

Nixon's Aides Insist Drive In Laos Was Worth Price

By MAX FRANKEL MAR 30 1971
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WASHINGTON, March 29— President Nixon has begun to review the postmortem studies of the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, which cover some serious military misjudgments as well as claims of strategic benefit.

The President is being advised that the allies badly underestimated North Vietnam's battlefield strength while overestimating their own. Yet, despite the high costs and the failure to realize maximum objectives, he is being asked to take comfort from the fact that more time was brought for the defense of South Vietnam and the continuing withdrawal of American forces.

Mr. Nixon is starting to look through the materials and analyses at his seaside retreat in San Clemente, Calif., to determine how to give the nation a further explanation of the Laotian venture, and how to profit from the experience in policy planning.

Some of the officials who helped assemble the materials doubt that the President, even in his own mind, will alter the judgment that the invasion was worthwhile. But they think that the presumed advantages, bought at such high cost in

battle, must be weighed against political losses at home, and, possibly, in Saigon. They expect that no one here will feel comfortable about the outcome for many months, at best.

The most conspicuous tactical setbacks are being attributed to intelligence failures. Mr. Nixon is being told that no one expected the North Vietnamese to be able to reinforce their units in Laos as quickly as they did or to supply them with 150 tanks and other heavy equipment in time to stage a massive counterattack.

Moreover, American air cover for the invading South Vietnamese is judged to have been much less effective than planned at early but critical stages of the six-week operation. Flights by helicopters and tactical support aircraft were hampered not only by poor weather but also by poor coordination with South Vietnamese guides and controllers on the ground.

Together those misjudgments are believed to have virtually eliminated the advantages in firepower and mobility contemplated for the 20,000-man invasion force. As they became

Continued on Page 9, Column 1

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

apparent, American military commanders wanted to rush reinforcements into the region, but their request was rejected by the Saigon Government and perhaps also by Washington.

The surprising enemy resistance, it is acknowledged, cut short both the reach and the duration of the invasion. It resulted in casualty rate of at least 25 per cent, and perhaps as much as 50 per cent, for the South Vietnamese, with as yet incalculable effects on their morale. And it left the North Vietnamese with at least a month more of relatively good weather to resume the shipment of men and supplies through the Laotian trails toward Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Nonetheless, the highest officials here do not accept the judgment of some analysts and journalists that the operation was ill-conceived or that the military results failed to justify the costs.

They are asking the President to keep in view its essential purpose: the disruption of North Vietnamese supply operations so that South Vietnam could be spared major military challenge through another period of American troop reductions.

Emboldened by the disruption of Hanoi's supply routes and bases in Cambodia last year, which brought relative tranquillity to the southern region of South Vietnam, the Nixon Administration had hoped to win a similar respite for Cambodia and the northern parts of South Vietnam for a period stretching well into 1972.

The largest gain claimed for the operation, therefore, is the pre-emption of enemy supplies and energies to ward off big attacks that would have been mounted over the coming year.

Heavy Toll of Enemy

The North Vietnamese are believed to have suffered at least as many casualties as the South Vietnamese and probably many more, from saturation United States bombing if not from engagements on the ground. They have been forced to use the better part of the dry season and their best reserves to repel the invasion. They will probably need a good part of the coming year to recuperate and to re-establish supply lines.

"When you ask whether it was worthwhile," a senior official remarked, "you have to ask whether we are better off than we would have been if we had not gone into Laos. Obviously, we are."

By that the President's men mean in a better position to continue the withdrawal of American forces without risking major North Vietnamese challenges. They think the South Vietnamese fought well under trying circumstances. They believe in any case that by buying time they have given the Saigon Government an even longer period in which to prepare to assume the total defense of its territory.

They had expected Hanoi to build up its forces for an effort to strike hard against the South Vietnamese Army sometime before the presidential election in South Vietnam this fall, and they had expected major assaults against American forces next winter and spring to influence the course of political debate in the United States.

Revival of Opposition

What the officials are asking themselves—if not the President—is whether the high military costs inflicted so much political damage on President Nixon, and perhaps also on President Nguyen Van Thieu, as to negate the benefits they had wanted to achieve.

It is acknowledged around the White House that opposition to Mr. Nixon's tactics of gradual withdrawal has been reignited by the invasion. He has lost ground in his bid for public support, they note, and cannot afford to lose much more without also losing flexibility in working for the survival of a non-Communist regime in Saigon.

They can only hope that Mr. Nixon will use the coming months to repair his standing and that Mr. Thieu can ward off challenges to his leadership.

At the middle levels of government here, the re-examination of the Laos venture have provoked quarrels about responsibility for the poor intelligence. There is also a continuing debate about the accuracy and value of the calculations being made to assess the degree of disruption or diversion of North Vietnamese supplies.
