

PUSH CUT SHORT, PENTAGON ADMITS

It Says Saigon Force Might
Have Stayed On if Foe Had
Reacted Less Strongly

MAR 24 1971
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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 23 —

The Defense Department acknowledged today that South Vietnamese troops might have stayed longer in Laos if the Communists had not reacted as strongly as they did to the attacks on their vital supply line.

It also emphasized that if the North Vietnamese response in the six-week campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail had been even more powerful, the withdrawal might have come earlier.

Those judgments were offered by the Pentagon's spokesman, Jerry W. Friedheim, when he was pressed by newsmen on whether the North Vietnamese counteroffensive had forced the South Vietnamese to cut their operation short.

Original Forecast: 6 to 8 Weeks

Mr. Friedheim said that when Secretary of Defense Melvin D. Laird was briefed last January on the plans for the thrust into Laos, he was told by United States and South Vietnamese commanders that the campaign, which began Feb. 8, would last five to eight weeks, depending on the enemy reaction.

"If the enemy had not reacted, they might have stayed longer," Mr. Friedheim said. "If the enemy had reacted stronger than he did, it might have moved to the shorter end of the parameter."

"Obviously the enemy influences the course of battle," he added.

Meanwhile, the Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield of Montana, challenged the view expressed last night by President Nixon that all the principal objectives of the incursion

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into Laos have been accomplished.

The Senator said in a statement that "on the basis of the hasty withdrawal, it looks like the trails will be in operation again shortly." Asserting that "It would seem the withdrawals are a bit premature," he remarked that he had never been optimistic about the drive.

Issue of Renewed Bombing

In a related development, Administration officials said that extensive air strikes on military targets throughout North Vietnam could not be ruled out should Hanoi attempt a major offensive in South Vietnam. They cited Mr. Laird's comment yesterday that the decision on "large strikes" would depend on developments.

Mr. Nixon's comments on the war were made in an hour-long televised interview conducted by Howard K. Smith of the American Broadcasting Company. The President made the "interim" assessment that the South Vietnamese drive had made considerable progress toward the objectives of insuring American withdrawals from Vietnam, reducing the threat to the forces still remaining and developing the long-range ability of South Vietnam to defend itself.

Mr. Nixon pledged that the next announcement on United States troop pullouts would be made next month and that they would at least be at the present rate of 12,500 men a month.

Mr. Friedheim reported that 20,000 Americans left Vietnam during the campaign in Laos.

Long-Range Appraisal

In his comments on the Indochina war, Mr. Nixon cautioned, however, that it might not be possible to judge the South Vietnamese incursion as "a success or a failure" even after its end because it can be appreciated only in the long-range perspective of the continuation of American withdrawals and the security of the troops staying behind.

Mr. Nixon's discussion was couched in more careful terms than before. At a news conference on Feb. 17 he declared that the South Vietnamese had gone into Laos to disrupt Communist communication and supply lines and infiltration routes.

"Once that is accomplished, if it is accomplished early, they will get out," he added. "If it take a longer time, they will stay in."

Mr. Nixon also said last month that the weather in Laos would be another limitation on operations.

As concern developed here over the security of the United States forces holding the Khesanh base in South Vietnam and other American positions in the area of the invasion, Mr. Friedheim said that various contingencies "based on the realities of the situation" were being developed to end the operation.

Silent on Khesanh's Future

He refused to say whether United States forces planned to abandon Khesanh, which served as the staging area for the American-supported incursion, but he indicated that there would be some changes in the American deployment in northwestern South Vietnam.

Other Administration officials said there was uncertainty over whether the Communists would mount a major assault on Khesanh.

With regard to the retaliatory strikes, American planes attacked antiaircraft missile batteries and related facilities in North Vietnam in two days of raids earlier this week in what the Pentagon described as "protective reaction."

Administration officials recalled Mr. Nixon's pledge last month that he would not be bound by the 1968 "understanding" that ended the American bombing of North Vietnam if Hanoi's forces threatened United States "blocking forces" in the Khesanh area.

North Vietnam Disputes Nixon

PARIS, March 23 (AP) — North Vietnam, contesting President Nixon's assessment of the Laos incursion, said today that it had "completely failed."

The North Vietnamese delegation to the Vietnam peace talks said: "The criminal operation in southern Laos by the United States and the puppet administration of Saigon for nearly two months has completely failed in the face of the infinitely heroic resistance of the forces of liberation and the Lao people."