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Retreat From Laos... MAR 24 1971

The precipitate withdrawal of South Vietnamese troops from Laos well before the anticipated arrival of the monsoon may not represent the humiliating rout that is suggested by fragmentary reports from the combat zone. But it is painfully clear, despite persisting efforts in Washington and Saigon to put the best possible face on a bad situation, that the Laotian operation has fallen far short of the expectations of American and South Vietnamese military planners.

Shortly after the "incursion" began, President Nixon suggested that decisive battles might be in the offing with the prediction that the North Vietnamese "have to fight here or give up the struggle to conquer South Vietnam." The North Vietnamese fought, with strength and determination that obviously were not anticipated. Although Communist losses undoubtedly have been heavy, there is no reason to believe they have been persuaded to give up the struggle. As the President indicated night before last, they have managed to keep at least part of the Ho Chi Minh trails to the south open throughout the South Vietnamese blocking attempt and they now have regained control of virtually all of the threatened area with four to six weeks of the dry season remaining. No wonder Hanoi is gloating.

The Laotian operation was supposed to demonstrate that South Vietnamese troops could "hack it" on their own. Despite General Abrams' assurances to the President, this is by no means evident. Even the limited achievements that were reported during the past six weeks depended heavily on the extraordinary skill and courageous efforts of American airmen who furnished essential logistical and fire support. Some of South Vietnam's best fighting units have undoubtedly fought with bravery but have been severely mauled.

The President insists that the Laotian gamble has bought more time for his program of Vietnamization. His explicit promise that he will continue to withdraw American troops from Indochina at least at the present rate is reassuring. But, unfortunately, time is not on our side but on that of the Communists. As Americans withdraw, the still uncertain Saigon forces will be left increasingly on their own to face a foe that remains in firm control of vital supply routes. Even if one concedes the President's contention that the Laotian retreat is not a defeat in traditional terms, the inconclusive results of this ill-conceived operation have ominous implications for Mr. Nixon's Vietnamization program.

...Increases the Credibility Gap

President Nixon's ill-disguised criticism of press and television for their reporting of the Laotian campaign is likely to benefit him as much as ancient Persian generals were benefitted by killing messengers who brought bad news.

There has not been a great victory in Laos. Mr. Nixon acknowledged that himself in his television interview Monday night. His assertion that 18 South Vietnamese battalions that performed well were not covered but only the four that were mauled by the enemy—"because those make news"—is not likely to convince the country that the bad news from Laos is a result of media distortion.

The facts are well known, but they bear repeating at this point. If there was any lack of press coverage of 18 South Vietnamese battalions, the fault is that of President Nixon himself. At any point, he could have reversed the decision that barred American correspondents from American helicopter transport to the Laotian front for all but a few brief moments of the campaign.

From its very beginning, the Laotian invasion involved a news blackout virtually unprecedented for major operations in the Southeast Asian war. Even if, as we readily concede, military security may have justified a period of news suppression, it was continued long after any justification existed. The Pentagon has made little information available. Questions have been referred to Saigon. There, the briefing has indeed been brief. Most of it has been done by the South Vietnamese military and their accounts have been lacking in both candor and completeness.

Newsmen in Vietnam have had to obtain much of their information by interviewing American helicopter pilots returning from the front. If the activity the pilots witnessed emphasized combat situations in which the South Vietnamese were bloodied, that undoubtedly was because that was where the action was.

Mr. Nixon did not indicate what there was in the performance of the other 18 South Vietnamese battalions that should have been reported. Were these units that, for the most part, were or were not engaged in major combat action with the North Vietnamese? In either case, the facts should be welcome.

But the credibility gap will remain hard to close. Mr. Nixon has implied that the more resistance the South Vietnamese encountered, the longer they would stay in Laos—the end point being "the latter part of April or the early part of May" when the rains come. But now Mr. Nixon asserts that the South Vietnamese encountered twice their numbers in enemy forces, yet denies that their withdrawal a month early signifies defeat. He cannot have it both ways.