



An Optimistic Look At the Laos Operation

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THE SENATORS and analysts who will now become extremely vocal about the withdrawal from Laos, will do well to remember their own follies at the time of the Tet offensive, and after the U.S. troops finished their job in Cambodia last year.

By now, the same publications that portrayed Tet as an unmitigated disaster for the U.S. and its allies, have been forced to admit obscurely that Tet was instead a dreadful diaster for Hanoi. The Cambodian venture was also portrayed as a sad failure. But by now it has just about ended the war in the whole southern, most populous half of South Vietnam.

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THESE REMINDERS are necessary because assessment of the result of the Laos operation is bound to be controversial. Optimism about the result is likely to be greeted with shock and surprise.

Yet optimism is in order.

The maximum objective was to cut the Laos trails, which are Hanoi's sole remaining supply line to the south, and to keep them cut throughout the whole dry season. That objective was not attained, because of Hanoi's willingness to expend almost limitless numbers of North Vietnamese soldiers to keep the trails partly open.

But quite aside from the fearful hemorrhage of North Vietnamese military manpower, the damage done to Hanoi has been very grave.

Until last year, only about one half of the total supply needed for Hanoi's war in the south had to be carried over the Laos

trails. The other half of all that Hanoi's troops in the south needed, was then provided through Cambodia.

This year therefore, with the Cambodian source cut off, Hanoi needed a through-put over the Laos trails in the dry season that would be at least twice the through-put achieved in last year's dry season. The desperateness of the need was signalled when Hanoi left in place throughout the 1970 wet season the whole huge engineering and transport apparatus that makes the Laos trails work.

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IN THESE CONDITIONS, so painful for Hanoi, the Laos operation did three things of great importance. Albeit temporarily, it cut the Laos trails for a considerable period. It thoroughly disrupted the trail-management apparatus. And it also forced Hanoi to expend, in the furious fighting of the last weeks, the bulk of the supply already in the pipeline that had been originally destined for Hanoi's units further to the south.

By mid-March of this year, Hanoi's through-put on the Laos trails was still only about 20 per cent of the through-put in the same period of last year's dry season. After the South Vietnamese withdrawal, great efforts will surely be made to push more supply to the south.

In sum, Hanoi's forces in Cambodia and threatening South Vietnam are going to have to get along, from May through next December, with about one quarter of their needed supplies. And with only one quarter of their minimum needs, their situation is obviously likely to be very grave indeed.