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
- *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
“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: