's and 166 older MIG-17's and 19's, and that these planes do not add up to much of an air threat in South Vietnam.

The Pentagon experts also say that the South Vietnamese have become quite proficient in flying transport, tactical reconnaissance and close air-support missions, and that their 32 squadrons and 600 planes will be almost doubled by the summer of 1973

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and supplemented by three squadrons of fighters by 1974 or 1975.

A little less of a news blackout on this timetable for the Saigon Air Force would be helpful, for if a million-man army and a 600-plane Air Force is not enough to deal with the threat from the North, is the American Air Force to keep on blasting that wretched peninsula until the Saigon Air Force is ready in 1974 or 1975? Is this what is meant by "getting out"?

The war has not been a major political issue in the last few months because the casualties have dropped, a timetable for withdrawal seemed to have been set, and everybody has been assured that the South Vietnamese were taking over responsibility for the war even faster than anticipated; but if the American war effort is to go on into the middle seventies, maybe the whole question of withdrawal should be explored again.

It is true that the Administration has recently decided to speed up the training and equipping of the Saigon Air Force. In 1966 the Johnson Administration decided to build a twenty-squadron force for the South Vietnamese. In 1968 this target was moved to forty squadrons, not yet complete, but as Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard recently told William Beecher of The New York Times, Saigon will not be completely self-sufficient in both offensive and defensive air power until the new international fighter, now in an advanced stage of

development, is in full production, and even then, he said, we may have to stick around in Thailand or somewhere else.

What these Pentagon projections and calculations about timetables and self-sufficiency never seem to take into account, however, is that whatever we put into Saigon to make it self-sufficient, the Russians and Chinese can match and challenge Saigon's self-sufficiency. This is a game both sides could play for decades.

The recent flap over the six-day news blackout in Saigon and Washington is only the latest indication of the element of mistrust that still poisons all discussions of the war in this capital. No Senator would ask for public information that might produce American casualties in the movements along the Laotian border, but Senators have been misled so many times in the last five years about what the Administration said it was doing in Vietnam that many of them now simply do not believe what they are told.

One day they are assured of the spectacular success of the Cambodia invasion, but before long they are told U.S. air power will be used anywhere in Cambodia or Laos against any force that might "ultimately" attack our troops. One day they are assured that no American troops are in Cambodia and the next some are found in civilian clothes at the Cambodian capital airport.

So again there is a rising debate about when the U.S. really is "getting out," when the Saigon regime will be self-sufficient, if ever, what role the U.S. Air Force is expected to play in the future and what the rest of us are supposed to believe meanwhile.