

The Forgotten Lesson

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9—In this latest crisis in the Indochina war, when we are being told once more that the latest adventure into Laos will surely put an end to the long agony, it may be prudent to look back at the record.

Last time, only last spring, it was the invasion of Cambodia that was going to destroy the enemy's sanctuaries and let us go home. Before that, it was destruction of the enemy's forces in the Tet offensive that was supposed to have broken the back of the opposition. And before that, it was American air support, then American air power itself, then the U.S. search-and-destroy missions, then the bombing of the North, each in its own turn, that was going to be "decisive."

It is a very old story, underscoring a long forgotten lesson. Herbert Butterfield pointed it out long ago. "However hard we have tried in the twentieth century to make allowances in advance for the unpredictable consequences of war," he wrote, "we have always discovered that the most terrible of these had been omitted from our calculations or only imperfectly foreseen."

The First World War was probably the most tragic example of this kind of miscalculation. Believing that there could never be an aggressor so monstrous as Germany under the Kaiser, the Allies fought that ghastly war in the West to the point of "total victory," and in the process created two much more formidable menaces, Nazi Germany and Communist Russia.

There is, of course, a certain military logic to the invasion of Laos, and even a moral justification for attacking an enemy sheltering and gathering in a neutral country for an attack on South Vietnam. The Administration's policy is that it will use air power anywhere in Indochina where enemy

WASHINGTON

forces may "ultimately" threaten the security of our own troops.

There was a certain logic too in all those other moves, as seen from the Pentagon. Who could logically suppose that a small enemy country, operating over long lines of supply and without air power, could stand against half a million Americans, equipped with all the modern weapons of war, and in complete control of the air and sea? Yet events did not quite work out as the Pentagon planned.

Now the assumption here is that Hanoi is down to its last supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and that if these are cut, the enemy will be crippled at least long enough to let us get out, and the South Vietnamese, by that time, will be able to fend for themselves.

It is a reasonable assumption if you also assume that the Soviets and the Chinese will not give Hanoi new weapons to match the mounting fire power of the allies. Maybe the enemy will accommodate us this time, stand and fight and be destroyed, while Moscow and Peking watch patiently on the side. But this is no sure thing, and time and geography are on their side.

What happens if the enemy merely retreats into the jungle and regroups later in North Vietnam? Do we then resume the bombing of the North on the ground that troops there might "ultimately" threaten our command? And if we do cut the supply trails to the North and get out in a year or eighteen months, what is "decisive" about that?

The theory of "a war to end war" went out with Woodrow Wilson. When we finally leave, if we do, it will be

said that General Giap in Hanoi expelled the French from Indochina and fought the Americans to a compromise settlement. This cannot hurt or depress Giap in what will then be a struggle with Saigon.

Accordingly, the war may very well go on being as unpredictable as before. The President has clearly won the battle of public opinion in the United States. He didn't even feel obliged to talk to the American people about his aerial invasion of Laos, and the reaction of the people was comparatively mild.

N.B.C. took a poll the other day and found that 46 per cent of the people were convinced, despite the Administration's statements to the contrary, that there actually were American ground troops fighting in Laos. In short, even when the Administration was telling the truth, it wasn't believed by almost half of those polled.

The popular view seems to be that it is all right to attack a neutral country occupied by the enemy so long as our casualties are not too high; that if the enemy invades a neutral country, it is reasonable for us to do the same.

This is the logic of our latest adventure, but what if the Russians or the Chinese assumed that since we were giving air support to Saigon, they would give air power to Hanoi? Or new longer range rockets? What then would happen to our logic and our assumptions?

"I wonder," said Butterfield, "if it could not be formulated as a law that no state can ever achieve the security it desires without so tipping the balance that it becomes a menace to its neighbors. . . . And this gives us one of the patterns of those terrible dilemmas which seem always to be confronting us in international affairs."