

# The New York Times

Published every day by The New York Times Company

ADOLPH S. OCHS, Publisher 1896-1935

ARTHUR HAYS SULZBERGER, Publisher 1935-1961

ORVILLE E. DRYFOOS, Publisher 1961-1963



## The Consequences of Laos

President Nixon undoubtedly is tempted to accent the positive as he draws up a new balance sheet on the Laotian invasion for his report to the nation tomorrow on further American troop withdrawals. Public optimism about the outlook in Vietnam has always been felt necessary by the Administration to justify the troop rundown, which Mr. Nixon has committed himself to continue at the current rate of 12,500 a month or faster.

Nevertheless, a realistic assessment might do more for the prospects of peace in Southeast Asia, not to mention the Administration's credibility. The full story of the Laotian adventure has yet to be told, but enough facts have emerged for a preliminary evaluation of gains, losses and the impact on the future of Vietnam.

Gains clearly are few. A minor part of the Ho Chi Minh network of trails and roads was blocked for a minor part of the dry season. The Communist supply flow toward Cambodia and South Vietnam on the remaining trails may also have been reduced as a result of diversion to the Laotian battle. However, the shift over the past three years from large unit combat to a strategy of "protracted warfare"—terrorism and small unit guerrilla operations — has greatly reduced Communist supply needs.

There is little basis for optimism that a supply shortfall, if any, will curtail Communist military activity significantly below recent levels. Nor are North Vietnamese and Vietcong operations in Cambodia and South Vietnam likely to be hampered by the casualties sustained in the Laotian battle. The far higher casualties suffered during the large unit warfare of 1966-68, when General Westmoreland sought to reduce the Communist forces by attrition, proved well below North Vietnam's replacement capability.

On the debit side of the operation, President Thieu has revealed that the five elite battalions that bore the brunt of the fighting suffered 50 per cent casualties. American military estimates reportedly are that Saigon's casualties over-all were close to 7,000, or about one-third of the combat troops sent to Laos. The numbers probably are less important in military terms than the effect on the morale of South Vietnam's best units.

Senator Fulbright has reported that the South Vietnamese forces failed to reach most of their major objectives and were forced, under heavy North Vietnamese attack, to withdraw more than a month before schedule. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee was briefed privately on the allied military objectives at the start of the operation by Secretary of State Rogers and the director of the Joint Staff, General Vogt. The committee's informal pact with Mr. Rogers to withhold public comment until the battle was over has muted its critical reaction, which now is beginning to emerge.

With National Assembly elections in South Vietnam scheduled for August and the presidential election in October, President Thieu is trying to offset the political effect of the Laos losses by claiming "the biggest victory ever." The extent to which his political opponents or military rivals will seek to exploit his discomfiture has yet to be seen.

Other consequences are clearer. If there was ever any serious intent behind the recent Saigon statements about invading North Vietnam, the folly of such a venture is unmistakable now. Saigon's inability to close off the Communist supply line through Laos, despite the availability of massive American air support, also makes it unlikely that any substantial invasion of Laos will be attempted after American forces have been further reduced. Another casualty is the illusion that the bombing of Laos or North Vietnam can halt infiltration.

The South Vietnamese Government now confronts a reality that should have been evident long ago: There is no military solution to its problems. How little public tolerance is left in the United States for American military participation in the war has been overwhelmingly demonstrated by the reaction to the Calley case from hawks and doves alike. Saigon's choice is between going on indefinitely with the war or negotiating a compromise settlement. Moves to broaden the Saigon Government and open this year's elections to the Communists, if they agree to a cease-fire, would be useful steps toward a political solution.

By facing these realities frankly in his report tomorrow, President Nixon might bring Saigon to do the same. Continued claims of success for the Laotian invasion and the Vietnamization program—and the contradictory policy of seeking military victory while American troops are withdrawing—will only tempt the South Vietnamese further down the path to disaster and intensify the highly emotional divisions at home.