

X James Reston

Nixon's Laos Strategy: Getting Out of Town

Washington

THE LATEST official explanation of the President's Indochina policy is that "he is backing out of the saloon with both guns firing," but there is a catch to this.

He insists that the guys in the white hats keep control of the saloon before he leaves town. He wants a non-Communist bartender, a non-Communist sheriff, and a secure non-Communist town before he rides away into the sunset of November, 1972.

It is a logical personal and political strategy, but in Asia, it is a military and geographical contradiction. Asia is not a frontier town, and the white hats are a very small minority.

Washington is deeply divided about all this, increasingly frustrated and cynical, because the President is emphasizing one thing and doing another. He is emphasizing withdrawal of the American troops to keep the home front quiet, and fighting in Laos to cripple the enemy and keep the Saigon front quiet, and the thing would probably work if the white hats were in the majority in that part of the world or if the President stayed around.



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It is his withdrawal and his faith in the minority in Saigon that is troubling and dividing Washington. In the short run, the strategy will probably work, but in the long run geography and the majority will probably prevail. And meanwhile, what will justify the bloodshed?

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IT IS not possible to understand the differences here over the President's policy unless a distinction is made between his dual aims of getting out and maintaining a non-Communist regime in Saigon. At some point he has to choose: He can stay in Indochina with his air power and probably prevail for a time against the patient weight of China's 700 million people, a quarter of the human race, or he can withdraw the American expeditionary force, but it is doubtful that he can do both.

Maybe he could do it long enough to hold the line through the Saigon election this autumn and the American presidential election of 1972, but the future order of the world is not going to depend on the re-election of Richard Nixon or General Thieu and Air Vice Marshal Ky. Either a non-Communist government in Saigon is vital to the interests of the United States or it isn't. If it is, we should stand and fight, not hold Thieu's coat or count on the C.I.A.'s mercenary tribal warriors to fight in the hills, or, if cutting the Ho Chi Minh trail is cutting the enemy's "life line," as Nixon calls it, leave the battle to the South Vietnamese, and abandon them if they are trapped.

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THERE IS SOMETHING, not only illogical, but almost dishonorable in his present strategy. If, as the President implies, the invasion of Laos is critical and may even be decisive in the war and "vital" to our interests, then one would have thought we should fight for it. If, as he emphasizes, the main point of what he calls the Laos "incur-sion" is to "insure our withdrawal, to reduce our casualties, and to shorten the war," then this can clearly be negotiated with Hanoi and the National Liberation Front.

Hanoi and the Viet Cong are not going to refuse to agree to the departure of the American troops. If this is really the President's purpose, he can get the boys back home and end the casualties and shorten the war. He can negotiate this, he doesn't have to fight for it in Laos or anywhere else.

But this is clearly the puzzling point. He must have another purpose, and the guess here is that his purpose is really to maintain a non-Communist regime in Saigon. Indeed, this has been central to the struggle from the very beginning. There is a good argument for it, but the thing should be stated plainly and clearly, who will control Vietnam? The Communists or the non-Communists? This is what the battle is all about and at least it ought to be made clear.

Nixon presented the Laos adventure as if it would settle everything. The North Vietnamese, he said, "have to fight here or give up the struggle to conquer South Vietnam, Cambodia, and (give up) their influence extending through other parts of Southeast Asia." But why do they have to do so? They can withdraw and wait, while Nixon brings the boys back home. They have been fighting the Chinese, the French, the Japanese, and themselves for thousands of years. They can lose and retreat into the jungle and try again after Nixon has kept his promise to withdraw our men. After all, November, 1972, means nothing to them.

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