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Supporters of Incursion Cite Changed Situation

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 8—The old plan for a ground attack on the Ho Chi Minh Trail network in Laos took on new life here at least three months ago in talks between South Vietnamese and American officials.

After nearly five years of being advocated by allied commanders and South Vietnamese leaders and rejected by the White House, the idea suddenly seemed feasible. President Nguyen Van Thieu favored it in private talks with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, who reportedly endorsed it.

"Nixon was really behind it this time," said a well-informed source. "He knew there would be troubles at home, but he also knew that they could be offset by mid-April when he announces another substantial reduction in American forces."

Thieu Spoke to Laird

By the time Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird arrived in January, the plan was very much alive. In a meeting on Jan. 11, President Thieu again urged the attack. Mr. Laird listened, expressed his views, and said he would discuss it further in Washington.

An exchange of conversations and messages followed. Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the American military commander, mapped out details with Gen. Cao Van Vien, the chief of the South Vietnamese General Staff.

The arguments, understood to have been advanced by President Thieu and backed by Mr. Bunker, were as follows:

¶The United States was pulling out of South Vietnam and the assault against the trail would not upset the timetable. By helping the South Vietnamese strike at the main supply artery for the war in Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam, the Americans would be insuring the security of South Vietnam as well as the continued pace of withdrawals.

¶Time was running out. The Americans were supposed to be out of a combat role by mid-summer. The peak of the flow of enemy supplies comes during the dry season. And if it is curtailed now, the allies would set the enemy's effort back at least a year and maybe more.

¶President Nixon would be able to point to continued troop reductions as well as the success of his program of Vietnamization, which involves an increasing combat role for the South Vietnamese. If the operation were successful, he could point to the progress of the South Vietnamese Army, now able to leap into the maze of roads and jungle trails in Laos, and, with the help of American air power, wreak havoc against the enemy.

Cambodia Would Be Helped

Moreover, President Thieu is understood to have noted that the move would pay dividends in Cambodia where the situation has caused more alarm among American officials than they openly acknowledge. By pinching the trail in southern Laos, the argument went, the Communist effort eventually would wither in Cambodia as well as in South Vietnam.

Supporters also contended that the assault was even more

necessary because of the success of the American-South Vietnamese incursions into Cambodia last spring.

The point was that before the war spread to Cambodia, a ground assault—against the trail—would not be the decisive measure its supporters now hoped for.

"One of the arguments you always heard against a Laotian operation before was that it could not be conclusive," a military officer said. "The White House argued that supplies could always come in through Sihanoukville and that the war would go on. This is no longer the case."

Port Closed to Enemy

Kompong Som, the former Sihanoukville, has not been open to Communist supplies feeding the war in the southern provinces of South Vietnam since last March when Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia was deposed.

Accordingly, supporters of a strike against Laotian sanctuaries said it was time to do for the northern provinces of South Vietnam what the Cambodia incursions had done for the southern provinces.

Supporters also contended that with the improvement in the South Vietnamese army, a major American military effort was no longer necessary.

When Gen. William G. Westmoreland first proposed the venture and then reportedly requested more than 200,000 American ground troops in 1968, the idea sent a shudder through Washington. Militarily, South Vietnam was less secure at the time and the thought of moving American troops into Laos, if only briefly, was regarded as totally unacceptable.

The fear of upsetting the political balance in neutralist Laos still remains. But one of the first steps in the preliminary planning for the present operation was presumably to make contact with Prince Souvanna Phouma in Laos to obtain at least tacit approval for the assault. The Prince has denied that he was consulted.

Crucial Meeting Jan. 29

The crucial meeting, which apparently covered the final details, took place Jan. 29 when Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams spent more than an hour with President Thieu. Mr. Bunker called again the next day and again on Feb. 1, and then left for Washington to meet with President Nixon.

Samuel D. Berger, the deputy ambassador, then took over the final phases of the negotiations, meeting with meeting with President Thieu last Wednesday and again two days later.

It remained unclear whether there had been a delay in the incursion into Laos after the American forces had cleared the way up to the border. Bad weather may have been a factor and the South Vietnamese may have moved more slowly than planned.

It could also not be determined whether American and South Vietnamese officials had set a date for the end of the operation and the withdrawal of South Vietnamese forces from Laos. "Time means nothing to us in Vietnam," one South Vietnamese said.