



## A Second Look at The Laos Incursion

**Joseph Kraft**

**T**HE JURY ON Laos may not yet be in, as the President put it in his last news conference. But out of the fog of war and censorship some big chunks of evidence are emerging.

The most dramatic was the fall of Fire Base Lolo to communist troops early last week. News reports from the field suggest the South Vietnamese pulled out in considerable disarray. Some reports from Saigon list heavy losses. In Washington, it is thought the enemy was able to capture intact most of the big guns brought in by the South Vietnamese.

Then there is the matter of the truck traffic south along the Ho Chi Minh trail. In his news conference of March 4 Mr. Nixon, citing as authority the American commander, General Creighton Abrams, said: "There's been a 55 per cent decrease in truck traffic south into South Vietnam, which means that those trucks that do not go south will not carry the arms and the men that will be killing Americans."

But it now appears that the 55 per cent figure covered only a brief period of extremely bad weather. Even as Mr. Nixon was speaking, the electric sensors and other measuring devices were recording a rise in truck traffic south.

★ ★ ★

**T**HEN THERE is the matter of Route 92, a main north-south traffic artery in the Ho Chi Minh trail. At the outset of the Laotian operation a senior official of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lieutenant General John Vogt, gave congressional testimony that the operation would enable

South Vietnamese forces to block Route 92 within a couple of weeks.

A month later only a couple of South Vietnamese battalions have advanced as far as Route 92. That is hardly a large enough force to block off a very heavily protected area.

Finally, there is the general configuration of the battle line. The South Vietnamese troops started the operation into Laos by advancing along Route 9. They first moved westward and then hooked north to Sepone.

But now much of the South Vietnamese force has been withdrawn south of Route 9. Indeed, the enemy seems to have opened a powerful salient on the other side of what started out to be the axis of the South Vietnamese drive.

★ ★ ★

**N**O DOUBT this evidence is far too fragmentary to be a base for conclusive judgments. But it does seem clear that the communists are not, as so many in the Pentagon have been saying, at the end of their strength. They have put up a strong fight, and even taken the offensive.

What this means is that another question mark has to be put after the policy of Vietnamization. It always strained credulity to believe that South Vietnamese forces could do, minus half a million American troops, what they were unable to do with those troops. Now that rough judgment based on past experience is reinforced by present experience. It is more than ever doubtful that the South Vietnamese can defend themselves without substantial American help.