THE MILITARY DEBACLE of the February-March invasion of Lower Laos by Saigon-US forces took many people by surprise. But in fact it merely reflects a truth about the Indochina war which the world will probably have more occasion to ponder on in the months to come than ever before. That truth is: the further Nixon presses North in Indochina, the closer he comes to the heartland of the strength of the liberation forces of the peninsula, and the fiercer the resistance he will meet.

In sending his forces into Laos where he did, Nixon sent them precisely into an area which is part of the big liberated region which straddles the borders of all four Indochinese States: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. This being the case, he had every reason to expect to stir up a hornets' nest of resistance. Many comments by US servicemen, helicopter pilots and others, which are quoted in the March 22 issue of Newsweek, give a good impression of the changed character of the resistance here from the usual area of their operation, South Vietnam. The comments centre on the greatly enhanced firepower and aggressiveness of their adversaries, and the fact that life was proving much more dangerous in Laos than they had recently been finding it in South Vietnam. But one comment from an unnamed "observer" went right to the heart of the matter. He is quoted as saying of the fighting in Laos: "This is no longer a guerrilla war or even a semi-guerrilla war. It is as close to conventional war as you'll get in South-east Asia."

The forces confronting the Saigon armies and the US in Laos are as well as if not better armed than the invaders, with the single exception of airpower. Perhaps the remarkably effective use made by the resistance forces of their resources in Soviet-built
tanks best expresses their reality. Many factors go to create this situation: the relative shortness of communications and supply lines from the North is certainly one. But it is also true that the Bolovens Plateau area where the invasion took place is the birthplace of the modern Laotian liberation movement and where this movement is strongly consolidated. It is therefore an area where the political conditions greatly favour the resistance. This area, together with the three northern provinces of Phong Saly, Sam Neua and Xieng Khouang, represents the core of the strength of the Laotian liberation movement (long known as the Pathet Lao, sometimes called the Neo Lao Hak Sat, but now, in the new, expanded phase of the Indochina war, calling itself the Lao Patriotic Front).

Reflecting on the experience of the Laos invasion, it is necessary to ask what better fate Nixon can expect for his forces if he goes ahead with his much-touted option of a land invasion of the southern areas of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam? There, in the conditions of a thoroughly consolidated socialist State power, with highly organised regular and popular militia forces in places down to the smallest hamlet, the military and political conditions will be markedly more unfavorable to an invasion even than is the case in Lower Laos. The whipping currently (March 22) being inflicted on the Saigon forces in Laos can only be expected to be repeated and to be even more severe.

Beyond this eventuality loom Nixon's second and third options, the mushroom cloud at the end of the tunnel of the Indochina war: the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Vietnam, and a nuclear strike against China. This is the inescapable logic of US Indochina policy, which has for 20 years rigidly adhered to the pattern of seeking the remedy to defeat in a widened ("escalated") war. The present reverses for the US-Saigon side in Laos must be seen with this perspective most firmly in mind.

A summary of the background to the Laos invasion by Banning Garrett of the Pacific Studies Center, USA, appearing in the brochure Operation Total Victory (February 1971), is such a masterpiece of concise exposition that it merits being written into the record here. Garrett writes:

Laos was occupied during World War II by the Japanese, along with the rest of the French colonial empire of Indochina. Like the Vietnamese, Lao-tians organised a liberation movement which emerged to take control of the country when the Japanese were defeated. After the war, the French, backed by the U.S., returned to try to regain control of Indochina in a nine-year war which culminated in the decisive defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

The Laotian liberation movement which opposed the French until 1949 held together the politically diverse urban elite which had fought the Jap-
anese. In 1949 the movement split. The majority agreed to form an 'autonomous' government within the French Union. Many important 'nationalists' were allowed to return from exile. The new government 'legitimised' continued French rule.

The other wing of the anti-colonial movement began armed insurgency under the leadership of Prince Souphanouvong, who formed the Pathet Lao in 1950. The Pathet Lao worked with the Viet Minh in the successful Indochinese liberation struggle against the French and their Indochinese supporters. The Geneva accords of 1954 were to have neutralised Laos and to have integrated the Pathet Lao into the government. But the US had other plans for Laos.

In 1958, following a Leftward trend in Laotian parliamentary elections, the US engineered a Right-wing coup d'etat (Toye, Laos). The 'civil war' resumed, with the American Central Intelligence Agency replacing the French colonial bureaucracy. In 1962, another Geneva Accord set up a neutralist government. This coalition government was short-lived, however. As the CIA backed the Right-wing and took control of the Royal Laotian government, the Pathet Lao resumed the fight, again turning to the Vietnamese (North Vietnam) for support.

