

Kick Them Off the Skids

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, March 22—Some South Vietnamese soldiers, in the retreat from Laos, have been clinging to the landing skids of American helicopters. Some have been falling to their deaths from these precarious perches, and in addition, "we just have to kick some of them off," an American pilot has reported. "We have to think about ourselves, too. You just cannot lift this bird with fifteen guys clinging to it."

Let that stand as the epitaph of the Laotian invasion, as it comes to an end so much less than glorious than even those who claim great things for it do not sound as if they have convinced themselves. It is an appropriate epitaph, for if the invasion had any rational purpose at all it was, in the familiar incantatory words of the Nixon Administration, "to save American lives."

This is not a purpose any American can oppose, but how high a price must the rest of the world, particularly the Indochinese, pay to rescue Americans from a decade of blunders? In the Laotian operation alone, taking Saigon's figures at their dubious face value, more than 12,000 North Vietnamese and 1,031 South Vietnamese have been killed; in addition, 219 South Vietnamese are missing and 3,985 were wounded. When North Vietnamese wounded and missing are considered, these figures suggest that perhaps 25,000 Indochinese military casualties have been suffered. (At least 59 American helicopter crewmen have been killed, 68 wounded and twenty are missing.)

What were the civilian casualties produced by this meatchopper of an operation? It is a safe bet that no one

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can say, because no one in Washington or Saigon, any more than in Hanoi, bothers to make such estimates before launching big military strikes, and it is only weeks or months later that the refugees and the wounded and the dead begin to make their miserable marks. Thus, it was only last week that semi-official figures were obtained from Senator Kennedy's subcommittee on refugees: 125,000 to 150,000 civilian casualties from military action by both sides in South Vietnam in 1970, with 25,000 to 35,000 civilians killed.

These figures have not so far been disputed here or in Saigon. They do not include civilian casualties in Cambodia or Laos. They are included in the estimated 1.1 million civilian casualties, including 325,000 deaths, in South Vietnam since 1965, when Americans entered the war in force; of the total of those casualties, about a third are thought to have been children under thirteen.

Aside from the bloodshed, once more a military operation was heavily oversold in advance as a decisive action, one that proved the South Vietnamese "can give an even better account of themselves than the North Vietnamese" (General Abrams via Mr. Nixon's news conference).

No doubt this hardsell will cause Mr. Nixon domestic political problems. It is more important that, once again, the American command made the old familiar error of assuming that when it made a move, the other side would have no answer; in this case, the answer was at least partially a mass of

heavy tanks. Moreover, since the President himself predicted that the North Vietnamese would fight and fight hard, it is also clear that the fighting abilities of the South Vietnamese Army were overrated. All of that suggests a continuing underestimate of the power and determination of Hanoi and the people it commands, a repeated overestimate of Saigon's ability, with or without American help, to match the effort from the North, and another mistaken effort at a quick, winning blow in a war that will not permit such a blow.

It would probably be a mistake, nevertheless, to think that the Laotian repulse will lead Mr. Nixon to a significant change of policy. If he accedes to the request General Abrams probably will make for a slowdown in American withdrawal, the President will wreck his domestic political stance; and he is more likely than ever to think that pulling out at a faster rate would open both Saigon and any remaining American forces to disastrous attack.

Nor is there any reason to believe that the expulsion of the South Vietnamese from Laos signals anything but even wider and more destructive aerial warfare "to protect American lives." The heavy series of air attacks on North Vietnam at this time can be read in no other way than as Mr. Nixon's defiant message to Hanoi that he still has the will and the means to carry on the fight, if only by air.

So the long, costly, shabby policy of withdrawing while propping up Saigon and ravaging Indochina probably will go on, without any new attempt to negotiate an end to the slaughter. It is a policy of kicking them off the skids so the American bird can fly.