

'Widening the

By Max Frankel

Washington

Though it has been given often before in the Indochina war, the official rationale was put forward again yesterday without apology or reservation: The purpose of widening the war is to shorten it.

That was the reason the Johnson Administration undertook the bombing of North Vietnam, a calculation ultimately abandoned as mistaken. That was the reason, too, for the Nixon Administration's

surge into Cambodia last year, a move that—with fingers crossed—is tentatively regarded now as a success.

And that was the essence of all the reasoning offered here and in Saigon for the allied thrust into Laos.

By pushing out the frontiers of combat into Cambodia and Laos, it is felt, the South Vietnamese can buy time for reconstruction and political consolidation on their own territory and also deny to the North Vietnamese the chance to rebuild a menacing coalition with in-

digenous hostile southern elements.

Success, says the argument, would further complicate Hanoi's already difficult supply problems and greatly postpone its chances of major attack in either Cambodia or South Vietnam. Failure, it is said, could be costly to the South Vietnamese but would not leave them much worse off in the long run than inaction.

The idea for the push into Laos is said to have been President Nguyen Van Thieu's. But President Nixon takes clear responsibility for his endorsement and appears to have managed the affair in a way that minimizes his own risks.

Whereas last April, after ordering the incursion into Cambodia, the President delivered to the country an apocalyptic address suggesting a giant test of will and fortitude, he said nothing directly this time and let his aides portray it as merely a large but limited tactical exercise.

CENSORSHIP

A needlessly elaborate censorship on coverage of the event is now acknowledged to have built up an unwanted

sense of drama about the operation since it first took shape ten days ago.

There is no evidence so far, however, that this period of official silence masked any hesitation or unscheduled change of plans. And although apparently unplanned, the week-long speculation about an attack into Laos served the Administration's purpose of fully preparing the country for the move when it finally came.

The Democrats, led by their national committee and Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, the former Vice President, were quick to stake out a position of critical skepticism. But their purpose was not so much to incite a calm public against the policy as to express an underlying uneasiness.

Militarily, hardly anyone here was prepared to question the President's tactical judgments. No one denied the desirability of choking off enemy supply movements if that were to be shown as possible, even for a limited time.

LEGALITIES

Legally, even Mr. Nixon's critics conceded that he had

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observed the letter of last year's inhibiting legislation forbidding the use of American ground forces in Laos.

In terms of international law, no one was disposed to quarrel with the Administration's use of the traditional concept that invasion of neutral territory is permissible in self-defense when the host government proves unable to curb the menacing activity of another belligerent.

Nor could the United State be legally charged with violation of the 1962 accord on Laotian neutrality, whose provision for the withdrawal of all foreign forces was nevnam.

POLITICS

Politically, the most dovish members of the Senate, led by Senator J. William Fulbright, described themselves as essentially helpless and frustrated. They have long to withdraw under any agreement that protects the departing American forces without trying to provide for the long-run viability of the urged the President simply Saigon government and its army. But Nixon has rejected that approach and defend-

ed it politically with the promise that American ground troops will continue to be withdrawn.

Mr. Nixon did not add to his influence in the Congress by again refusing to consult its members before the move into Laos. But is doubtful that those who question the premises of his Vietnam policy could have been swayed to support a tactical extension into Laos of those premises.

There is little chance that American casualties will increase dramatically as a result of the operation. Nor is there much likelihood that the President's pattern of troop withdrawals from Vietnam will be hindered by it.

MISGIVINGS

The only real misgivings heard around Washington yesterday went to the larger concept of continuing the war — even after Americans disengage from its ground combat — that is served by the Laos invasion.

When leading Democrats assert that the way out of Vietnam does not run through Cambodia or Laos they are saying that twoprecariously neutral countries of

Indochina are being progressively sacrificed to the defense of South Vietnam. They are saying also that enlarging the field of combat, and the paths of destruction, is only a further mortgaging of American air power, supplies and money for the indefinite future.

And they are saying that if, in retaliation or frustration, Hanoi should move its forces even deeper into Laos toward Thailand or reopen some of the infiltration routes through the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam, then American air power would have to rain destruction upon an even larger region.

In all, the reaction here bore a remarkable resemblance to the reaction to the latest manned excursion on the moon. There was much less excitement than during previous escalations. There was a vague feeling that the mission may have value in the sense of redeeming prior investments. And there was an underlying doubt about whether the long-range purpose and price would ever prove to have been worthwhile.