

MAR 18 1971

Thieu, Facing Election, Sees Political Gains in Laos Drive

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, March 17—President Nguyen Van Thieu, facing an election this fall, has intensified his efforts to reap political as well as military benefits from the present South Vietnamese campaign against Communist supply lines in Laos.

"The operation will instill a sense of national pride in the people," said one of his advisers. "They will feel 10 feet tall. They went after the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

"They showed the Communists that the South Vietnamese were not going to sit back and allow them free passage for their war supplies," he continued. "All that should pay off in political dividends for the President."

Whether the South Vietnamese are feeling all that proud of the operation so far is questionable. Some observers believed that the people are



Associated Press

Nguyen Van Thieu

paying little attention because they view it as merely one more operation. But other observers say that the operation, barring any future disaster, does seem to be paying off politically for President Thieu.

A Failure Would Hurt

"Thieu's reputation is riding on this campaign in a big way, just like Nixon's," said a senior American diplomat. "If it turns out to be a failure it would provide political fodder for the potential opposition to Thieu."

Other diplomats quickly assert, however, that the operation will be described officially as a smashing success even if it falls short of its objectives. For that reason alone, they say, Mr. Thieu stands to benefit.

"It's one of those military operations where the planners can announce success and nobody will be able to prove it one way or the other until much later when we see whether the Communists really have been hurt in their ability to wage war in the South," said one diplomat here.

In any event, President Thieu is taking no chances. He has been traveling around the country extolling the virtues of the campaign and attacking what he calls antiwar defeatist elements. After receiving a delegation of city and provincial officials yesterday, he announced that they had presented him with a resolution condemning all those who want "to stab the back" of the South Vietnamese soldiers fighting in Laos. He endorsed the group's plans for a nationwide campaign called "the Rear in Support of the Front."

A Victory Song

The Government announced that President Thieu's wife had sent 100,000 packs of cigarettes and 20,000 vials of camphor ointment to the troops in Laos. And the Government-run radio for the South Vietnamese military has been broadcasting its favorite song these days. Called "Tchepone Victory," it includes such lyrics as:

Tchepone! Tchepone! Have you heard of the Tchepone victory?

Our troops majestically poured into that town.

Tchepone! Tchepone! Have you heard of the Tchepone victory of the Republic of Vietnam's armed forces?

A marvelous exploit.

The divided Opposition is well aware of the advantage President Thieu holds as the incumbent. When at the outset the operation seemed to be going badly, with several of Saigon's units badly mauled,

there was a flurry of comment from the President's critics.

The criticism seemed to fade, however, after the short-lived occupation of Tchepone, the strategic road junction inside Laos that was taken ten days ago. The capture of the deserted and destroyed town gave the operation an aura of success.

The maneuvering for political position was evident when the operation began on Feb. 8. Gen. Duong Van Minh, who is regarded as President Thieu's most serious potential rival, spoke vaguely about how the campaign could shatter the army and have long-term adverse consequences for the nation. But he did not openly oppose it. As one diplomat put it, "Minh left his options open on this one, just as he usually does on issues."

Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, another potential rival for President Thieu this fall, also tried to set the stage for a political bonus or two. He expressed some fear that the South Vietnamese troops would bog down in Laos and suggested that they move into North Vietnam to insure success.

Sensing a position that appeals to some military elements as well as to hawkish northerners now living in the South, President Thieu made a few suggestions of his own about moving north. Few observers, however, regard the threats seriously.