



Mankiewicz and Braden

The end of Vietnamization

WASHINGTON—It is still possible if one places more value on captured rice than on Asian lives to call the invasion of Cambodia "a success," but that is no longer true of the operation in Laos. As the South Vietnamese conduct their current "sweep"—a headlong retreat back to the border—the perfectly good old word "rout" seems more in order.

What happened? An Associated Press dispatch from Saigon this week summed it up: "South Vietnamese troops abandoned another fire base in Laos in the face of heavy enemy pressure overnight, spiking and leaving behind their artillery pieces, military sources said today. The abandonment was ordered because U. S. helicopters could no longer supply the base."

The South Vietnamese, if there are enough helicopters left to airlift them out, will have completed their retreat back to the border by April 1, they have announced. They have suffered heavy casualties and withdrew immediately from the positions around Tchepone—the only area in which they were outside the range of U.S. artillery—as soon as a North Vietnamese attack threatened.

It even appears they never reached Tchepone, an early announced objective, but were airlifted nearby by our helicopters so the American press—reporting that the campaign was bogged down—could report a victory. But the drive was indeed bogged down, and the South Vietnamese, having been badly mauled in the only battles which were fought, had no desire to fight another one for the same of U.S. morale.

And this army, carried into battle by American helicopters, supported by as many as 2,000 bombing and strafing sorties a day, totally dependent on us for defense and supply, spiking its guns and heading for home one month before even the earliest pre-invasion estimates—this is the army President Nixon said can "hack it on its own."

The implications of this debacle are not totally clear. It may be clear, as we have been assured, that the North Vietnamese are "hurting" so badly that they have neither the will nor the capacity to fight in South Vietnam. It may even be—although it seems highly doubtful—that the enemy's ability to mount an offensive anywhere has been delayed by months through the destruction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

It may even be—as Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird has now put on the record—that U.S. troop withdrawals will continue until the magic moment of November, 1972, leaving only a "residual force." But what is clear beyond doubt is that the army of South Vietnam (ARVN), with more massive support than any power has provided in history, cannot "hack it" and that it continues to have neither ability nor stomach for a fight.

There are two conclusions to draw from the ARVN'S humiliation in Laos, and each has to do with a presidential election. The first is the re-election campaign this year of President Nguyen Van Thieu. It is hard to find anyone outside the U.S. Embassy in Saigon who does

not believe that Thieu would lose a free and fair election, as indeed he would have four years ago if we had not helped him rig a victory.

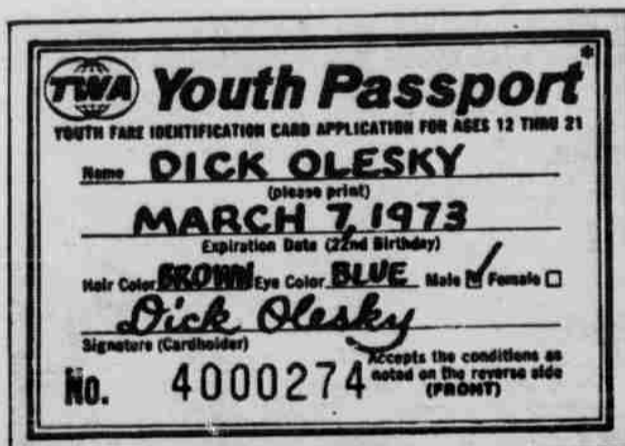
As the message begins to spread through South Vietnam that the ARVN took enormous losses, physically and psychologically in Laos,

largely in an attempt to convince the American people that Vietnamization has succeeded, Ky's chances will be even less. This means either a government in Saigon which will seek peace, or massive U.S. political intervention to keep Ky aloft.

The second impact is on

our campaign in 1972. It may be that the number of U.S. troops—largely airmen—will be between 50,000 and 100,000. But whatever the figure turns out to be, Vietnamization is in a shambles, and we know now that if the preservation of the Saigon government is a war aim, we will have to fight that war.

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