



Nixon's Struggle In Southeast Asia

Joseph Kraft

THE CENSORSHIP which was called an embargo and then broken is not the only ludicrous feature of the latest operations along the Laotian border.

The latest offensive shows once again that President Nixon has no reliable plan for a safe exit of American forces from the war in Southeast Asia.

To understand the Laos border operations, it is necessary to look at Southeast Asia through the eyes of President Nixon and his chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger. For their view is something else.

It is not that of the military chiefs who have now lost interest in Vietnam. It is poles apart from that of the cynical journalists who assume the President concentrates mainly on reelection in 1972 and, therefore, on getting American troops out before that deadline.

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UNLIKE all the others, Mr. Nixon and Kissinger really care about what happens in Vietnam. They believe that a communist takeover there would have disastrous consequences all over the world.

Public pressures have forced them to wind down this country's role in the war. They have worked for the progressive transfer of the military burden from American to South Vietnamese forces. But they know that the South Vietnamese army, which couldn't hold the communist forces with the support of half a million Americans, is not awfully likely to hold them without the Americans. They also know that American bombing has only

limited impact on interdicting communist troop movements.

Accordingly, the President and Kissinger have been casting about for ways to build barriers against communist exploitations of a situation bound to worsen. They have been looking for blows, or better still the threat of blows, that would make the Communists think twice about exploiting the advantages which are shaping up for them.

The Cambodian invasion of last spring was one attempt, and it did jolt the other side briefly. Punitive bombing of North Vietnam is a second attempt. But so far Hanoi has not flinched. The Laotian border operation is a third move in the same direction. Maybe the move will prove successful. But there is a strong possibility that it won't be.

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THINGS are probably going to get worse before they get better. For Mr. Nixon and Kissinger have hooked themselves on a desperate ratio. The more the number of American troops in Vietnam dwindles, the more the remaining troops become vulnerable, and the more the President and his assistant are prone to lash out at the enemy.

In their frustration with a policy that doesn't work, they are backing themselves into a position where they will have to resume the serious bombing of North Vietnam — a truly dangerous step that could once more blow off the lid in this country.