

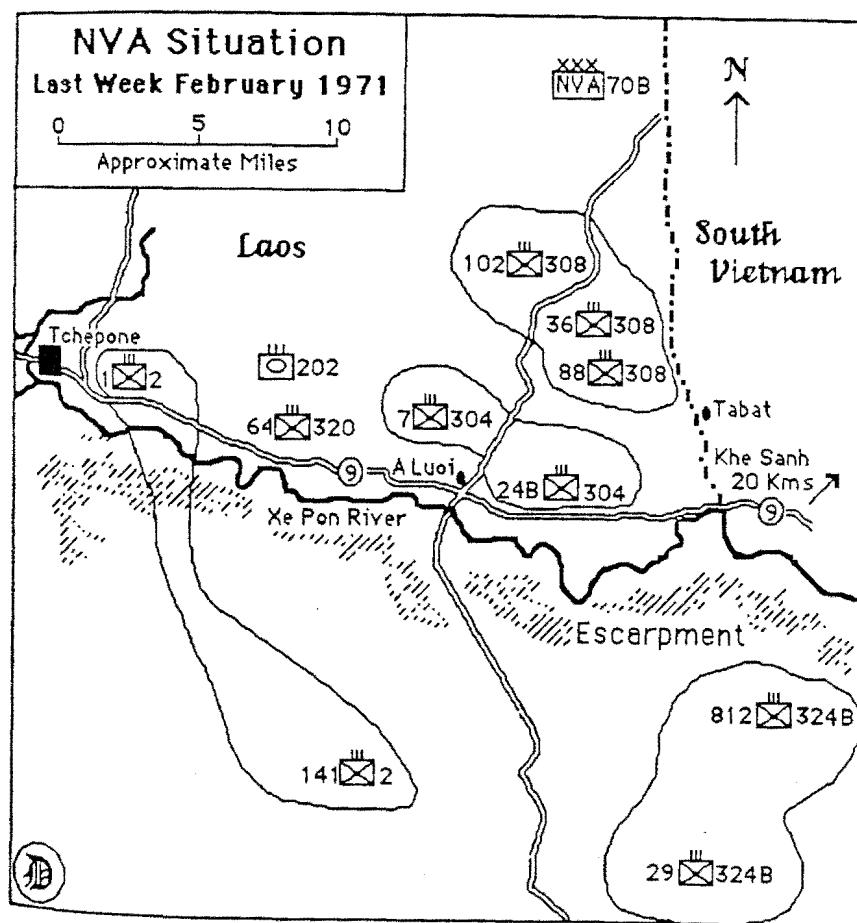
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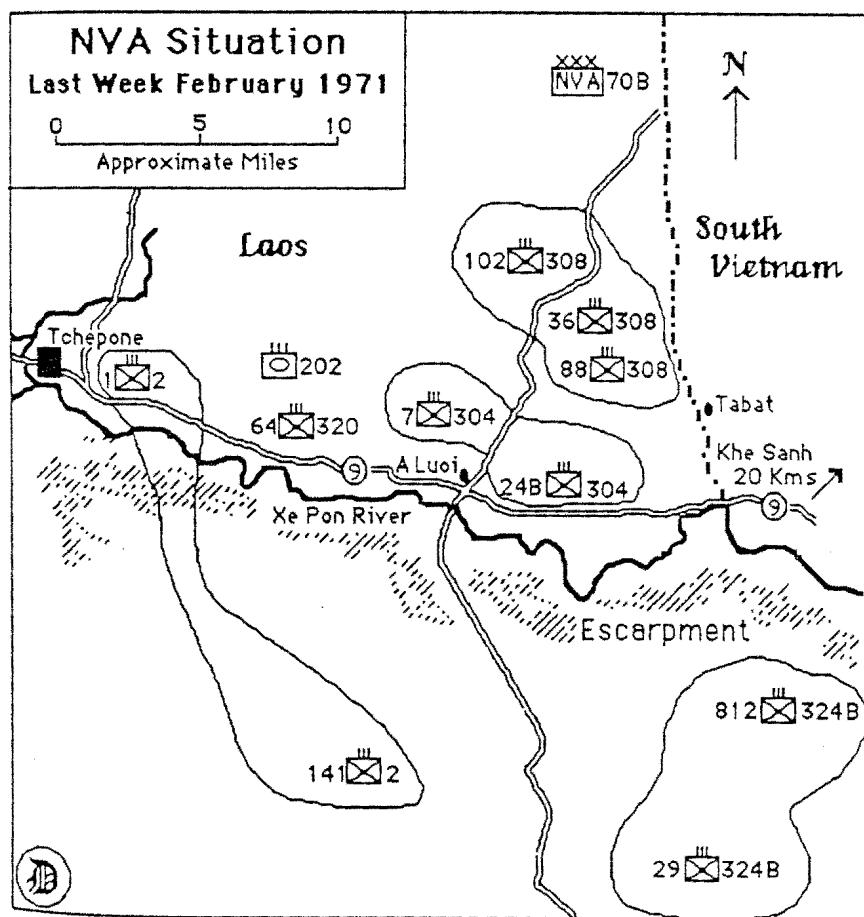
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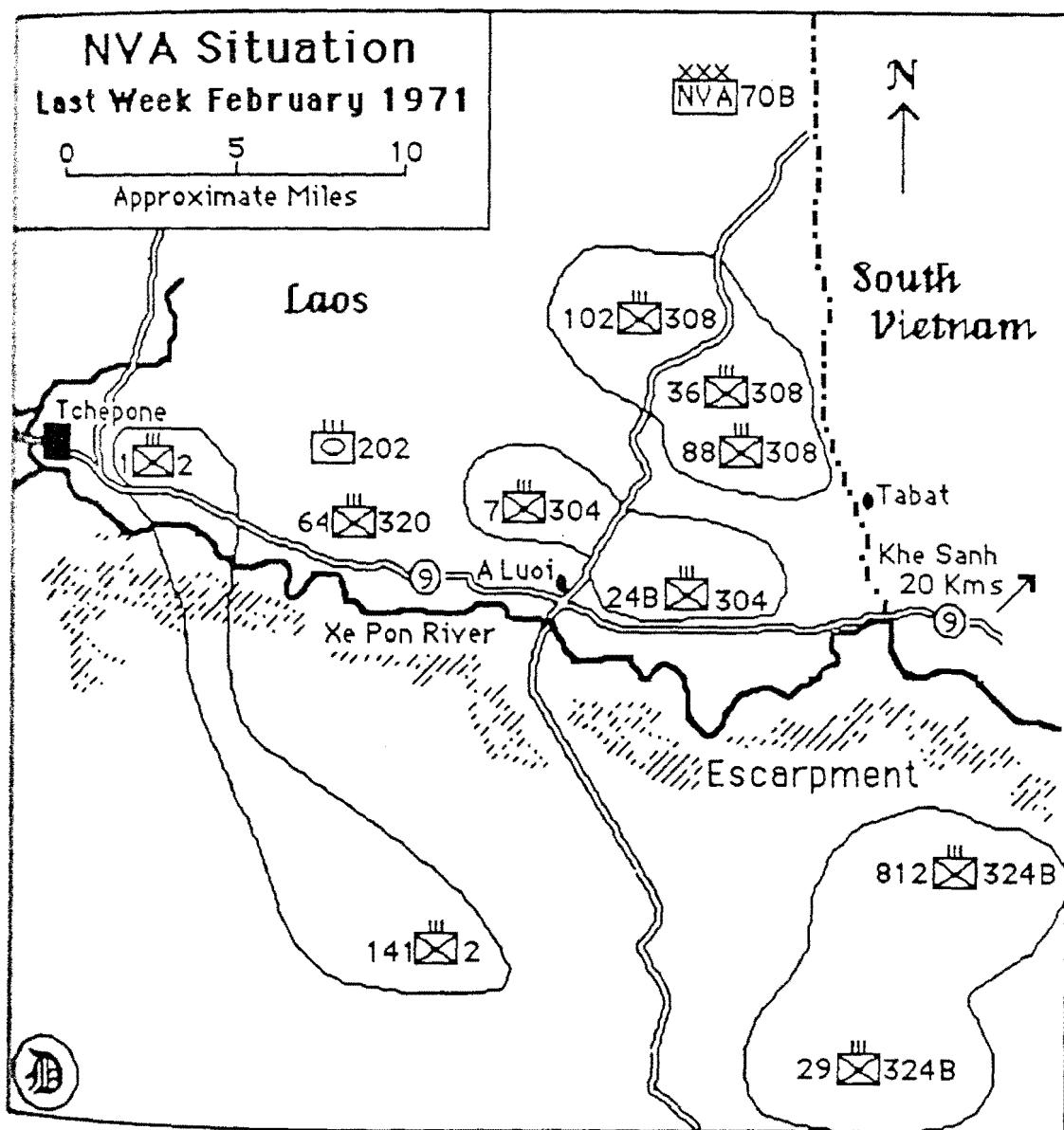
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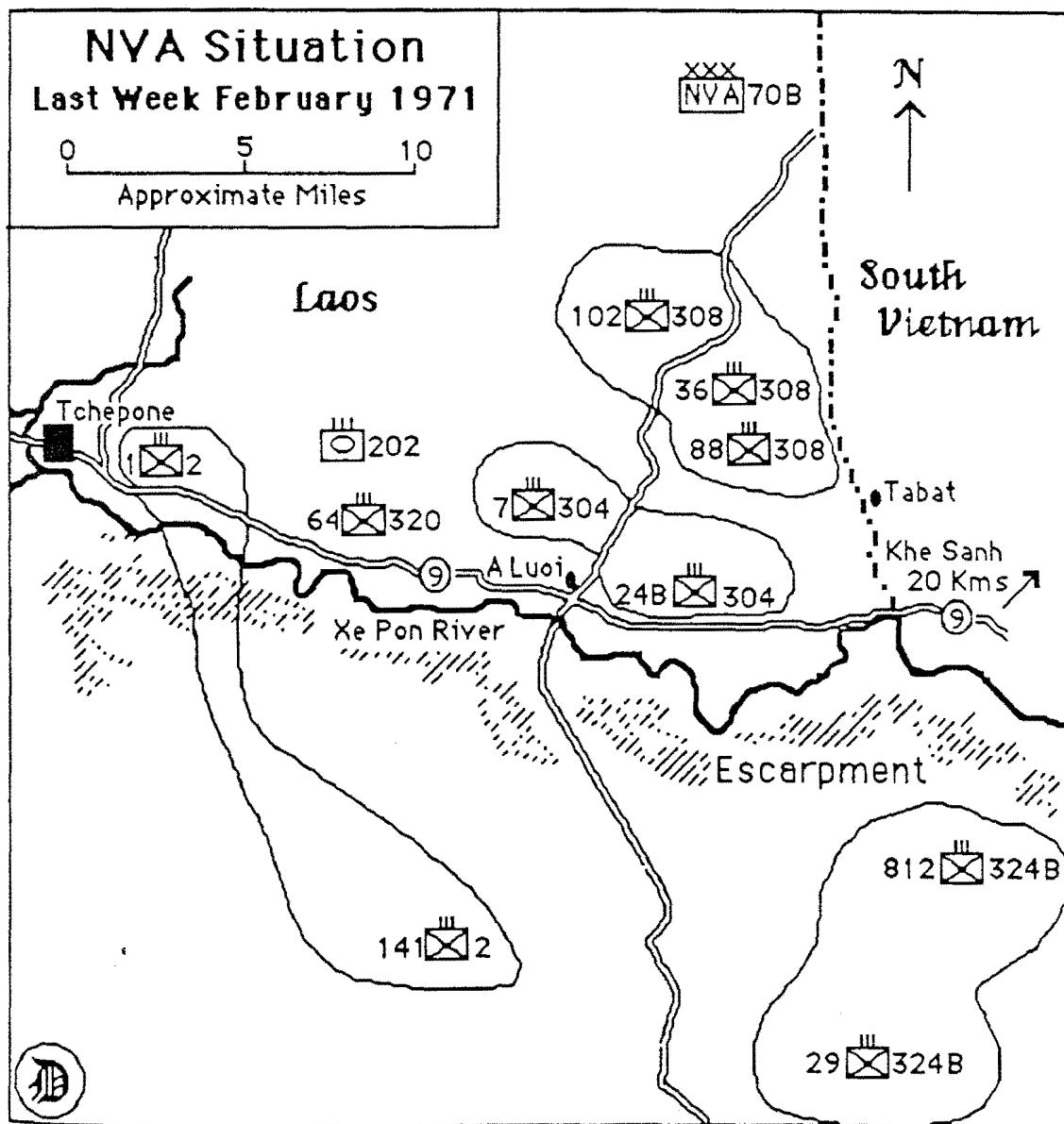
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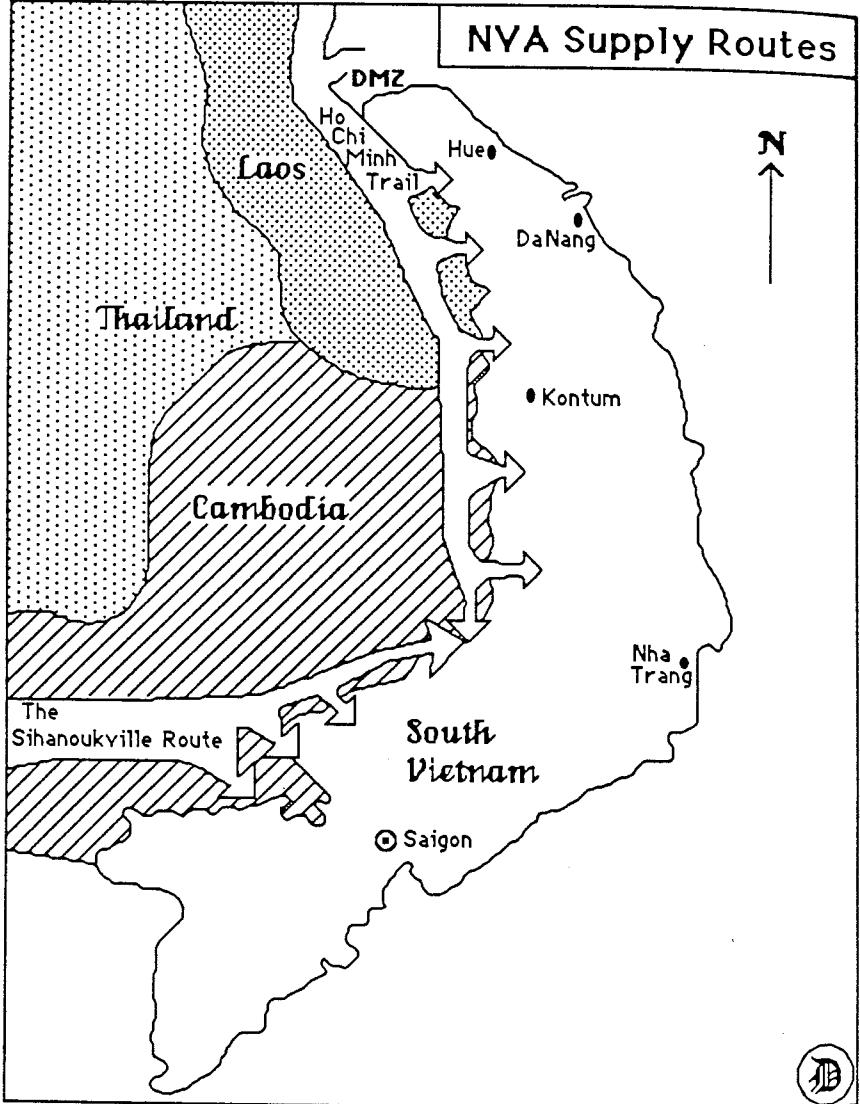


