

## Laotian Gamble

The risk of a further widening of the war in Indochina has been increased by the decision to push deeper into Laos in the face of strong and increasingly effective enemy resistance.

It is possible that this desperate gamble will pay off in a limited military sense; that is, if it succeeds, the expanded operation may give Presidents Nixon and Thieu something more substantive to show for the latest escalation than the paltry results that have been registered so far. But it is doubtful whether even a total stoppage of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which must necessarily be only temporary, could justify the heavy price in American and South Vietnamese lives that is already being paid. Those casualties can be expected to mount tragically, especially if the reported new enemy anti-aircraft missiles prove effective against the vulnerable American helicopters which are the lifeline of the allied offensive.

Even more ominous than the risks of the operation itself, are the growing threats of some kind of concurrent action directly against North Vietnam to help ease enemy pressure on embattled forces in Laos. A Saigon report that North Vietnamese gunners have fired missiles across the demilitarized zone at American planes flying over South Vietnam is difficult to explain except as a prelude to new "protective reaction" air strikes against the North.

President Thieu's renewed threat of a ground invasion of the North sounds hollow in view of the difficulties South Vietnamese troops are already encountering in Laos and Cambodia. It is probably only intended as psychological warfare. But today's rash rhetoric has a way of becoming tomorrow's harsh reality in a war in which one escalation constantly leads to another.