

## Enlarging the War

Hours after South Vietnamese troops crossed into Laos with strong American logistical and fire support, the State Department declared that this massive operation "is not an enlargement of the war."

That statement is so patently at variance with the facts that it undermines the credibility of everything else Washington asserts about the Laos invasion: that it will be limited in time and scope, that it will aid in the Vietnamization program, and that it will speed and help secure the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam. It is more probable that this significant escalation of the war will have effects directly contrary to those Administration spokesmen so glibly promise.

The narrow panhandle of Laos through which Communist troops and supplies filter southward has long been a tempting target for allied military strategists. But the decision to invade was withheld, even at the time of peak American power in Southeast Asia, because responsible leaders recognized that such an enlargement of the conflict could not be easily contained and would open up endless complications. This sober judgment, now overruled by the White House, is even more pertinent today when American forces are being withdrawn.

Experience in Cambodia is instructive. Allied forces invaded Cambodia last spring in another precedent-shattering operation against Communist bases and supply routes—one that was also said to be limited in time and scope. But the South Vietnamese are back in Cambodia in force, not only to police the sanctuaries but to lend direct support to an increasingly insecure Cambodian Government. Through Communist initiatives beyond the control of Washington or Saigon, Cambodia has become an unstable fixture in an indefinitely enlarged conflict.

Can anyone imagine that Laos will be different? Whatever the short-run benefits of this latest escalation, the long-term effect of the invasions of Cambodia and Laos will be to tie down increasing numbers of South Vietnamese troops in interminable foreign operations just when they are most urgently needed at home to replace withdrawing American forces.

The South Vietnamese Army is unquestionably improved. But it is straining credibility to suggest that it can now accomplish singlehandedly in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos what it has been unable to accomplish in its own country with massive American aid.

Vietnamizing Cambodia and Laos will only compound the already serious shortcomings of Vietnamization in Vietnam. No amount of sophistry in Washington can conceal the fact of escalation in Southeast Asia, escalation that points not toward peace and disengagement but toward a wider, unending conflict.