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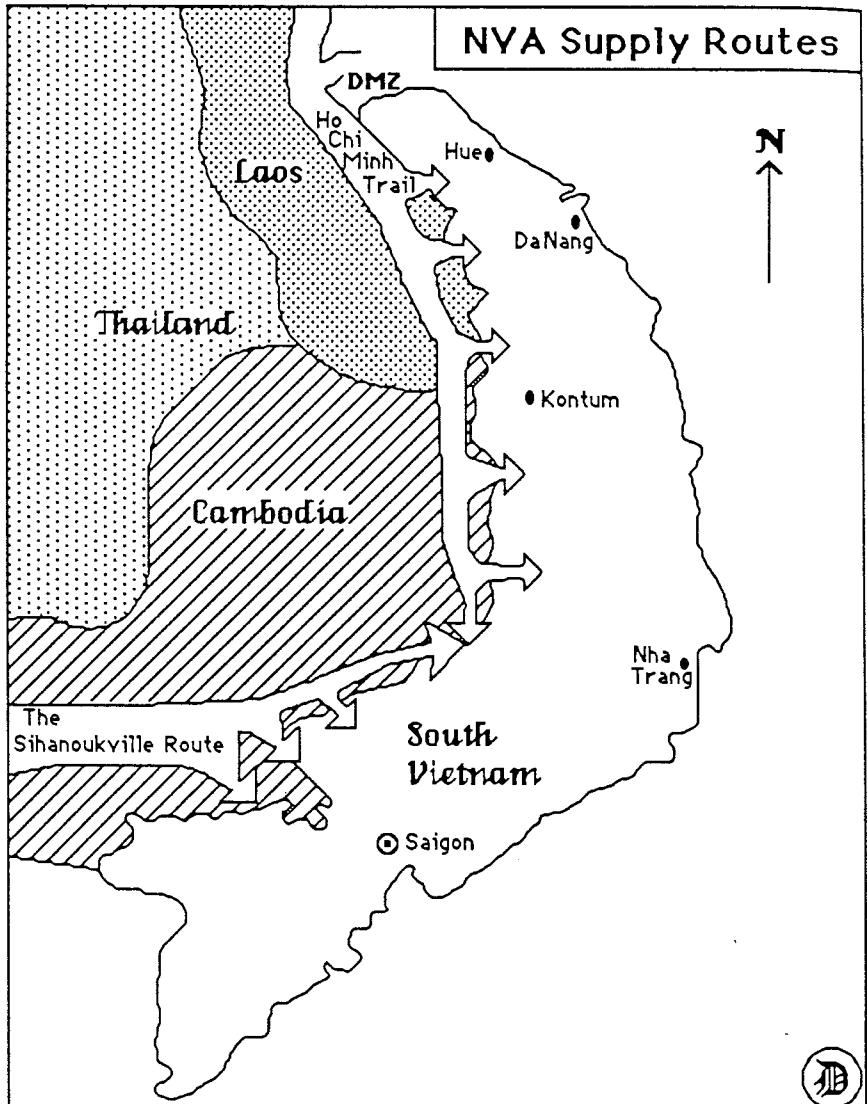


