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# The Campaign in Laos

## Early Assessment Indicates That Hanoi Won at Least a Propaganda Victory

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 23—The allied thrust against Communist supply lines, now drawing to a close, may have achieved some limited military success and killed thousands of the enemy, but in political propaganda terms Hanoi seems to have won the day. In this situation, unlike the aftermath of last spring's joint American and South Vietnamese offensive against the Cambodian sanctuaries, the allies are coming out looking like losers, whether they are or not.

And barring some new and dramatic future operation, which may well be in the offing, the image projected of a defeated South Vietnamese Army is likely to remain, much to the distress of American and South Vietnamese officials who believe that those troops deserve better.

In the casualty figures as reported, North Vietnam comes out second best. But, in the view of diplomats and others here, Hanoi realized the obvious: What went into Laos had to come out. And the Communists took heavy losses of life to counterattack, reap the propaganda benefits from appearing to drive Saigon's forces back to the border, and cripple at least four South Vietnamese battalions in the process.

What went wrong? Is the appearance of a South Vietnamese Army fleeing from tough Communist troops accurate? Did the allied operation fall short of its objectives?

### Enemy Resistance Strong

In short—and short answers are always dangerous in Vietnam—the operation probably did end more quickly than the planners would have liked, the enemy resistance and antiaircraft fire were more intense than anticipated and the operation did seem to fall short of its goals.

It appeared that more men should have been committed to the battle. But it is not that simple.

Military sources insist that the plan all along called for the outnumbered South Vietnamese to maintain their mobility, to move into an area or a landing zone blasted out of the jungles by 1,500-pounds bombs, to search and destroy what they could find, and then to move out. American firepower provided by warplanes and artillery at the border would take care of the enemy.

"When the Communists hit and run, everyone calls it clever," one military source said. "When the South Vietnamese do the same thing, it's called a retreat. Something is wrong.

"We got the enemy to mass and attack. That was a critical factor. It is hard to get across that this did not make us angry. They lost a lot of key people and while we did not think we would draw down their manpower that much, we did. We used mobility and firepower, once the operation got moving, and let the enemy throw away his manpower."

### Debate Just Beginning

The debate over the operation is just beginning, of course, but some tentative conclusions have been reached by military officers, diplomats and others here trying to draw up a balance sheet. Opinion seems to divide as follows:

On the plus side is the official view that the operation disrupted the Hi Chi Minh Trail, if only temporarily, destroyed "significant" amounts of supplies, killed (by allied count) more than 13,000 of the enemy, damaged key supply arteries and left them mined, delayed enemy plans for offensives by three to six months, forced Hanoi to devote time and energy to rebuilding its supply network, showed that the South

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ECONOMIC AND  
SOCIAL COUNCIL

Committee for Program  
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the public desk, main lobby,  
United Nations Headquarters.  
Tours: 9:15 A.M. to 4:45 P.M.*

Vietnamese could fight in difficult enemy terrain without American advisers and left the troops with a new sense of confidence.

On the minus side, the view is that the operation underscored weaknesses in South Vietnam's army and its almost total dependence on American warplanes and helicopters, handed Hanoi a propaganda victory, dramatized the limitations of American air power, fell so short of expected results as to be devoid of long-term benefits and created new strains at unofficial levels between Americans and South Vietnamese arising out of the oft-expressed concern among the Vietnamese that the Americans were skimping on air support.

### Satisfaction Voiced

There will have to be a considerable wait for conclusive answers. In the meantime, official spokesmen are echoing President Nixon's view that the operation was a success and that they are satisfied. There is no doubt, however, that they would have been more satisfied if the campaign had produced more dramatic immediate results.

In some key indicators, the dividends fell well below those of the Cambodian operation. In six weeks in Laos, for example, the booty included 4,400 individual weapons, or enough to equip eight enemy battalions. But 15,000 were captured in the first month in Cambodia.

The South Vietnamese troops reached two of the several major storage areas described by military briefers here at the outset of the campaign — areas designated 604, near Tchepone, the road junction area, and 611 to the southeast.

The troops roamed through caches near Tchepone, destroying what they could find, but discovered that the enemy had moved much of the stocks to other locations. The base area, 611, was just barely delved into. Many other caches were found elsewhere along the way, but fewer than hoped for. And at times the South Vietnamese were so busy defending themselves that they had little time to search.

### Early Resistance Unexpected

High-ranking military sources also say that the enemy strategy, which determined whether the operation would proceed from one phase to the next, was not what had been anticipated. They say that heavy resistance had been expected because of the crucial value of the trail network, but add struggle than predicted.

The planners had thought that the strongest enemy effort would appear after the South Vietnamese had moved farther into Laos. The operation seemed to bog down at 16 miles from the border for about two weeks, in part because bad weather curtailed helicopter support flights, and the North Vietnamese apparently believed that the advance was going to stop there.

Thus, in the view of these military sources, the Communists decided to carry out their intense assaults at that point, overrunning Hill 31 and a ranger battalion north of the main thrust.

The attacks resumed after the South Vietnamese left the Tchepone area two weeks ago

and they continued as Saigon's forces moved southeast toward the border, leaving fire base after fire base under mounting pressure. American planes dropped up to 400 tons of bombs a day, but still the enemy came, despite heavy casualties.

### Linguistic Problems

There were also some unexpected drawbacks on the South Vietnamese side. The South Vietnamese soldiers, because of their difficulty in speaking English, created serious problems when calling for air strikes, medical evacuation helicopters and other air support. And the helicopters had become even more important than planned because route 9, which crosses the border, could not be made secure and used as a key supply road.

Moreover, the South Vietnamese command structure left much to be desired, with separate command posts for the airborne troops, infantry and marines. Interservice rivalry is not a monopoly of the Americans.

The key question, of course, is whether it was all worthwhile. President Nixon seems to have made up his mind already that it was, saying the operation would make it possible for him to continue troop withdrawals at the current rate.

Others are not so sure of the operation's benefits. And there are many subscribers to the comment this week of an experienced diplomat here who said: "You can tell if it worked only if nothing happens."