Congressional Record S. 1582 - Laos: Some Questions

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
LAOS: SOME QUESTIONS

Mr. MANSFIELD. Mr. President, at the moment, the situation in Southeast Asia shows clearly that for many months U.S. casualties have been held lower, that fewer Americans have been engaged in combat, and that the cost of the war has decreased. These are consequences of the withdrawal of more than 200,000 Americans, a decision which was made at the outset of this administration. The consequences are, of course, welcome.

On the other side of the coin, it is also obvious that the arena of the war in Vietnam has been enlarged into an Indo-Chinese war and the executive branch has made us partners in that expansion. First came the invasion of Cambodia last spring with U.S. ground forces and the subsequent widespread devastation of what had been the stable economic and social life of that country. We are there now with hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and a mounting staff of American officials. Now there is the invasion of Laos by South Vietnamese ground forces supported by American firepower, airpower and logistical support and the likelihood of more intense participation by North Vietnamese forces in this area close to its border.

This recent thrust of all-out conflict into still another region of Southeast Asia cannot mean that we may not be taking the risk of not being able to withdraw U.S. military forces from Laos.

Mr. SCOTT. Mr. President, we all honor the distinguished majority leader’s views here. I am bound to say that I cannot accept them as stated, for a number of reasons.

First, I think it ought to be pointed out that the incursion into Cambodia of last May was limited; that it had the effect of cutting off 85 percent of the supplies being received by the enemy which were coming through Si-Phan-Don; and that, all of the personnel, and 15 percent of the supplies were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

This incursion into Laos may or may not succeed. It is the judgment of our military authorities that it will succeed. If it does, it will severely cripple the enemy’s ability to resist and will improve our chances in the talks at Paris, and will greatly strengthen the ongoing Vietnamization of the South Vietnamese.

If this happens, then the enemy will be unable to mass forces for retaliation during the dry season. He certainly will not be able to do so during the monsoon or the wet season. This carries him on into November or December.

The purpose of these operations is to enable us to get our troops out of there, which we are doing. Our withdrawal from Indochina is continuing during the incursion of the South Vietnamese into Laos.

Indeed, I think this is why we can point to the cooling of America and to the challenges which other priorities are demanding, the greening of America and the growing of America.

I cannot join in the deploir of the successful operations, operations which so far at least, appear to be successful, when everything the President has done has been proven to be justified in ending the war.

The President has taken large numbers of troops out. And he will take more out. On May 1, or around that time, there will be other announcements.

It seems to me that this is not a heightening of the war but a constriction of the war. The war has always been in Laos. It has always been in Cambodia. The difference is that only one side was able to
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use these privileged sanctuaries, and now the other side, without the use of U.S. ground forces, have put an end to something that ought to have been put an end to 15 years or more ago, I respectfully submit.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the Record an article entitled, "The Curious Liberal View of Southeast Asia," written by Crosby S. Noyes of February 7, 1971. This article does not relate to what the distinguished majority leader has had to say.

There being no objection, the article was ordered to be printed in the Record, as follows:

The CURIOUS LIBERAL VIEW OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

(By Crosby S. Noyes)

The anger of the liberals over recent developments in Southeast Asia defies rational analysis. What is it that they want? What do they really feel? What would they do if they were making the decisions about our policy in Asia?

The answers, I submit, are not nearly as simple as they seem. The fatal weakness of the liberal position is that it is inherently a minority position, not because the government or the majority of the country is vastly outvoted, but because what the liberals recommend could not be adopted by any American government.

The characteristic of liberal thinking today is that of dissent—not from any particular policy, but from any policy that takes the slightest chance of success. When it comes to Southeast Asia, the failure of American policy has become a primary article of faith.

The anger at the present course of events is real enough. There is little that happens in this country or abroad that does not fuel the sense of exasperation and dismay. Their capacity for dire prediction is limitless. The liberals are simply angry at each other.

The peace movement, they complain, is dead, killed off by the machinations of a devious administration. Even the peace bloc in the Senate seems to be showing new signs of indecision and impotence.

Americans are, of course, everything is going to hell in a handbasket.

The Cambodians, despite all the predictions, are showing signs of determination in resisting the depredations of their countrymen, the North Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese are said to be invading Laos with the object—just imagine—if of breaking up Communist supply lines into their country. And worst of all, the Americans are helping them, even while claiming that they intend to withdraw the bulk of their forces in Vietnam as quickly as possible.

Small wonder the liberals feel betrayed. This is hardly the scenario they had in mind when the Senate doves pushed through the Cooper-Church amendment last summer.

And if, in the end, they were unable to stop the use of American air power in supporting actions in Laos and Cambodia, why surely the administration should have understood what they meant to do.