permit ARVN (with United States help) to cut the trail at a critical point and inflict a major blow. The ground assault force, however, was forbidden by the Cooper-Church Amendment to permit American ground troops to enter Laos. The North Vietnamese, too, were dependent on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They knew that if they could force the United States to withdraw its incursions into Laos, the DMZ would be open to them and they might well follow. According to the plan, the 70B Corps would be given the task of exercising operational control over the 320th NVA Divisions, located in the northern part of North Vietnam. With the formation of the corps, the formations that the corps make possible would be able to move along Route 9, the road leading from Laos to the coast. The NVA logistic activity in Laos would be concentrated, and the Communists prepared defensive positions along the coast. They concentrated their artillery on potential targets and prepared substantial part of their supply lines to repel an attack.

And so, as the Northeast Monsoon season approached, the North Vietnamese were ready.

The parenthood of Lam Son 719 was not in question. There was no rush after the plan was finalized. In spite of the obvious risks involved in the operation, the South Vietnamese, later saying, "The Cambodian incursion from Tchepone in 1971 came as a surprise to us. They came to us, promoted them, and then they left. The true as far as it went, General Vien had been asked to agree to the raid into Laos. In fact, General Vien had been asked to agree to the raid into Laos. Nobody on the United States side had been asked to launch the operation. No American had been asked to rigid adherence to truth had been asked to either North or South.

