

*David Chron*

INFORMATION

March 19, 1971

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MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT  
FROM: HENRY A. KISSINGER  
SUBJECT: Situation in Laos

Attached is a report from General Haig of his meeting with President Thieu. The meeting tended to confirm General Haig's earlier assessment of the battle situation, but some favorable modifications on a tentative basis were made to plans previously outlined. President Thieu indicated that:

- he agreed to a suggestion by General Abrams that he consider conducting a raid operation in Muang Nong (see attached map) prior to the departure of ARVN units from Laos. This would be similar to the attack executed against Tchepone and would involve heavy air preparation followed by a helicopter assault with troops staying on the ground for about 3 or 4 days. This would tend to terminate the operation in Laos on a positive note;
- he anticipates his troops will be in Laos until 5 to 8 April. General Haig cautions that pressure from local commanders may cause an earlier departure;
- he would also like to attack the southeast tip of Base Area 611 but only after his troops had left Laos and had experienced a period of rest. General Haig does not believe that this possible operation should be considered a part of the Lam Son 719 political package;
- his troops would not leave western South Vietnam but would remain in the Khe Sanh area for 3 or 4 weeks after his forces left Laos, to keep the enemy under threat and to avoid the inference that they had been driven out of the area. General Abrams confirmed that the US 5th Mechanized Brigade would also remain in Khe Sanh through April.

State Dept. & OSD  
review completed pgs  
3-5 only

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE  
INSTRUCTIONS APPLY

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MORI C05076855, pgs 3-5

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**President Thieu expressed regret for the need to modify plans and explained that two factors had made changes mandatory:**

- The unexpected strength of the enemy which exceeded all expectations.**
- The heavy casualties experienced by his troops.**

**President Thieu stated he had not expected such severe contacts and that he had reinforced with his entire strategic reserve as well as with cavalry elements from II Corps.**

**General Haig observed that President Thieu is very sensitive about the casualties suffered by the airborne and probably feels that this unit as well as the marines have received less than evenhanded treatment as guests in I Corps.**

**Attachment**

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FROM: General Haig, MACV, Saigon 641

TO: The White House, Exclusively Eyes Only Dr. Kissinger

Accompanied Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams during extended meeting with President Thieu. Discussion tended to confirm my message earlier today although we were able to obtain some favorable modifications on a tentative basis to Plan 1 outlined previously.

During meeting I stressed to President Thieu difficulties which changes in plans caused in Washington. He replied that he too regretted need to modify plans but that two factors had arisen to make changes mandatory:

1) The unexpected strength of the enemy which exceeded all expectations -- Thieu stated his intelligence had predicted heavy AAA, difficult terrain and marginal weather but that none foresaw the degree to which the enemy would reinforce his defenses.

2) The heavy casualties experienced by his troops -- Thieu stated he had not expected such severe contacts and that he had reinforced with his entire strategic reserve as well as with cavalry elements from II Corps. He pointed out that he would not in the future commit his general reserve to corps operations except to overcome emergency situations which might develop or to put out critical fires in Cambodia. Comment: It is apparent that Thieu is very sensitive about casualties suffered by airborne and probably feels this unit as well as marines have received less than even-handed treatment as guests in I Corps.

Thieu agreed to suggestion by General Abrams that he consider conducting a raid operation in Muang Nong prior to the departure of ARVN units from Laos and of the type executed in Tchepone. The operation would involve heavy B-52 preparation followed by tacair and gunships and finally helicopter assault. Troops would stay on ground destroying supplies and material for about three or four days, thus ending operation on psychological upswing. We urged Thieu to insure that is done so that operation in Laos can terminate with positive thrust.

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Thieu went on to say that he anticipates that his troops will be in Laos until 5-8 April. Comment: I believe General Lam will try to shorten this period however events may intervene. I told Thieu that in my view retrograde must be conducted in an orderly, professional manner making full utilization of our firepower. We must however, be prepared for earlier departure since local commanders may move more quickly than either President Thieu or General Abrams would prefer.

Thieu stated he would also like to attack southeast tip of Base Area 611 but only after his troops had left Laos and had experienced some rest and refitting. He pointed out that this operation could be conducted later this spring without public fanfare similar to other border operations in Laos. He stated that he would inform General Abrams of the support he felt might be needed from the US at later date. Comment: This confirmed my earlier speculation on the 611 phase of the operation. President Thieu may ultimately do it but I would not consider it any longer to be a part of the Lam Son 719 political package.

Thieu stated he would not leave western South Vietnam after his troops left Laos in early April but rather would remain in Khe Sanh area to keep enemy under threat and to avoid inference that he had been driven out of area. He stated he would welcome an enemy attack on Khe Sanh where the battle would be fought on our terms and would be costly to the enemy. He asked General Abrams whether the U.S. 5th Mechanized Brigade would remain in Khe Sanh through April. General Abrams confirmed that it would. President Thieu stated he believed Khe Sanh would assume a political significance after his forces left Laos and that we should therefore remain there for three or four weeks. Comment: I agree with this assessment.

Contrary to comment in my earlier message, President Thieu then stated he would leave airborne in coastal areas of I Corps after they are withdrawn so that they will not return to the city with gloomy tales of the battle.

President Thieu stated people of South Vietnam are pleased with Lam Son 719. They know that although the battles have been costly, they are bringing trouble to the enemy and no waiting for the battles in their own provinces. He insisted that he will have no problems about the "victory" in South Vietnam. Comment: I noted from your cable to Ambassador Bunker that President is planning on Monday press conference. If you feel this is necessary, he should be aware of possible

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future difficulties and limit his comments to what has been accomplished thus far. He should not repeat not comment on duration of the operation other than to reiterate Thieu's original statement that it would be limited in space and duration. I will compile as complete a list of accomplishments as is available here and cable them to you tomorrow. In any event, I do not feel we need to be in the least defensive about Lam Son 719. It has achieved most of what we had hoped for and those involved here all are confident that it was well worth the price of admission - albeit a high one.

Best regards.

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