But what is it exactly that they did intend? The liberal lexicon is a bit murky when it comes to practical policy, but a few solid points show through the rhetoric. They would, presumably, prohibit all help for Cambodia and for the Vietnamese operating in these countries. They also would set a firm date for the end of the American involvement in Vietnam, including the withdrawal of all American troops and support for the Vietnamese army. And they would tie the рук of the President to a "nonrepresentative and repressive" government in Saigon and set up in its place a coalition willing to come to terms with Hanoi.

Or would they?

The curious thing about the Senate liberals is that while they readily make outrageous statements about their wishes, they show little zest for putting such suggestions into effect. The chances, for instance, of extending the amendment to preclude the purchase of fuel for American air power in Cambodia and Laos are rated at practically zero.

If you ask them, furthermore, whether they really would prefer to see a Communist government in Laos and Vietnam, they will say of course not. If you ask them who would be served by a public timetable for an American withdrawal from Vietnam, they change the subject. If you ask them whether they consider the government in Hanoi more representative and less repressive than the one in Saigon, they say it is beside the point.

More than anything else, one feels there is an apprehension that it may all work out—that the disaster they have been predicting so relentlessly over the years may not actually be quite as obvious as they suggest, not mean that the opposition can afford. And the liberals at this point really feel devoutly attached to their opposition role.

Mr. BROCK. Mr. President, I rise to support what the distinguished Senator from Pennsylvania has said. I would like to say, it is I am embarrassed by the continuing criticism of our actions in Southeast Asia, specifically our bombing of Laos and Cambodia. This running commentary in many instances is little more than crying wolf. I regret these attacks against the President, because they only hinder our efforts for an orderly departure from Vietnam, they change the subject. If you ask them whether they consider the government in Hanoi more representative and less repressive than the one in Saigon, they say it is beside the point.

Is it not time to put aside partisan caterwauling and unite in common purpose to end this tragic war? Is it not time to stop trying to use American POW's as political pawns?

No one wants to prolong any war. Instead of being "barbaric," our bombing missions in Laos and Cambodia were called to hit the enemies last remaining supply routes for communists, supplies, and food—and, therefore, their ability to wage war.

The President has kept his word to the American people. Critics should note that we now have some 330,000 men in Vietnam. 200,000 less than were there 2 years ago. We continue to negotiate sincerely—with any response from the North Vietnamese other than the usual diatribe.

We continue to seek humane treatment for thousands of American prisoners of war—without any response from North Vietnam; other than a continuation of the abuse of our men.

Is it so hard for them to understand that as Senator States? 1971.

I regret that figure has increased by several thousand in the past month, counting both dead and wounded.

So I rise on the floor of the Senate, as always try to do with a proper understanding of the situation which confronts this Nation, of a deep appreciation of the responsibilities which are the President's, but not forgetting for a moment that as Senator States. It is our duty and our obligation, to express our thoughts when we can in good conscience.

Mr. CHURCH. I so respond the Chair.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Idaho is recognized.

Mr. CHURCH. Mr. President, I wish to commend the distinguished majority leader for his excellent statement on the most recent developments in the war in Southeast Asia.

Any intimation to the effect that the majority leader expresses a partisan view with regard to the war is so completely and utterly refuted by the record that I hardly need stress it here. Nevertheless, the Senate will remember well that the majority leader began to express his misgivings concerning this war long ago during the tenure of the Democratic Congress. He has been consistent throughout the years in admonishing against and for the expansion of American participation in it. If his advice had been taken years ago, 55,000 Americans would not have been killed in Vietnam and a much larger number would not have been maimed and wounded.
Mr. BYRD of West Virginia. Mr. President, I wish to say most respectfully to the distinguished Senator from Tennessee that I have read the statement by our distinguished majority leader and I listened with great care as he made that statement. I recognize the fact that the Senator from Tennessee did not criticize the majority leader by name in his remarks, but coming on the heels of the remarks by the majority leader it can be appropriately inferred by readers of the Record and those who heard the remarks that some criticism might have been meant and directed to the majority leader for the statement he had just made.

In the majority leader's prepared statement there was no "criticism" of the President. There was no attack on the President. I am using now the words of the able Senator from Tennessee, as I recall them. He used the words "attacks against the President." There was no attack against the President by the majority leader in his statement. There was no "partisanship." I have been in the Senate for 12 years, and I have seen less "partisanship" displayed by the majority leader than I have seen displayed by any other leader in my 12 years in the Senate, my 6 years in the House of Representatives, and my 6 years in both houses of the West Virginia Legislature. There is supposed to be a little partisanship in a party leader, but there was none in this speech by the distinguished majority leader.

