



Laos and the Old Illusions

By DAVID HALBERSTAM

So this time it is Laos.

On and on it goes: Who would have thought that instead of the light at the end of the tunnel we would have found a tunnel at the end of the tunnel. The rationalizations are familiar: shorten the war, bring the troops home quicker, protect American lives, improve the morale of the South Vietnamese Government, serve notice on Hanoi of the seriousness of our intent.

Yet one has a sense of microcosm about Laos; if it invokes all the old rationales it also reeks of all the old misconceptions and illusions.

The first is the belief that when we make a move the other side has no alternative, no counter-move. This is perhaps the most remarkable continuing illusion of the war. Its entire history going back to 1946 has been that the Vietnamese Communist forces possess the greater roots in society, the greater willingness to die for their ideas. (Thus the misconception of the Kennedy years when the idea of limited war was fashionable: you fight limited war, but the other side, small, underdeveloped, fights total war.)

where we are weak and they are strong?

The second illusion might be called the illusion of tangible structures. Trails, sanctuaries, main force units, depots, factories. Things to be seen, photographed, identified, and destroyed. This has always been a central problem. Do you see it as a war in which the tangible structures and the tangible force levels are the given? Or do you see it as a war in which these structures are the minor temporary reflection of the other side—the real factor being his ideas, his determination? Twenty-five years of war has proven that the latter view is the dominant one ("And how long do you Americans wish to fight?" Pham Van Dong asked four years ago in Hanoi. "One year? Two years? Twenty years? We will be glad to accommodate you." Yet the instinct on the part of Westerners, particularly of Western military men, has always been to concentrate on structures and to overrate the results of temporary destruction of them.)

There is a melancholy feeling to this. A feeling that we are back where we were a few years ago. The question is how and why we got here again. The earliest tipoff came during the silence of the 1968 campaign; had Nixon truly wanted to get out he would have surfaced with his thoughts then.

Then in early 1969 when there was still an official silence, when Mr. Kissinger went around Washington telling people that the greatest mistake of the Johnson Administration was Clifford and Harriman's attacks upon the Thieu-Ky Government. And then Nixon's own attack on Clifford. Quickly after that the most important speech of the Administration, Nixon's Nov. 3, 1969, speech when he said we would get out, but get out with honor and where he bought the assumptions and the rhetoric of the war: that a viable non-Communist South Vietnam is vital to American interest.

That policy has of course become clearer ever since: The welcoming of hawkish labor leaders to the White House, the honoring of Joseph Alsop, the purging of a dovish Republican Senator, the unleashing of the Vice President upon the war's critics. And Cambodia and Laos. Last week Don Oberdorfer, the Washington Post White House correspondent, wrote a particularly incisive explanation of what had happened, noting "the cardinal point is that the President seems truly to believe that a non-Communist South Vietnam is extremely important to the interests of the United States. He appears to believe this may be achievable and he is prepared to take important risks and incur large costs to further this cause." In other words the President appears to believe that the United States can win the war, or if you prefer, can avoid losing it. He means by "peace" what other people think of as "victory."

So that is why we are where we are, making the same foolish mistakes and taking the same foolish risks.

It is all so futile; for years now the only question left on Vietnam is how much damage we will do to ourselves as a society. Eighteen months ago a group of foreigners went by Mr. Kissinger's office and talked about Vietnam with him.

Midway through Kissinger's explanation one of the foreigners said it sounded like they were repeating all the old mistakes. Kissinger, who is known and liked for his humor, stopped and answered, no. "We will make our own mistakes in our own way and they will be completely new mistakes." Very funny, very charming. Too bad he was wrong.

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The most neglected lesson of the war is that it is their country. Time is on their side. They can take all the time they want. (If the guerrilla is not defeated then he has won, once said the noted political scientist Henry A. Kissinger before he went from critic to second-stage architect of the war.) Whatever we do, they can match. We bomb the North; they send men down the trail. We send combat troops to the South; they send more men down the trail. We go after the Cambodian sanctuaries; they shift the war to Cambodia where once again they are stronger. So we move into Laos, South Vietnamese or American troops notwithstanding. Does anyone familiar with the painful history of the war really believe that they cannot move somewhere else