Today the US clandestinely operates the effective Lao government, employing more than six thousand Asians and non-Americans. According to Fred Branfman (Laos; War and Revolution, ed. Adams and McCoy, p.258), the Lao act as advisors to the US government administration of Laos, which has more employees than the Royal government.

Meanwhile, the Pathet Lao have maintained their autonomy while cooperating with the North Vietnamese. According to a 'long-time Western resident of Vientiane' quoted in the Far Eastern Economic Review recently (January 23), 'For years everyone's been claiming that the Pathet Lao is merely an "arm" of the North Vietnamese. From the hundreds of Laotians I've talked to over the past few years, that doesn't seem the case. If it is, then the North Vietnamese are pulling the most colossal con job in history.'

Fred Branfman provides us with a useful summary of US operations in Laos in the period preceding the present invasion '1) a massive air war directed, above all, at the destruction of the physical setting and the social infrastructure of the enemy; 2) a ground war fought by Asian troops directed and supplied by a relatively small number of American personnel; 3) the large-scale [forced] evacuation of the civilian population to American-controlled zones; 4) the creation of an American-directed civil administration paralleling the existing government structure; 5) a policy of deliberate secrecy designed to give the executive (US) as free a hand as possible.' (Laos: war and Revolution pp.13-14).

In 1968, before Nixon escalated the air war over Laos, nearly all those living in Pathet Lao zones lived in caves, trying to farm at night. By 1970, the bombing had reached the figure of nearly 1500 sorties a day, at a cost of $2 billion per year (Robert Shaplen in Foreign Affairs, April 1970). The increased bombing has forced many to leave the countryside; the US has generated 700,000-800,000 refugees and killed another 200,000 through bombing (Senate Sub-Committee Report on Refugees, 1970).

Since the US subversion of the 1962 Geneva Accords in 1963, the ground war in Laos has continued in see-saw fashion with the CIA army crossing back and forth across the cease-fire line dividing Royal Lao territory from the liberated zones of the Pathet Lao. The Royal Lao Government has carried out offensives in the wet season, and the Pathet Lao retakes its positions during the dry season. This dry season, however, the US-Saigon invasion in
Southern Laos may provoke a Pathet Lao liberation of all of Northern Laos. The ‘civil war’ in Laos has been re-integrated into the War for Indochina.

Much propaganda effort has gone into establishing that the US is fighting “Hanoi” in Laos, that (as noted above in the Garrett document) the Laotian resistance is merely an extension of Hanoi’s influence, and that the Lao liberation forces are completely dominated by North Vietnamese.

I know from my personal experience and observation of relations between Vietnamese and Laotians that such a relationship (as is equally the case between Vietnamese and Cambodians) is just not politically feasible. History has determined that the national sensitivities of the Laotians in relations with their stronger neighbors, the Vietnamese, are such that a relationship of Vietnamese dominance would simply not be tolerated by popular opinion, on which the Laotian liberation forces must fundamentally rely.

As a matter of fact, to present matters in this way is merely an exercise in standing the truth on its head, in which apologists for the US Indochina aggression have a certain expertise. The real phenomenon of foreign domination of political forces in Laos is the domination of the Royal Lao Government by the United States. The real phenomenon of political manipulation in Laos is the use by the United States of Lao territory in pursuit of its strategic aim of dominance in the Indochina peninsula.

But how do the Vietnamese see the Laotian problem? Their starting point is that from the earliest days of colonialism in Indochina, Laos has been used as a field of manoeuvre by outside forces seeking to control the peninsula’s richest prize: the human and material resources of Vietnam. How this reality is reflected in Vietnamese consciousness is well expressed by a North Vietnamese spokesman quoted by Professor Noam Chomsky in his essay “A Visit to Laos”. (New York Review of Books, July 23, 1970). The spokesman told Chomsky:

Laos is on our Western border. For our own security, we cannot allow Laos to turn into a base for the Americans to threaten us. You know that the Americans have been using Laos as a forward base both for themselves and the Thais, and have guided their planes for bombing us from Laos . . . Laos has been a historic invasion route into North Vietnam. The French took Laos first, originally, before setting out to colonise us. At the end of World War II they went back in and took Laos first, then used route 9 to transport men and materials to take Hue, and also route 7. Our only concern for Laos is that it remain strictly neutral. We cannot allow Laos to be a base for the Americans with their planes, their soldiers, their special forces, their CIA, their Thais and other mercenaries.