The majority leader did not say anything that would indicate an attempt to "use American prisoners of war as political pawns." I think the record should be made clear that the majority leader raised legitimate questions—questions that should be raised. I salute him for raising those questions. I would have a few of my own. For example, I would like to see a more definite announcement on how much this operation is costing the United States in men and materiel, the exact number of helicopters that have been downed, and the number of helicopters that could not be retrieved. I would like to know how many Americans have died as a result of this offensive. I do not necessarily criticize the efforts being made in Laos by raising these questions, but they are legitimate questions. Of course, North Vietnamese troops are being forced to fight. If they chose not to do so, the Ho Chi Minh Trail would be effectively cut and the threat to American forces in South Vietnam would be weakened. There are two sides to the issue, but the questions raised here today are reasonable and pertinent.

I hope we would be very careful not to misinterpret as partisan that which was not partisan or as an attack upon the President that which was not the statement by the majority leader was clear and ought not to be misunderstood.

Mr. BROCK. Mr. President, may I say to the distinguished Senator from West Virginia and particularly to the distin-

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STATEMENT OF SENATOR MIKE MANSFIELD (D., MONTANA)

At the moment, the situation in Southeast Asia shows clearly that for many months U. S. casualties have been held lower, that fewer Americans have been engaged in combat, and that the cost of the war has decreased. These are consequences of the withdrawal of more than 200,000 Americans, a decision which was made at the outset of this Administration. The consequences are, of course, welcome.

On the other side of the coin, it is also obvious that the arena of the war in Vietnam has been enlarged into an Indochinese war and the Executive Branch has made us partners in that expansion. First came the invasion of Cambodia last spring with U. S. ground forces and the subsequent widespread devastation of what had been the stable economic and social life of that country. We are there now with hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and a mounting staff of American officials. Now there is the invasion of Laos by South Vietnamese ground forces supported by American fire power, air power and logistical support and the likelihood of more intense participation by North Vietnamese forces in this area close to its border.

This recent thrust of all-out conflict into still another region of Southeast Asia represents a gamble which may not be worth the risks involved. Rather than a shortening of the war and a further reduction of casualties, the consequences of this air-ground invasion may be to lengthen the war and increase the casualties. The outcome of this new military venture depends not only on the success of the South Vietnamese forces in Laos but on the reaction there and elsewhere of the North Vietnamese and perhaps other Asian nations to the invasion.
The gamble in Laos is likely, in my opinion, make it still more
difficult to arrive at a negotiated settlement. Furthermore, it may well
increase, again, the number of U. S. casualties and raise the number of
American prisoners of war who have been taken in Southeast Asia.

With regard to the American prisoners, the North Vietnamese have
stated that the issue would not even be discussed until it is evident that
U. S. forces are to be withdrawn completely from Viet Nam. In my opinion,
these men are held as hostages to that end and this action is almost certain
to delay their release. Threats are not likely to deter North Viet Nam
from that course.

Nor is it at all certain, as has been suggested, that "they (the
North Vietnamese) have to fight there (in Laos) or give up the struggle."
The option is theirs as it has been from the outset. The fact is that they
still have many cards in Cambodia, elsewhere in Laos, in South Viet Nam and
in North Viet Nam. What if they opt not to fight at this time in Laos?
What if they do stand and win against South Vietnamese forces in that remote
area? What course is open to this nation then?

What if they draw back now but return in May and resume use of the
present Ho Chi Minh Trails or new trails on an accelerated basis?

What if the present penetration prompts them to move further west
on the approaches to Thailand, even as the incursion into the Cambodian
border areas last spring prompted them to move westward throughout Cambodia?

In short, we must ask ourselves whether a temporary invasion of
Laos, and I emphasize the word temporary, will have any real effect on the
capabilities of North Viet Nam of engaging a continuing war in Southeast Asia?
According to North Vietnamese calculations, they have already been at war at least 25 years and an additional 25 years of conflict may well be anticipated.

These are questions which put in balance the military gamble which is now taking place in Laos. Is it worth the lives--American and others--which it already claims? Will it fulfill the objective of shortening the war, so that the U. S. military phase-out can be continued and accelerated? Will it hasten negotiations which will end this tragedy and thus permit a complete U. S. withdrawal?

Will it help the plight of our prisoners of war?

Indeed, has any previous escalation of the conflict since the Tonkin Gulf--the use of B-52 bombers, the massive air and naval war against North Viet Nam, the secret air-war in Laos, the incursion into Cambodia--have any of these previous escalations fulfilled its promise to these ends?

In my opinion we may well be up against a stacked deck in Laos.