The architect of the operation was General

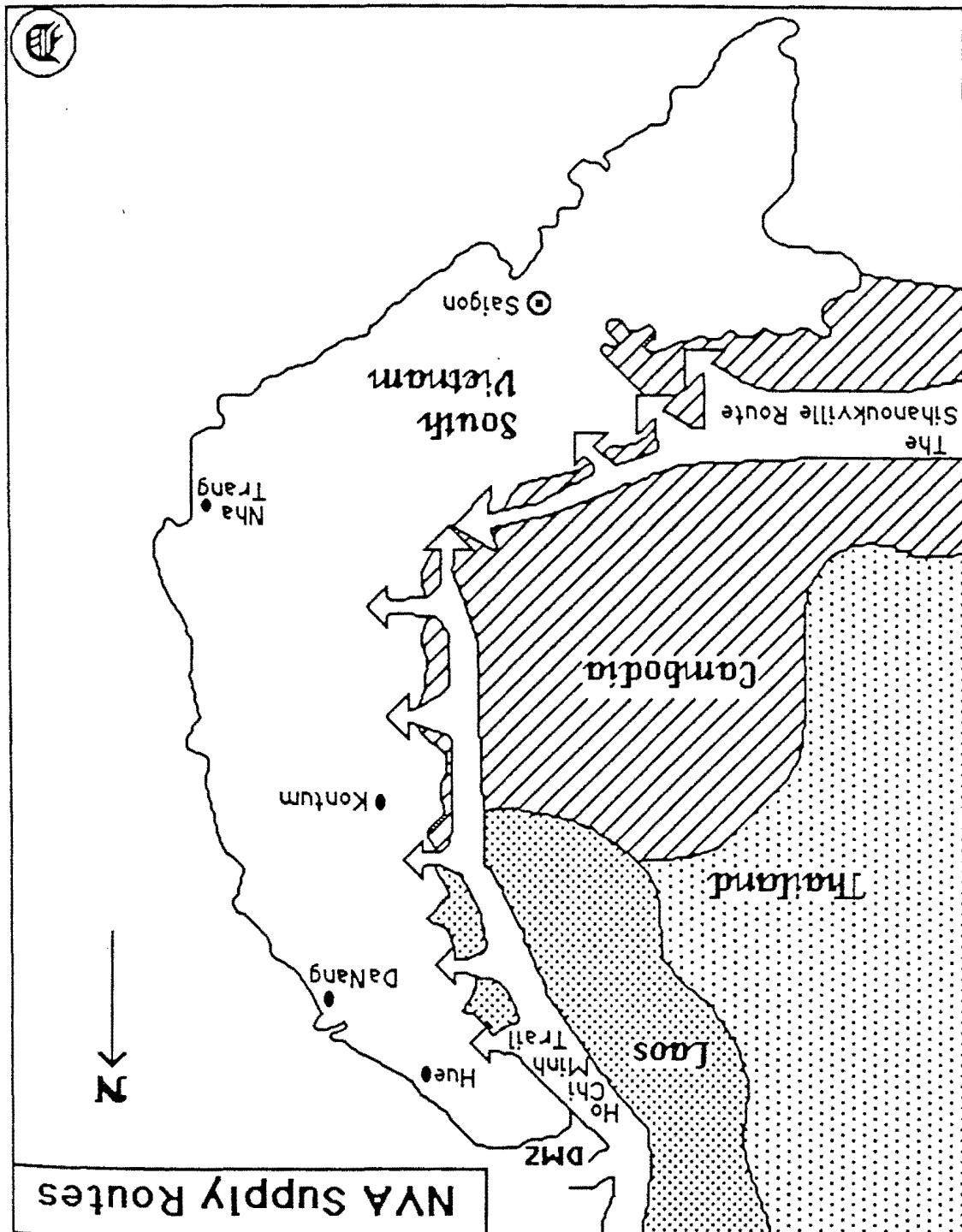


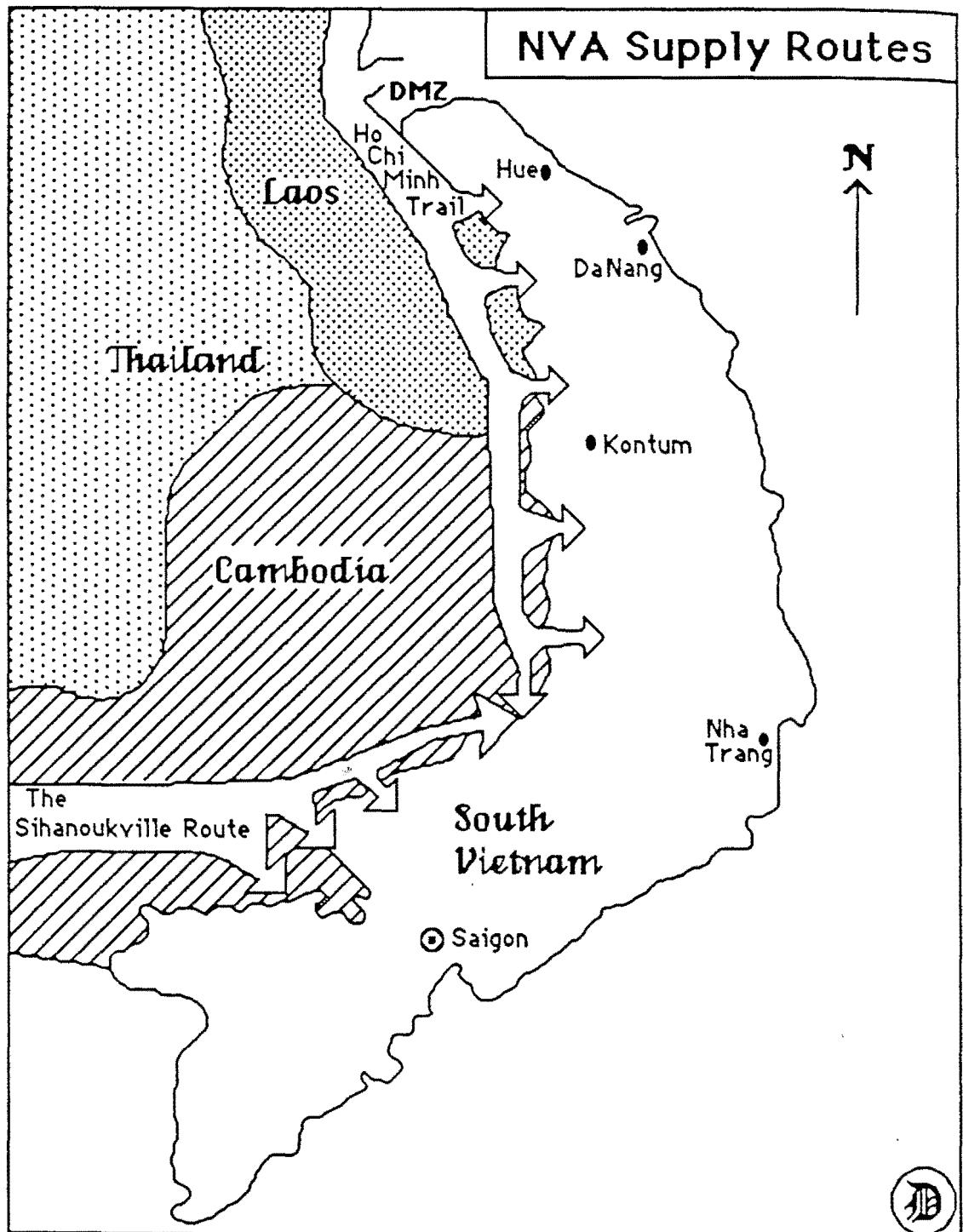
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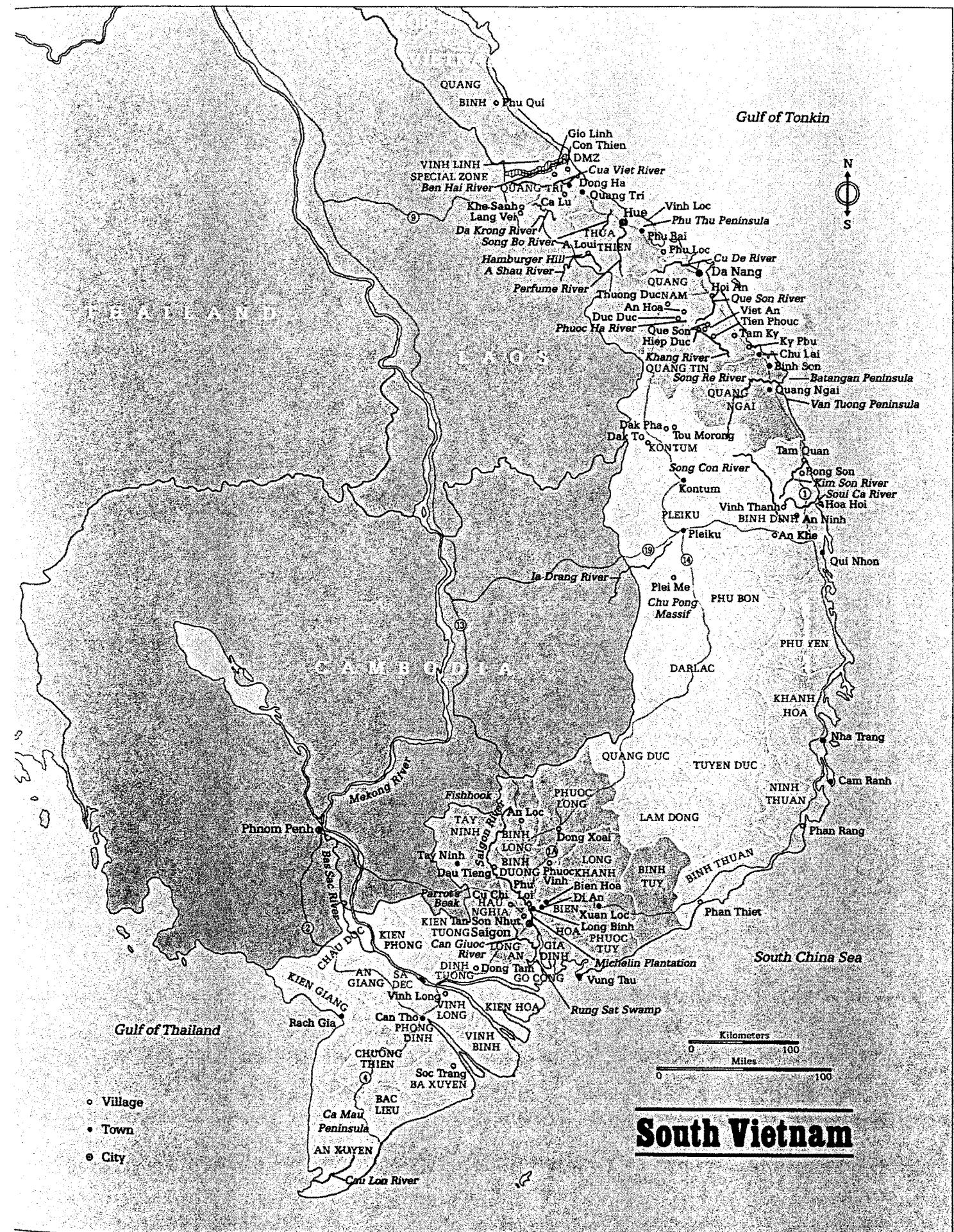
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Notes—Chapter 22

1. Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1974), pp. 160–161.
2. Tang, *Vietcong Memoir*, p. 177.
3. Thompson, *Peace*, p. 77.
4. Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 986.
5. John S. Bowman, ed., *The Vietnam War, An Almanac* (New York: World Almanac Publications, 1985), p. 261.
6. Richard M. Nixon, *The Real War* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), p. 109.
7. Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, *The Cambodian Incursion*, Indochina Monographs (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), p. 180.
8. Tho, *Pacification*, p. 170.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

CONCEPT FOR LAM SON 719

HO CHI MINH TRAIL
ARTERY

SOURCE

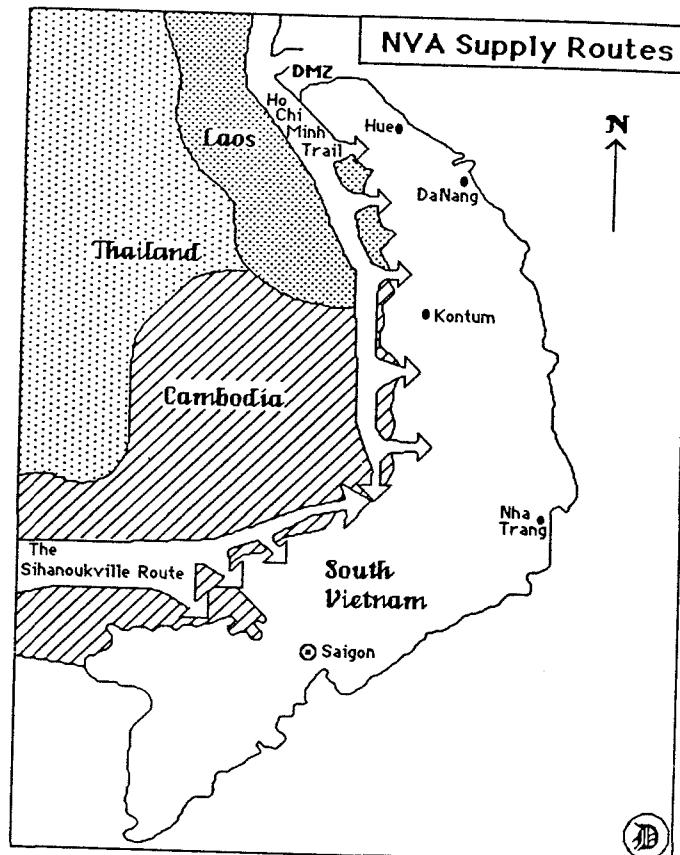
23 The Raid Too Far

Lam Son 719
1971

All wars are continuous scenarios in which operations are related to what went before. And so it was with Lam Son 719. Named after the village of Lam Son, the birthplace of Le Loi, a Vietnamese national hero of antiquity, it was the most important combat action of the year, and it epitomized and focused the strategies of both sides. For the United States and South Vietnam, the ARVN offensive, designed to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to occupy and destroy the base areas in southern Laos, bought time for continued Vietnamization and United States troop withdrawals. For North Vietnam, the South Vietnamese attacks struck directly at its greatest vulnerability: logistic support of its forces in the South.

The concept of this offensive sprang from the successful U.S./GVN incursion of May 1970 into the Cambodian base areas. Lon Nol's closing of the port of Sihanoukville and the destruction of the Cambodian base areas dealt the North Vietnamese a staggering blow, severely damaging the logistic support of the large Communist forces in central and southern South Vietnam. More importantly, the Ho Chi Minh Trail became the sole artery of support from North Vietnam through Laos to the NVA forces in South Vietnam. On the continued use of this network depended the capacity of the North Vietnamese to carry on the war.

