

By C. L. SULZBERGER

Both sides know the Nixon plan for "Vietnamizing" the Indochina war depends on at least partial victory in the continuing Laos battle. Partial victory means destruction of sufficient Communist stockpiles along the southward channel of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to prevent Hanoi from mounting another serious offensive for another year.

Normally speaking the monsoon season in that area starts in May. For the North to initiate an effective assault on South Vietnam and key regions of Cambodia requires advance storage of considerable matériel. This is far more difficult since Kompong Som (formerly called Sihanoukville) and the Delta have been pried from Communist grip.

The present battle has long-range significance transcending any Indo-chinese engagement subsequent to Dienbienphu in 1954. For the first time since the United States became heavily committed there has been serious effort to maintain total military security so that the enemy will not have sufficient advance knowledge to counteract tactical intentions.

Even the usual cable traffic from Saigon to Washington was not duplicated to key U.S. embassies elsewhere to avoid inadvertent leakage. Things were expected to proceed slowly—and have done so. Announcements of substantial gains or losses may be withheld temporarily.

Despite reports of the seriousness of this operation, the troops which may ultimately be committed by both sides are not yet completely in action. Hanoi has mustered some six units

## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

equivalent to divisions, with adequate corps commands, in the neighborhood of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They have by no means all been engaged. Saigon also has powerful reserves in the neighborhood.

Unlike the Cambodian operation, which displayed the maneuver capacity acquired by Saigon's new army, the southern Laos campaign is over exceedingly difficult mountain terrain where swift movement is impossible. But, allowing for due caution, it is foolish to be over-pessimistic at this stage because the famous Communist supply route has not been fully severed at its hinge and because casualties have been considerable.

From a military viewpoint Washington has taken the irrevocable decision that Saigon should henceforth be in a position to handle its own problems. This is what the somewhat fatuous word "Vietnamization" means. About 2,000,000 South Vietnamese in various categories now carry arms. South Vietnam has more helicopters than any of our European allies in NATO. Saigon's army is the strongest in non-Communist Asia.

The test is whether this impressive organization is able to stand on its own feet. Vietnamization as such is irreversible and, should it fail to achieve victory, U.S. troop withdrawal will proceed anyway. That is why the present operation is so crucial.

The likelihood is that there will be no repetition in South Vietnam of the situation in South Korea where there

are still numerous U.S. troops *sur place*. There was a peak of 543,000 Americans in South Vietnam during Nixon's first year. Almost all will probably be gone before July, 1972. Supporting Air Force units are almost certainly going to be based outside Indochina.

This may be a gamble but it is a logical gamble. Should there be miscalculation of the odds it would be an undue risk to leave perhaps 50,000 American soldiers as "hostages" in South Vietnam, tokens of blackmail offering Saigon an unreasonable chance to influence Washington's decisions.

As in any military operation, there is a nonmilitary purpose to the battle at the foot of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The political fallout in both Saigon and Washington is obvious. President Thieu stands a far better chance of holding on to power if he succeeds in obliterating accumulated stocks at the outlet of Hanoi's supply pipeline.

And President Nixon will also stand a far better chance of being re-elected if, by the fourth quarter of 1972, he has managed to disengage American troops from a swamp without danger of an enemy offensive blocking their retreat.

If the current Laotian operation succeeds it may at least prove possible to envision a diplomatic way out of the impasse. Right now the so-called Paris peace talks are only a propaganda exercise in which Hanoi seeks to influence U.S. opinion.

The moment Saigon is able to demonstrate that the war is no longer winnable, a real negotiation will become possible. This is the ultimate implication of Laos.