Chomsky provides some fascinating insights into what is the real relationship between the two parties, the North Vietnamese and the Lao Patriotic Front. On the basis of conversations with
refugees from the US-bombed Pathet Lao areas, and in his study of American sources on the subject, he suggests that the Vietnamese exercise very considerable discretion and delicacy in these relationships. He cites a document on the matter handed out to him by the US Embassy in Vientiane ("Life Under the Pathet Lao", by Edwin T. McKeithen), which emphasises the reliance of North Vietnamese cadres working in agriculture, medical and other fields in Laos on "patient counsel rather than direct command", and their "softest of soft-sell approaches in dealing with their Lao counterparts", their "deep faith in the efficacy of endless persuasion" and in "the spirit of brotherhood which should bond their relationship" (with the Laotians).

A RAND Corporation study by Langer and Zasloff brings out the same essential point. According to the authors, the Vietnamese advisers

provide experienced, disciplined personnel who add competence to the operations of their Lao associates. We have found that these Vietnamese advisers are widely respected by the Lao for their dedication to duty. By their example, by on-the-job training, and by guidance, generally tactful, they goad the less vigorous Lao into better performance.

The authors write:

The doctrine of the North Vietnamese places great emphasis on winning over the population . . . one would expect considerable tension between the Lao and their Vietnamese mentors . . . but we were struck by how successful the Vietnamese were in keeping such resentment to a minimum.

But perhaps most expressive of all is a story told to Chomsky by a refugee in the camp he visited outside Vientiane. Chomsky reports the story as follows:

During 1964 and 1965 only very few North Vietnamese soldiers were in the vicinity. By 1969 there were many North Vietnamese. The soldiers maintained a very strict discipline and kept away from the villagers. People felt sorry for them because of their enforced isolation. The Pathet Lao taught them that the North Vietnamese were their friends who had come to give them technical assistance and help them to survive. They had enormous respect for the North Vietnamese. To illustrate, he told a story of a North Vietnamese irrigation adviser who was condemned to death by the Pathet Lao after he had killed a water buffalo. The people objected and protested to the General, who affirmed the sentence. The man then killed himself. In general, they regarded the North Vietnamese with awe.

According to the best estimates Chomsky could uncover, the number of North Vietnamese combat troops in Laos did not exceed 5000 at a time (March 1970) when President Nixon went on public record to say that there were 67,000 such troops in the country. Concerning the US saturation bombing of Pathet Lao areas, Chomsky notes a phenomenon identical to that which I was personally able to observe when in North Vietnam in 1967 during the US bombing campaign of 1965-68. He writes:
It is doubtful that any military purpose, in the narrow sense, is served by the destructive bombing. The civilian economy may have been destroyed and thousands of refugees generated, but the Pathet Lao appears to be stronger than ever. If anything, the bombing appears to have improved Pathet Lao morale and increased support among the peasants, who no longer have to be encouraged to hate the Americans (my emphasis — M.S.).

The situation is exactly like that in Vietnam, where, in the first year of the intensive American bombardment in the South (1965), local recruitment for the Viet Cong tripled to about 150,000, according to American sources. And, as in Vietnam, the indigenous guerrilla forces are now more dependent on outside assistance as a result of the destruction of the civilian society in which they had their roots . . .

The reality of the Laos situation is this: with incredibly meagre resources — in 1960, the country had no railways, two doctors, three engineers and 700 telephones — the vital elements of the Lao people are reaching out for a modern life and renovated social structures. McKeithen, an unsympathetic observer, describes the achievements and aims of these elements as fellows:

They have pressed for economic equality by introducing progressive taxation and discouraging the conspicuous consumption that establishes a wealthy villager's status. They have almost eliminated the 'wasted resources' that are spent on bonus, marriages, funerals and traditional celebrations. They have taken initial steps towards the communalisation of property by establishing 'public' paddy, by closely controlling livestock sales and slaughter and by introducing public ownership of livestock in the school system . . .

The status of women has also been altered, as they have been given greater responsibility in administrative affairs and have assumed jobs traditionally restricted to men . . . (They have set up) 'youth organisation' devoted to lofty principles and dedicated to the advancement of long-term goals.

In their endeavors they are aided — out of social principle and perfectly legitimate strategic interest — by their neighbor people living in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and by more distant friends in China, the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Opposing their purpose is the most powerful of the imperialist powers, which has squandered wealth beyond Lao belief to frustrate it. Yet still about one million (on American figures) of Laos' three million population still elect to live in the areas controlled by the Lao Patriotic Front. And this despite one of the most insane, persistent and destructive bombing campaigns in the history of warfare.

It used to be a joke of the French colonialist period for the French colon, just back in Paris from his stint in Indochina, to say to friends: “Laos? It doesn’t exist. I know, I’ve lived there.” The reality of 1971 tells us that Laos certainly exists.

The national reality of this poorest of South-east Asian countries has been affirmed in the crucible of the most brutal social, political and military torment.