The criticality of the trail was not lost on the Americans or the South Vietnamese. Both had long held plans to cut the trail, but neither had done so—the United States from political restrictions, the South Vietnamese from military incapacity. Now, in 1971, after the U.S./ARVN success in Cambodia, American planners saw that the situation might



permit ARVN (with United States air and artillery support) to strike the trail at a critical point and deal the North Vietnamese a devastating blow. The ground assault force would have to be solely ARVN because the Cooper-Church Amendment, passed after the Cambodian incursion, forbade American ground troops from entering Cambodia or Laos.

The North Vietnamese, too, saw the vulnerability of their total dependence on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Cambodian raid also warned them that the United States had changed the rules of the game and that incursions into Laos, the DMZ, or even into southern North Vietnam might well follow. Accordingly, in October 1970, Giap established the 70B Corps to exercise operational control over the 304th, 308th, and 320th NVA Divisions, located in and around Laos, the DMZ, and southern North Vietnam. With the formation of the 70B Corps, Giap issued instructions that the corps make preparations to counter an ARVN offensive along Route 9, the road leading from Khe Sanh to Tchepone, the center of NVA logistic activity in Laos. Beginning in October 1970, the Communists prepared defensive positions and ambush sites in the area, preregistered their artillery on potential helicopter landing sites, and shifted a substantial part of their supplies to other areas. The NVA made similar preparations to repel an attack into the DMZ or southern North Vietnam. And so, as the Northeast Monsoon began to wane in January 1971, the North Vietnamese were ready.

The parenthood of Lam Son 719 remains ambiguous. Certainly, there was no rush after the controversial event to claim credit for the operation. In spite of the obvious fact that three ARVN divisions participated in the operation, the South Vietnamese brazenly denied responsibility, later saying, "The Cambodian foray in 1970 and the Laos operation to Tchepone in 1971 came into being only because MACV originated them, promoted them, and supported them."¹ While this statement is true as far as it went, Gen. Cao Van Vien, the Chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS), and President Thieu both eagerly agreed to the raid into Laos when General Abrams presented it to them. In fact, General Vien had been proposing a similar operation since 1965. Nobody on the United States side compelled the South Vietnamese to launch the operation. No American had that kind of power. But then a rigid adherence to truth has never been a Vietnamese characteristic, either North or South.

The architect of the operation on the American side is also debatable.

VS
CIA
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WB
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NVA
PACAF

WEATHER

ARVN
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KISSINGER
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B.
ABRAMS

Henry Kissinger wrote in his memoirs that he originally wanted to send ARVN back into Cambodia, a repeat of the 1970 raid. He sent Alexander Haig, his military assistant, to Vietnam to discuss that possibility with Abrams. General Abrams proposed a much bolder operation—a relatively small ARVN attack into Cambodia, and a major multidivision offensive by ARVN (with United States air and helicopter support) into Laos to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Later, Kissinger, who adopted Abrams' concept, passed the blame to Abrams for having misled him about the operation's prospects of success. There is an irony here savored by military men dealing with civilians. The civilians want to "play soldier," making strategic and sometimes tactical decisions, but they don't want to play by the rules the soldiers must play by—in victory the decision maker gets the acclaim, in defeat he gets the blame. His is the ultimate responsibility, and if he loses, he cannot blame his staff, even though they misled him. On Kissinger's behalf, however, it should be noted that not only did he approve the operation, but so did the theater commander, CINCPAC, (by then Admiral McCain), the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird.

If any agency should have challenged the operation's concept and chances of success, it was the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff. They didn't do so, and the main reason they didn't was their long-standing tradition of supporting the field commander, right or wrong. There were other reasons. The Joint Staff, which serves the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is a multiservice, overmanned bureaucracy, rife with service rivalries and deeply mired in a labyrinth of tedious and time-consuming procedures. The Joint Chiefs themselves, overworked and engrossed with individual service problems, were, and are, prone to agree with the simplest solution, which in this case was to support the operation.

There was another reason why the Joint Chiefs approved the operation. In the numerous conferences with civilian authorities, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff speaks—often without prior consultation—for the rest of the Chiefs. This is particularly true when time is short. In December 1970 and January 1971, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was Adm. Thomas Moorer, United States Navy, a distinguished navy airman, but one who had never served in Vietnam. He understood little of the complexities of ground operations and virtually nothing about the peculiarities of infantry fighting in Indochina. Unable to challenge the operation, he had to support it. The one man who could have told

the Joint Chiefs about the difficulties and dangers posed by the operation was General Westmoreland, then the army chief of staff and thus a member of the Joint Chiefs. He has told me on several occasions (as late as 1987) that he was *not* consulted about the operation until after it had been launched. Admiral Moorer and Secretary Laird have rebutted Westmoreland, claiming that he *was* consulted prior to the operation and that he concurred in it.²

The man who made the final decision to launch Lam Son 719 was Richard Nixon. On 23 December 1970, the president approved the Laos operation in principle, subject to final review. So when Abrams proposed the operation to General Vien in early January 1971, he spoke for the president of the United States. Nixon finally approved the operation in detail on 18 January 1971. It was a bold decision, but one that Nixon would apparently prefer to gloss over. In his memoirs he devotes just one page to the entire operation.

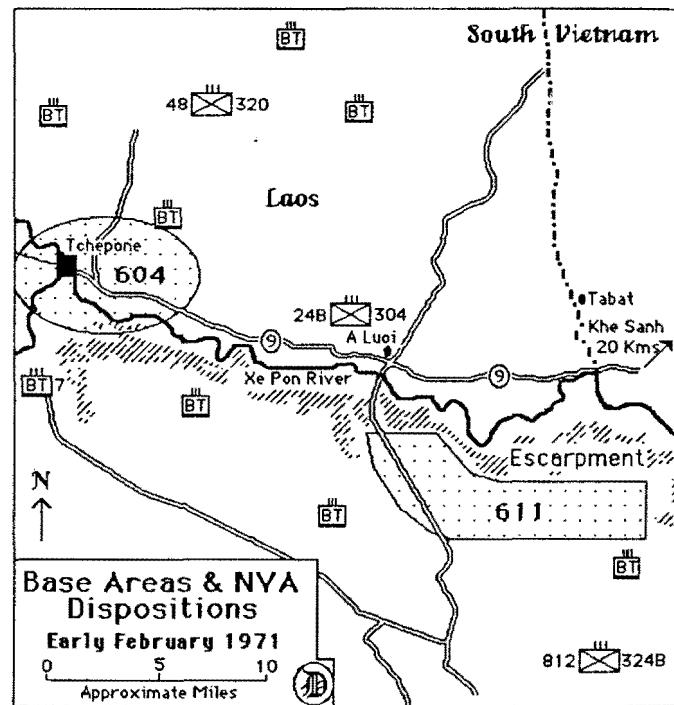
And yet from the national viewpoint of Nixon and Kissinger, Lam Son 719 made strategic sense. In the broad perspective the United States had begun a strategic withdrawal (retreat, actually) from Vietnam in 1969. And the best way to carry out any strategic withdrawal is by switching over on occasion to the *tactical* offensive. Hitler's Ardennes Counteroffensive of 1944 is a classic example. In the same way, the Cambodian raid of 1970 and Lam Son 719 in 1971 coupled with the violent American counteraction to the North Vietnamese Easter offensive of 1972 and the Christmas bombing of 1972 were tactical blows to upset the North Vietnamese and, by taking the initiative, to throw the pursuer off balance.

And so, concerning the American parentage of the concept of Lam Son 719, there is Abrams, who proposed the operation to Kissinger, who approved it. Kissinger passed it through the Joint Chiefs and the secretary of defense, who approved it; and they all passed it to the president, who ordered it carried out. Everybody except Abrams has, in one way or another, ducked responsibility for the concept and the results of the operation. Abrams, who died three years later on active duty—and thus to some extent muzzled—never gave his side of the affair.

As an immediate purpose, the offensive sought to destroy the logistic installations and supplies in Base Areas 604 and 611 in Laos. The destruction of logistic support in these areas would preempt any NVA offensive

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in South Vietnam. A success in Base Areas 604 and 611, coupled with the destruction wrought on the Communists in 1970 by the Cambodian raid, would buy at least a year free from major NVA offensives, a year of precious time, and the buying of time was the crucial long-range object. In addition to these objectives, Kissinger thought that an offensive into Laos in 1971, following the Cambodian raid of 1970, might convince Hanoi to negotiate.

