Widening the War to Wind It Down?

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As opponents of the war saw it, there was a bitter irony to these developments, for the allied escalation was being carried out in the sincere pursuit of *de*-escalation. In order to protect a poor investment in South Vietnam, the argument of the critics went, Washington was committing itself to an even more unprofitable deal in Cambodia. And to protect Cambodia, the Administration seemed to be on the verge of buying a pig in a poke in the Kingdom of Laos. If the strategy was suspect, the tactics were equally questionable, for the extension of U.S. and South Vietnamese involvement in Cambodia and Laos seemed to play squarely into the hands of North Vietnamese Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, whose favorite ploy is to lure his enemy out onto a limb and then to strike at his vulnerable base.

So far, however, the new allied thrust was still in the planning stage. For months, U.S. jet fighter-bombers had been flying in direct support of anti-Communist Laotian troops, and B-52s had been conducting one of the heaviest bombing campaigns of the war against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian panhandle. More recently, enemy infiltration routes in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam had been added to the list of targets. Then last week, thousands of South Vietnamese troops began to move toward the Laotian border, and American units—including almost all of the 101st Airborne—were ordered to guard the areas they had formerly garrisoned. At this stage, the operation was still a "positioning exercise," and it was possible that the allied troop movements were a massive feint. But by late last week, it appeared likely that an offensive in Laos would begin within a few days at most, and that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) would plunge into Laos to interdict the trails that have become the enemy's chief source of supply since Hanoi lost the use of the Cambodian port of Kompong Som.

Even as the operation was gathering steam, reporters in Washington learned that the U.S. commander in Vietnam, Gen. Creighton Abrams, had imposed an embargo on news accounts of the buildup from South Vietnam. And for good measure, Abrams also embargoed the embargo itself. But this move only served to fuel speculation, and as details of the plan leaked out in Washington, it became increasingly hard to believe that Communist agents in South Vietnam had not already learned of the impending attack.

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The first official reaction in Washington only confirmed the impression that the Administration had been caught with its hand in the cookie jar. State Department spokesman Robert McCloskey admitted that U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Emory Swank had decreed civilian clothes for the salvage crew. Stammered McCloskey: "This is a discretionary judgment by the American ambassador, supported here in Washington, that it seemed prudent, in the light of restrictions under the law prohibiting the presence of American ground forces and military advisers"—which sounded very much like a guilty plea. It did not help matters for State when Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird declared later that, as far as he was concerned, the soldiers should have worn their uniforms.

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That may be so, but for the moment there seemed to be little that the antiwar faction in Congress could do to oppose the President's air-power policy, or his support for the regime of Cambodian Premier Lon Nol. Congress has already granted the Administration $255 million for assistance to Cambodia, and the Cooper-Church amendment does not prohibit the use of American air power there or in Laos. "The time for Congress to have drawn the line was in the vote for the Cambodian aid package," said one foreign observer. "Now it is too late." Thus, for the time being at least, President Nixon appeared to have a free hand to test his theory that the war can be ended by expanding it.

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