

Divided Command in Saigon

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, March 25—Nothing is harder to conduct than coalition warfare with divided counsel and command. This cost the allies hundreds of thousands of lives in the two World Wars when the separate nations could not agree on who had the decisive voice on the battlefield, and it is clear from the recent operations in Laos that the United States and South Vietnam are now running into that dangerous problem in the final phase of the war.

It is clear from the private testimony of top U.S. military and civilian officials that South Vietnam invaded Laos with about half the troops available to the enemy, and that General Abrams, the U.S. commander, wanted them to commit a much stronger force and remain longer in the battle, but that President Thieu of South Vietnam chose a different course.

This is probably only a foretaste of unavoidable problems ahead. The more responsibility Saigon takes for the conduct of the war, the more it will want to determine the strategy. As President Nixon has made clear, he will, of course, insist on retaining control over where and when and in what numbers U.S. planes and airmen are used, but by the same token, President Thieu will insist, as he did in Laos, on deciding how many men to use and when to advance or withdraw.

For a while the White House and the U.S. military officials in Saigon were giving the impression that the withdrawal from Laos, a vital month before the coming of the monsoon rains, had all gone "according to plan," but lately the Pentagon has been taking a more candid and believable line, at least in private.

Secretary of Defense Laird, for example, told reporters on Capitol Hill that the invasion of Laos was cut short because of "the tremendously" vicious and violent reaction on the

WASHINGTON

part of the North Vietnamese, and also the fact that the South Vietnamese feel that they have carried out a primary objective of the operation—that is, to disrupt the supply routes.

This is a much more reasonable explanation of the adventure than the optimistic official reports out of Washington and Saigon just a week or so ago, but it doesn't tell as much as officials now say in private.

First, it is conceded here now that somebody—whether the American or South Vietnamese command is not clear—underestimated the strength of the enemy forces in the area. President Nixon said on television early in the invasion that the North Vietnamese would have to stand and fight or have their supply routes cut.

Even before Hanoi demonstrated that it was willing to accept the battle, despite the overwhelming air power of the United States, General Abrams urged President Thieu to be sure he was going in with enough men to drive across Laos to the western-most trails.

When the North Vietnamese did put up stiffer resistance than expected and also demonstrated that the U.S. helicopter fleet was vulnerable to mass gunfire from the ground, General Abrams tried again to get the Saigon leaders to rush in many more troops than Thieu thought advisable, so the battle was broken off, not without achieving some of its objectives, but clearly without realizing the Pentagon's hopes.

For one thing, given another month and deeper penetration into Laos, it had been planned to seed most of the trails with all kinds of concealed explosives that would have hampered the continued use of these supply routes even after the end of the monsoon rains. Some of this, of course,

was done, but not nearly to the extent General Abrams wanted.

The result is that, while both Washington and Saigon are claiming, no doubt with some justification, that they have interrupted the enemy supplies and killed over 13,000 of his men and gained time for the continued withdrawal of American forces, both allied camps are more disappointed than they let on in public, and both are now tending to blame the other for not doing more.

Nevertheless, this is what usually happens when there is no unified command and when the sacrifices of one ally are much greater than the casualties of the other. The U.S. official casualty list is a little over fifty Americans killed in the invasion, the official South Vietnamese count is 1,146 killed and 245 missing.

Even within the ranks of the American expeditionary force, there are complaints of unequal sacrifices, for the burden is now falling on the U.S. Air Force, while the Army is holding the line and otherwise engaged in less risky assignments.

Nor is there much likelihood that the future will correct the problem of divided commands. For while Washington and Saigon may for the moment have a common objective, the more President Nixon pulls out of that country, the less he will have to say about what goes on there. As he approaches the U.S. Presidential election of 1972, the more eager he is likely to be to reduce his forces, but as President Thieu approaches the South Vietnamese presidential election of September 1971, the less he is likely to want to risk a military disaster. In fact, officials here have reasons for believing that this was very much in President Thieu's mind when, faced with stiff resistance from the enemy and advice from General Abrams to commit more troops, he chose to minimize his risks and withdraw.