To strike at the NVA base areas in Laos, Abrams proposed a bold and risky plan of four phases. In Phase I (to start on 30 January) United States troops along the DMZ would clear the area to the Vietnam/Laos

MILITARY
CONSULTATIVE
PLANNING
TO
NATIONAL
PLAN

PHASE I

Phase II
border and reactivate Khe Sanh as a base of operations. In Phase II ARVN would launch a three-pronged assault from South Vietnam astride Highway 9 to Tchepone. The central column, consisting of the ARVN Airborne Division reinforced by the 1st Armored Brigade, would attack down Highway 9 by heliborne assault and ground movement to A Luoi. From there, the airborne division would air assault into Tchepone while the armored brigade attacked overland. The South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division (the only ARVN infantry division worthy of the name) less the 2d Regiment which remained on the DMZ, would advance on a parallel axis to the south of Highway 9, protecting the south flank of the central column. A ranger group would establish a fire base at Tabat and protect the north flank of the airborne division. A Vietnamese marine brigade would be in reserve around Khe Sanh.

Phase III
After capturing Tchepone, Phase III foresaw the razing of Base Area 604. In Phase IV the ARVN force would move southeast from Base Area 604 to Base Area 611, destroy it, and then make its way back into South Vietnam. The ARVN offensive into Laos was scheduled to begin on 8 February with a duration of ninety days, when the Southwest Monsoon would terminate both tactical and logistic operations. The ARVN force would be commanded by Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, the ARVN I Corps commander. On the United States side, Lt. Gen. James W. Sutherland, CG U.S. XXIV Corps, would support the ARVN operation by helicopter, air strikes, and artillery fire from South Vietnam. The Laotian incursion would be accompanied by a minor ARVN operation into Cambodia.

Cooper Church
Two factors made Lam Son 719 unique. First, the Cooper-Church Amendment precluded United States ground troops from entering Laos or Cambodia. Second, and more critical, American advisors, artillery forward observers, and air controllers could not accompany the ARVN ground units into Laos either. This made U.S./ARVN coordination difficult and would denigrate support by aircraft of all types.

In February the Northeast Monsoon is just blowing out; nevertheless, weather for low-level air operations would be marginal, permitting them to operate, generally, only between 1000 to 1500 hours. The low clouds plus the hilly terrain would channel helicopter and low-level air operations along a few corridors in which enemy antiaircraft units could concentrate. The terrain was dominated by Highway 9 (a broken-up track) and the Xe Pon River, which ran south of, and parallel to, the highway. To

the south of the highway and river ran a sheer escarpment leading to mountainous terrain. The entire area was rugged, covered with dense undergrowth, and along the river, by double-canopy jungle.

While the terrain and weather promised difficulties, so, too, did the enemy. Enemy forces in the area of operations were estimated at three NVA infantry regiments, all Main Force and battle tested. In addition there were eight *binh trams*, NVA logistical units, with some marginal ground combat capability, but who had recently been reinforced by around twenty antiaircraft battalions manning a total of from 170 to 200 pieces of 23 mm to 100 mm in caliber. In all, in the projected area there were 22,000 enemy troops (7,000 combat, 10,000 *binh trams*, and 5,000 Communist Pathet Lao soldiers).

To the U.S./ARVN planners, the enemy's capacity to reinforce the area should have been a matter of great concern. Intelligence officers estimated that within two weeks eight NVA Main Force infantry regiments supported by artillery units could move into the objective area. Thus, within a few days the ARVN assault troops (a scant three divisions) could find themselves fighting at least four enemy divisions, with possibly more on the way from North Vietnam. To make the picture darker, both the ARVN and American commands knew from agent reports that the enemy was alert and expecting an assault into Laos or the DMZ.

Yet as D-day approached, both the ARVN and United States commanders and staffs were confident of success. In his *After-Action Report*, Col. Arthur W. Pence, the senior advisor to the ARVN Airborne Division, wrote, "It was apparent at this time that United States Intelligence felt that the operation would be lightly opposed and that a two-day preparation of the area prior to D-Day by tactical air would effectively neutralize the enemy antiaircraft capability, although the enemy was credited with having 170 to 200 antiaircraft weapons of mixed caliber in the operational area. The tank threat was considered minimal and the reinforcement capability was listed as fourteen days for two divisions from north of the DMZ."

*SURPRISE
LOST*

Lam Son 719 suffered a serious setback before it started. The North Vietnamese discovered the details of the operation from press leaks and from agents within ARVN. Tactical surprise, then, was totally lost. Nevertheless, the offensive began at 0001 hours, 30 January, when United States forces began their operations to clear South Vietnam north of

Highway 9 to the border, to repair Highway 9 within Vietnam, and to rehabilitate the runway at Khe Sanh. By 5 February the Americans had finished their tasks and taken over the security of the ARVN assembly areas in Vietnam near the border.

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WEST*

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ARVN
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On 6 and 7 February the operation received another blow. The weather turned bad and the preparatory American air strikes, which were supposed to neutralize the NVA antiaircraft guns, had to be canceled. At 0700 hours, 8 February, the ARVN part of Lam Son 719 jumped off. On that day the lead echelon of the central column on Highway 9 (elements of the 1st Airborne Division and the 1st Armored Brigade) pushed nine kilometers into Laos. The two ARVN forces on the flank made equally good progress, all against sporadic enemy resistance. Giap and the local commander, the CG of the NVA 70B Corps, were holding back until they were sure that Lam Son 719 was the real thing and not a feint to conceal a main attack elsewhere. On 9 February, in bad weather, the armored-airborne column advanced another two kilometers toward its first objective, A Luoi. On this same date the CG, 70B Corps, started the 308th ("Iron") Division from its assembly area around the DMZ toward Highway 9 in Laos. On 10 February the ARVN airborne division "choppered" a battalion into A Luoi against light resistance. Late in the afternoon the armored column moving east on Highway 9 linked up with the airborne troopers in the objective area at A Luoi. So far, so good.

Then on 11 February the inexplicable happened. The ARVN force in Laos froze where it was. They pushed out short-range patrols, which reported increased contacts, while the ARVN fire bases themselves began to get substantial enemy pressure. General Lam, the ARVN corps commander, issued no orders, nor did his subordinate commanders issue any. The operation just stopped for no discernible reason. Abrams, back in Saigon, was stunned and furious. As an experienced tank commander, he knew that success in this type of operation depends on speed and movement, both necessary to keep the enemy off balance. And this was particularly true of the North Vietnamese, who reacted slowly to changes on the battlefield, but who excelled at slow-paced, "set-piece" slugging matches. Abrams went to see Vien, imploring him to get the ARVN troops moving. Abe ranted at Sutherland, who was powerless to achieve any forward movement either. On 16 February, Abrams and Vien flew up to see Sutherland and Lam. At this meeting the decision

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was made to move the 1st ARVN Division west along the southern escarpment to establish fire support bases from which to support a renewed airborne-armored push westward on Highway 9.

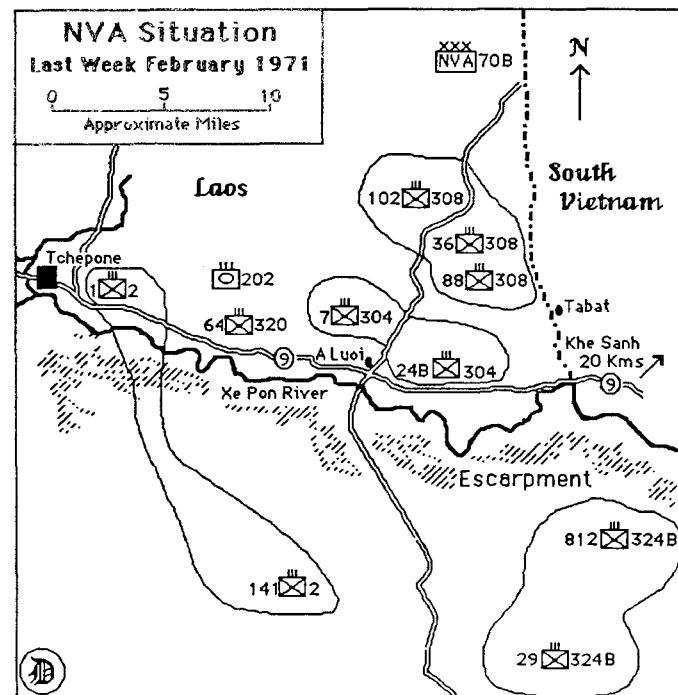
Meanwhile, enemy ground attacks supported by heavy artillery fire constantly increased. The NVA air defense capability, too, had grown menacingly. On 18 February, the 308th Division was identified in action on the northern flank. The 2d NVA Division appeared on the west of the ARVN advance and the 24B Regiment of the 304th Division showed up along Highway 9. Even more ominous, the ARVN force began to sight enemy tanks, and a POW stated that there was an NVA tank regiment in the area.

