

Don't Ask, Just Listen

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 11—Even when you get the facts on what is happening in Indochina, it's not easy to reconcile the gains with the sacrifices, but we are now coming into a new phase of the war in Laos where it is going to be more difficult even to get at the facts.

In the first place, American correspondents, who have always been able to follow the battle with our own Army, Navy and Air Force in Vietnam and Cambodia, are now not permitted to fly with our aircraft in Laos.

They are allowed to fly with the South Vietnamese, but the Saigon forces have comparatively few aircraft, and this is a dangerous business, as the loss of four of our best battle photographer indicates this week.

Second, since no U.S. ground troops are engaged in the fighting, U.S. correspondents again must travel with the Saigon troops under the regulations of the South Vietnamese command, whose enthusiasm for reporting the truth is not unlimited.

This is not a newspaper or television but a public problem. The reporters will take their chances and do the best they can. Twenty-six of them have been killed in this bloody war since 1965, which indicates that your chances of surviving as a fighter are better than your chances of surviving as a reporter. Also, thirty reporters and photographers have simply disappeared in Cambodia since last April, so the reporters left will go where they can.

The problem is to find out what's going on. The Pentagon has shown us maps, which are clearer than the

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truth. The Ho Chi Minh Trail looks in the Pentagon map-room like the Jersey turnpike or an umbilical cord: cut it and the baby dies. If only it were true! The White House briefings reassure us that all will be well, that invading, bombing and expanding the war will bring the boys back home, reduce the casualties, or at least our casualties, and produce a generation of peace.

Maybe it is all so. The President, the Secretary of State and Henry Kissinger, spending the weekend together at Key Biscayne, undoubtedly believe they are doing the right thing, but they cannot quite ignore the fact that many other equally serious men think they are doing the wrong thing, that they are still betting on a military resolution of the problem, still betting that Moscow and Peking will let Hanoi go down—in sum, betting on assumptions under challenge not only in Moscow and Peking but in Washington, even within the Republican party.

Faced with this conflict between what is right and what is wrong, at least it ought to be possible to agree on getting the facts, and here the Administration's record is a disgrace. The President is a very perceptive man. He knows he is in the White House today because Lyndon Johnson lost the confidence of the people and withdrew. Mr. Nixon came into office promising an "open" administration, and has been talking ever since about "open doors," but that is not the way things are going now in Indochina, or even in the White House.

The President has sent his air force into Laos, without a single personal word of explanation. His Communications Director, Herbert Klein, a genial honest man who lost his way and stumbled into political advertising, has the impertinence to circulate Joe Alsop's unspeakable suggestion that opponents of the Nixon war policy want to see the nation defeated in order to justify their opposition.

And on top of all this, they proclaim the virtue of their bombing in Laos, assume that Moscow and Peking will stand aside, assert that they are merely providing "air cover" for the South Vietnamese, and tell the reporters of their own country to go catch a ride with the South Vietnamese if they have any doubts.

We have to ask why? Why if they are bombing a path for the South Vietnamese in order to bring the boys back home sooner, why not let the reporters go along as before to record the facts as best they can?

It is very hard to answer these questions, particularly because in Laos the President and General Abrams actually seem to be doing no more than they say they are doing. The difference is not in their cant but in the cruelty. They are bombing almost at the level of the European war in a miserable, pacifist country, occupied by a cunning enemy. But rooting the enemy out of there is a ghastly business, and they don't want the facts recorded any more than they can help. No reporters allowed with us, they say. Go to the South Vietnamese, which is what the four battle photographers did before they flew over an enemy anti-aircraft battery and disappeared.