



Nixon's 1971 Spring Campaign and the High Water Mark of the Republic of Vietnam

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Sources:

- Nixon White House papers
- FRUS, Vietnam, 1970-1971
- Abrams msgs, CMH
- MACV and unit histories
- Unit and personal internet histories





Objectives



- Gain a clear and comprehensive understanding of the nature of the war as America conducted its withdrawal, in the face of:
 - National disengagement from the war, both military and psychological
 - Deliberate obscuration from the White House
 - The power of the media, and of the image
 - The power of classification—even when it doesn't make much sense
- Evaluate the effects of the campaign on the course and eventual outcome of the war
- Evaluate the dynamics that shaped the conflict in this period, and the lessons to be learned
 - Coalition Warfare
 - Civil-Military Relations
 - Strategic Assessments
 - Defining (and understanding) success



Principal Sources

American

- Nixon Presidential Materials Project
- Moorer Diaries
- Abrams Messages, Center for Military History
- General Sid Berry papers
- Command and unit histories
- Internet unit and personal accounts
- Hinh, Major General Nguyen Duy, *Operation Lam Sơn 719*.
- *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1970-1972*

North Vietnamese

- Politburo cables
- COSVN histories
- Giap speech to the Central Committee, December 1970
- General Staff histories and campaign analyses
- Unit histories at division and regimental levels
- Personal accounts



Origins of the Plan



- It all begins with the Cambodian incursion and its aftermath
 - Lon Nol regime adopted by US—within capacity and governance constraints: the Nixon Doctrine in the worst possible test case
 - Horizontal escalation of the war
 - SGUs and air interdiction pressure the Ho Chi Minh Trail
 - Covert action in eastern Laos and along the border of the DRV, culminating in the Son Tay raid
 - A pre-election peace offer from Nixon permanently changes the negotiating arena
- Planning for 1971 dry season focuses on Cambodia's survival and US withdrawal—yielding a White House concept in early December 1970 for a three-pronged theater offensive February-May 1971
 - Incursion into Laos (the “Tchepone operation”)—quickly to Tchepone, stay through the dry season, come out through base areas
 - Two-pronged offensive into southeastern Cambodia (the “Chup operation”)
 - Covert operations against North Vietnam
- Gen. Haig sells the plan to RVN and MACV—then reimports it to Washington in a Nixon Administration classic Kabuki theater—process of defining and approving the offensive causes a lack of focus, critical thought, and accountability