The sudden breakdown of the ARVN offensive on 11 February at first mystified Abrams and the other Americans. Later, they found that President Thieu had taken a hand in the game. On 12 February, he told Lam and his division commanders to be cautious in moving west and to cancel the operation once the ARVN force had taken 3,000 casualties. Such an order stifles boldness, the one ingredient which might have successfully concluded the mission and have curtailed ARVN losses. Actually, Thieu's order guaranteed that ARVN would lose the initiative and take heavy casualties as the troops hunkered down in their fire bases to await the onslaught by the ever-increasing forces of the enemy.

While Thieu's covert order undermined the offensive—as well as his American supporters—it made some sense in the occult world of South Vietnamese politics. The airborne division, the 1st Armored Brigade, and the marines were not only the total ARVN general reserve, but they were also Thieu's "palace guard," his anticoup defense. Their destruction would expose Thieu to dangers from his internal enemies. Also, a national election was scheduled for the fall. Heavy casualty figures would not provide a popular platform for Thieu to run on. So, on Thieu's order, from 11 to 19 February the invading ARVN force sat while the NVA concentrated its divisions against it.

On 19 February, Thieu held another meeting with Lam and his division commanders. Lam briefed Thieu on the growing dangers of the situation, particularly from Tchepone and on the north flank, where the rangers were under heavy attack by the 308th NVA Division supported effectively by T-34 and T-54 tanks. Thieu told Lam "... to take his time and ... expand search activities toward the southwest."³ In other words continue to do little or nothing.

With this kind of directive, the situation continued to deteriorate. By the last week of February, the NVA had elements of four divisions (ten regiments) in the operational area, plus tanks and artillery, and they were attacking. A fire base on the north flank was lost and the 39th Ranger Battalion overrun and virtually wiped out. Another fire base, held by a battalion of the airborne division, was overrun and an ARVN brigade commander captured. Large-caliber artillery fire from NVA guns increased markedly, and the now intense antiaircraft fire made heliborne movement in the area costly and dangerous. The NVA units stepped up their combined tank-infantry assaults, and single tanks



28 FEB
MORE OUT
ABN DIV

used as mobile gun platforms took an increasing toll. Truck convoys on Highway 9 came under frequent NVA attacks and this ground LOC, the only one, was in jeopardy.

In the midst of this approaching debacle, Thieu struck again. On 28 February he ordered the airborne division to be replaced in the attack by the marine division which had joined its one brigade near Khe Sanh. The folly of this decision stunned even the South Vietnamese. While the airborne division had taken losses, it was still in good shape. The marine division had never fought as a division and was an unknown quantity. Worst of all, the relief of one division by another in the face of a strong and aggressive enemy is an extremely ticklish and hazardous undertaking.

With these misgivings, Lam, the embattled and incompetent corps commander, flew that afternoon (28 February) to Saigon to propose an alternate plan to President Thieu. The 1st ARVN Infantry Division (to be reinforced with its 2d Regiment from the DMZ) would assault by helicopter into Tchepone. The airborne division would protect the north flank, and the marine division would deploy behind the 1st Division. Thieu approved Lam's plan and the next day (1 March) informed General Abrams and Ambassador Bunker of his new concept.

28 FEB 0800
COLLAPSED
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Thieu's decision of 28 February completed the collapse of the original concept of Lam Son 719. The original plan (to deal the enemy a telling blow by occupying and destroying his logistical bases in southern Laos) was now replaced by a meaningless public relations ploy to get ARVN troops into Tchepone (by now a deserted village of little military value), which ARVN would hold only momentarily. In a conference with Thieu and his generals, Abrams and Bunker concurred in Thieu's change of plans. They could do nothing else, particularly when some of the South Vietnamese conferees assailed Abrams about what they saw as the inadequate support the Americans were giving Lam Son 719. Abrams hotly defended his troops and their efforts. But then bad news always rubs thin the veneer of an alliance, and so it was here.

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From 3 to 6 March, elements of the 1st ARVN Division executed a series of airborne assaults to the west along the southern escarpment. On 6 March, after a heavy pounding of the area by B-52's and fighter-bombers, two infantry battalions from the 2d Regiment of the ARVN 1st Division were lifted by 120 Huey helicopters from Khe Sanh to LZ HOPE four kilometers north of Tchepone, a distance of 65 kilometers.

END OF
PHASE-III

Only one helicopter was hit, and it landed in the objective area. On 7 March, elements of the 1st Division entered Tchepone, and on 8 March they began to withdraw to the south towards the fire bases on the escarpment. The movement into Tchepone ended the offensive phase of the operation.

Now would come the difficult phase—the withdrawal under heavy enemy pressure. On 9 March, General Lam flew again to Saigon to present to Thieu his reasons for withdrawing from Laos and his plan for doing so. Basically, each of his columns would be extracted by helicopter, starting with those in the west, leapfrogging to fire bases to the east. The 1st Division, the most exposed, would leave first, then the airborne division, and last, the marines. General Abrams, who attended the meeting, opposed the withdrawal and suggested that the ARVN 2d Infantry Division, then in Quang Ngai province, be used to reinforce the troops in Laos so that the original mission might be carried out. Thieu sneeringly suggested that a United States division should accompany them. This was, of course, contrary to the Cooper-Church Amendment, and this insult killed Abrams' suggestion.

The withdrawal was an agonizing affair. The NVA units concentrated heavy antiaircraft fire on the evacuation helicopters, attacked the fire bases, and ambushed the retreating ARVN troops. Losses on both sides ran high as B-52's and American fighter-bombers covered the withdrawal with a maximum effort. The television cameras immortalized this phase of the operation by showing panicky ARVN soldiers hanging on to the skids of United States helicopters in an effort to flee the enemy. By 25 March, the ARVN troops had returned to Vietnam.

A look at the enemy situation is required to understand what happened. When ARVN launched the offensive on 8 February with 17,000 men, they were opposed by three NVA infantry regiments, and eight *binh trams*, plus other odds and ends in the area of operations, totaling around 22,000. When the withdrawal phase terminated (around 23 March), the enemy situation had grown to four infantry divisions (12 regiments), a reinforced regiment of tanks, supported by several battalions of light and medium artillery, a substantial (and deadly) antiaircraft capability—in all, a modern, conventional force of at least 40,000 men, pursuing around 7,000 to 8,000 demoralized South Vietnamese.

The results of Lam Son 719 were, as usual in this war, obscure

and controversial. Both the South and North Vietnamese claimed victory—the South because they had reached Tchepone, the final objective, and the North because they had ejected the South Vietnamese ignominiously from Laos. The statistics were also ambiguous. The official U.S. XXIV Corps *After-Action Report* showed enemy KIA at 19,360.⁴ If the ratio of KIA to permanently disabled of .35 is applied, the permanent NVA losses totaled around 26,000 men. It is probably valid to say that the NVA lost around 20,000 men, or about half the participating force. The greater amount of the killing was done by United States B-52's and fighter-bomber strikes. One cannot read South Vietnamese reports on the operation without being amazed by the detailed evidence from ARVN sources of the recurring effectiveness of these air strikes in inflicting materiel damage and human casualties. The XXIV Corps report revealed that the cumulative American and South Vietnamese casualties for Lam Son 719 totaled 9,065—1,402 Americans (215 KIA), 7,683 South Vietnamese (1,764 KIA). The American news media which covered the operation challenged this figure. *Newsweek* speculated in its issue of 5 April 1971 that ARVN's casualties alone had reached 9,775, with a KIA figure of 3,800.

Equipment losses were heavy on both sides. ARVN lost 211 trucks, 87 combat vehicles, 54 tanks, 96 pieces of artillery, and all of the combat engineer machinery (bulldozers, graders, etc.) which accompanied the units. The materiel losses of the NVA force were even greater: 2,001 trucks (422 confirmed by ground troops), 106 tanks (88 verified), 13 artillery pieces, 170,346 tons of ammunition (20,000 tons verified) and 1,250 tons of rice. Further testimony to the ferocity of the combat in Laos could be found in the damage to the United States helicopter fleet and the expenditure of artillery ammunition. The United States lost 108 helicopters destroyed and 618 damaged, while the Americans and ARVN fired over 500,000 rounds of artillery.

Those are the best statistics available, but they tell little about the results of the operation. The operation did disrupt activities along the Ho Chi Minh Trail for a few weeks. It forced the enemy to expend men and material that might have been used offensively in 1971 or 1972. Kissinger, at least, believes that the attrition inflicted in Cambodia in 1970 and Laos in 1971 might have given the U.S./GVN side the thin winning edge in 1972. Nixon in his oblique way supports him. Lam Son 719 *might* have caused the NVA to postpone their massive

attack from 1971 to 1972, although the evidence suggests that Giap had always planned the offensive for 1972. Regardless of any gains the United States and GVN might have made, the price was a steep one.