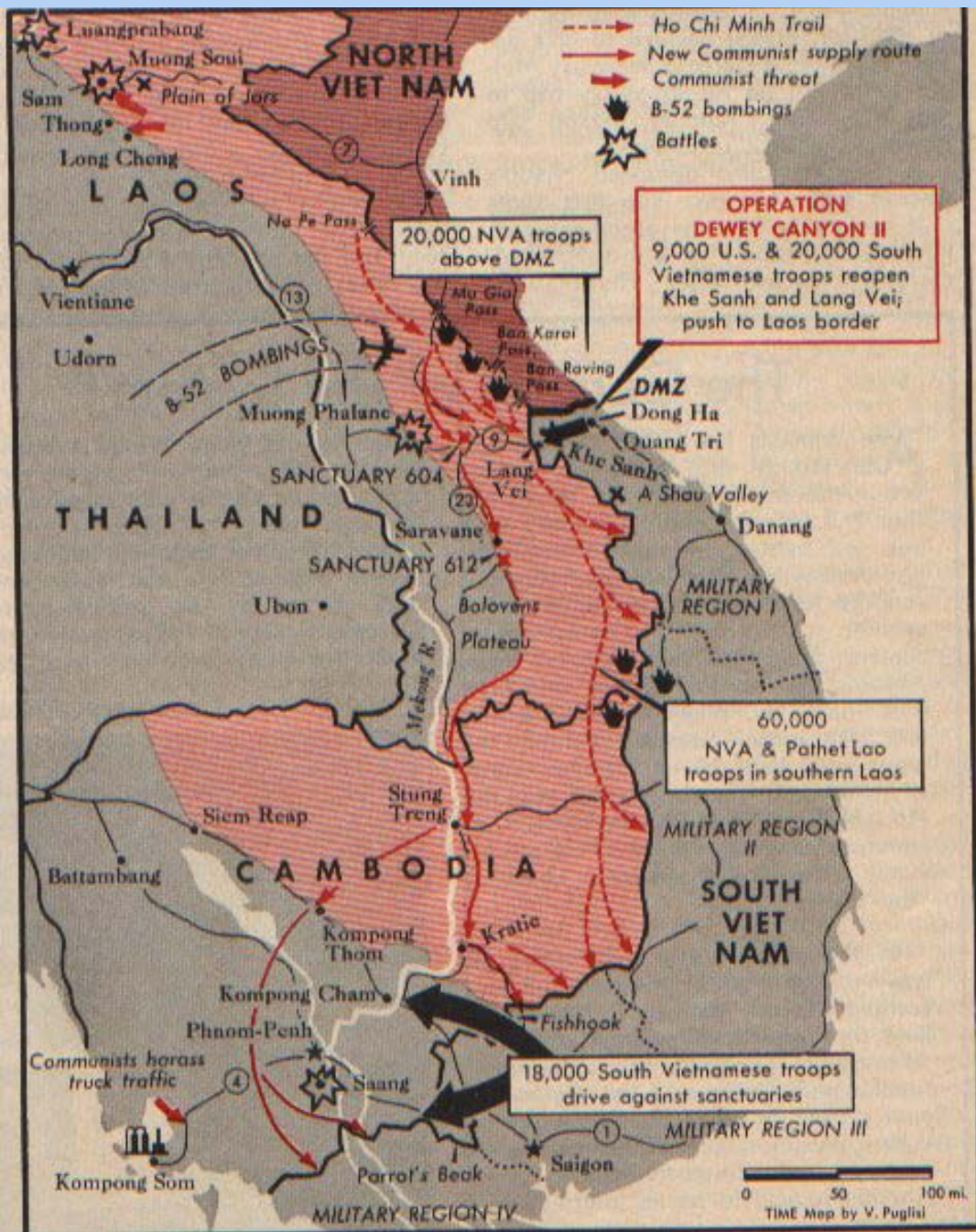


The DRV responds

- Initial response to the Sihanouk coup: extend territorial control west to the Mekong
- After the US-ARVN incursion:
 - Logistics:
 - Protecting, building out, and extending the Ho Chi Minh Trail
 - Reorganizing logistics forces in Cambodia
 - “Khmerization” of the war in Cambodia
 - Political
 - Military
 - Execution of an “anti-infrastructure” strategy against Cambodia—high impact, low cost, low risk
- Politburo meets in June to conduct a review of the conflict and work through their strategy in this new game
 - Projects likely American move as an incursion into Laos; subsequent analysis by General Staff fixes on Route 9 as likely avenue
 - NVA takes aggressive action to prepare, planning on a “strategically decisive, counteroffensive battle of annihilation”
 - Campaign road infrastructure
 - Logistics infrastructure
 - Command structure
 - Detailed terrain study and campaign analysis by NVA

Indochina

“had become a single battlefield”





The Operational Arena: Route 9 in Laos

Cuộc hành quân Hạ Lào - Lam Sơn 719
Operation Lam Son 719
8 February - 25 March 1971

«Hôm nay, mừng 8 tháng 2 năm 1971, tôi đã ra lệnh cho Quân lực Việt Nam Cộng Hòa tấn công vào các căn cứ của quân Cộng sản Bắc Việt nằm trên lãnh thổ Ai Lao, dọc theo biên giới Lào Việt thuộc Quán Khu I.»

Nguyễn-văn-Thiệu
Tổng Thống Việt Nam Cộng Hòa

"An Odd and Laughable Plan"





Results of the Campaign

- North Vietnam
 - Assessment of the campaign
 - Implications for strategic planning
- United States and the Nixon White House
 - White House assessment of MACV's performance: a permanent scar
 - Negotiating initiative
 - Triangular diplomacy and its effects on the conflict
- South Vietnam
 - What they wanted
 - What they got



So what do we learn from all this?

- Strategic and operational estimates as a competitive, reactive, iterative process
- Coalition warfare as interests diverge (or in the case of the Vietnamese and Cambodians, when they are built on centuries of hatred and mistrust)
- Civil-military relations in a long, frustrating war
- Military standards of performance: what do we expect of the military chain of command?
 - Professional planning
 - Timely and aggressive adaptation to the unexpected
 - Clear, accurate, and honest reporting up the chain of command
- Assessing operations in a confusing, divisive war
 - Nixon and the media
 - Unit vs. system performance
 - Strategic vs. tactical assessment
 - US vs. RVN assessment



And to conclude:



Lam Son 719