To determine objectively whether Lam Son 719 was a success or failure, one has only to weigh the results against the original mission. The mission of Lam Son 719 was to seize and hold Base Areas 604 and 611 for ninety days and to destroy the supplies and installations in those base areas. Lam Son 719 did not accomplish this mission. The ARVN troops stayed in Laos about forty-five days, most of the time in either a static or retrograde mode. Base Area 604 was "mucked up" (to use the British expression), but neither the base area nor most of the supplies were destroyed. Base Area 611 was scarcely touched. In fact, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was in full operation a week after ARVN's withdrawal.

On the other hand, sometimes a military failure can be a success in other ways. For example, the enemy's 1968 Tet offensive was a military catastrophe for him, but a Communist public relations victory in the United States. But not Lam Son 719. In the United States, the media portrayed it as a debacle. President Nixon described it as a "psychological defeat" in both the United States and South Vietnam, and the South Vietnamese saw it the same way.⁵ The South Vietnamese people were shocked by the heavy casualties of Lam Son 719. An even greater shock was the fact that in its withdrawal, ARVN had to leave substantial numbers of dead and wounded. As one South Vietnamese officer put it, "This came as a horrendous trauma to those unlucky families who in their traditional devotion to the cult of the dead and their attachment to the living, were condemned to live in perpetual sorrow and doubt. . . . Vietnamese sentiment would never forget."⁶ The operation produced on the South Vietnamese troops who participated in it an equally dismal effect. Those troops wondered if the results justified the casualties, and although Thieu might have proclaimed the offensive a success, the ARVN troops themselves believed they had been defeated. Success or failure of a military operation is really determined in the hearts and minds of the soldiers who fought in it. These are the supreme realists, and the South Vietnamese soldier knew he had been beaten.

Not only had Lam Son 719 been defeated, but the operation revealed the inherent and incurable flaws of the RVNAF, which doomed any

realistic hopes of successful Vietnamization. First, Lam Son 719 showed again the painful inadequacies of ARVN's politicized leadership. Lieutenant General Lam, who commanded the operation, could not control two of his three major subordinates, the commanders of the airborne and marine divisions, who, too, were lieutenant generals. The airborne commander, Lt. Gen. Dong, did about as he pleased. The marine commander, Lt. Gen. Khang, delegated his command authority to a subordinate colonel and, in effect, boycotted the entire campaign, in spite of the fact that his marines were hard put to avoid annihilation in the last stages of the operation.

President Thieu's own actions epitomized ARVN's incompetent leadership. Although he attached the airborne and marine divisions to Lam's command, he refused to intervene on Lam's behalf when the latter's efforts were subverted by the insubordination of these subordinate commanders. The reason was obvious. Thieu depended on these two units, particularly the airborne division, as his palace guard, his primary anticoup force.

Nor was this oversight Thieu's only dereliction. At first he enthusiastically agreed to the operation, and then he "chickened out" when the going got tough and the military and political price became apparent. He interfered at critical points during the offensive, always to the detriment of the operation. His decision of 12 February to suspend the operation's forward movement not only doomed Lam Son 719, but placed his troops in a vulnerable and dangerous situation. Later on, to protect his airborne division, he tried to substitute the marine division for them—a totally unrealistic solution—and then, he transferred the spearhead role of the airborne division to the 1st Infantry Division. His decision to send two battalions of the 1st Division to Tchepone was a public relations spectacular, an operation which placed those troops in jeopardy for no military purpose.

One might quarrel, too, with Thieu's refusal in early March to commit the ARVN 2d Infantry Division in an effort to sustain the operation. In the light of what happened, however, it was probably a wise decision. The 2d Division was inferior to any of the units already committed to the offensive, and one more division would probably not have contributed much more than an increase in ARVN casualties. In fact, this might have been *the one* intelligent decision Thieu made.

Lam, the unfortunate and inept corps commander, was totally beyond

his depth. He was a military administrator, in effect, the governor of a huge chunk of South Vietnam. He had no experience in large-unit, conventional operations, let alone one as complex and as difficult as Lam Son 719. He tried to conduct the operation from a command post at Dong Ha, some thirty-seven miles from the Vietnam/Laos border and about sixty miles from Tchepone. His staff and major commanders were as inadequate as he was, with the exception of the commander of the 1st Infantry Division. One ARVN lieutenant bitterly summed up the shortcomings of his superiors when he told a United States Marine that ". . . the Americans are using us [troops] as training aids for the senior staff."⁷

In addition to the deficiencies of South Vietnamese leadership, Lam Son 719 exposed again the incurable flaws of ARVN. The static "home-guard" nature of so-called infantry divisions evidenced itself. The JGS judged that the 3d Infantry Division in the northern part of South Vietnam was inadequate for mobile operations, and Thieu canceled the use of the next nearest division, the 2d, for that and other reasons.⁸ Since the infantry divisions (with the exception of the 1st Infantry Division) could not meet the requirements of mobile warfare, the entire general reserve consisted of the airborne and marine divisions. Lam Son 719 demonstrated all too clearly that this reserve was totally inadequate, not only in quantity, but in quality as well.

Finally, Lam Son 719 disclosed a glaring lack of professionalism by the ARVN units. ARVN had for years relied too heavily on their American advisors and felt apprehensive without them. This was particularly true in obtaining and adjusting tactical air strikes and artillery fire and in bringing in helicopters. In Lam Son 719 the ARVN officers had to do these complicated jobs by themselves, and in an operation stressing air mobility and firepower, this aspect was critical. A few units did well; most poorly.

Other deficiencies quickly showed up. The units had devoted little time to combined tank-infantry training and coordination. The tanks fought alone, and the infantry fought alone, and both suffered. Reporting by subordinate units was slipshod and sometimes nonexistent. A South Vietnamese general and historian described it as "deplorable." Since the corps and division commanders or their staffs rarely visited the front lines, the operation drifted along without information, intelligence, or control. Communications security was equally bad. The ARVN units sent orders and reports in clear text, not attempting even the most primitive

coding procedures. All armies (the American army among them) suffer to some degree from this fault, but in Lam Son 719 the ARVN failings were disastrous, indicative of basic deficiencies in training and discipline.

ARVN troops had picked up other unfortunate traits from their American models. They relied too much on helicopters, using them when foot movement would have been easier, faster, and safer. When they made contact with the enemy, they sat down and called for air or artillery support instead of maneuvering and attacking. As General Abrams once said, "I don't know if ARVN is going to copy any of our good points, but they sure as Hell will copy all the bad ones," and he was right.

Lam Son 719 demonstrated that, while Vietnamization had made progress, the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces had deep flaws which made final success of the concept years, probably decades, away. Above all, the operation showed ARVN's complete dependence on the United States forces. Without United States support, there would have been no Lam Son 719.

Nor did the South Vietnamese have sole option on deficiencies of planning and execution in Lam Son 719. The Americans, too, made mistakes. First, at American insistence, the planning and preparation for the operation was conducted too hastily and was too closely held. The participating ARVN units had no time to undergo special training for the exercise and little time to prepare for it. As a result, the troops went in "cold" and in many cases with the wrong, or no, equipment. The planning was held so closely that ARVN agencies which could have made an input were unaware of the operation. At the JGS level, the J-2, the intelligence officer, was not told about Lam Son 719, and his intelligence data and expertise went unconsulted. The same intense secrecy inhibited United States support preparations as well.

Then the Americans and the South Vietnamese fumbled the command post (CP) problem, a vital factor where an operation depends on close cooperation and coordination. The main ARVN I Corps CP was at Dong Ha, while the United States XXIV Corps CP was at Quang Tri City, about eight miles away. There were inadequately staffed, separate forward CP's at Khe Sanh, but not until three weeks after ARVN troops crossed the border was a functioning combined U.S./ARVN CP established at Khe Sanh.

Finally, there was a serious interservice dispute between the United

States XXIV Corps and the United States Seventh Air Force over the concept of air support for the operation. Seventh Air Force believed that the NVA antiaircraft fire in the area would take a heavy toll of the vulnerable helicopters, and that the only way the choppers could survive would be to use large quantities of fighter strikes to soften up the areas before the helicopters went in. XXIV Corps, on the other hand, thought that Seventh Air Force had exaggerated the NVA antiaircraft menace and that helicopters could not only land troops and supplies in the area, but could furnish close air support by helicopter gun ships as well.

Another planning issue between the American services erupted regarding the command arrangements for the operation. Seventh Air Force maintained that the air assault and air support operation should be under a single commander, CG, Seventh Air Force. The air force pointed out that in all previous wars the air commander had controlled air assault operations until a firm terrestrial linkup with advancing ground troops had been made. The army believed that bringing an air force commander into the battle would unduly complicate an already complex and shaky command relationship with the South Vietnamese, and so they spurned the air force request. Who was right and who was wrong is argued to this day, but it did produce, at least in the view of the air force, "inadequate tactical air support."⁹ And the weight of the evidence tends to support the air force view. So the Americans embarked on *their* support mission with inadequate planning, deficient coordination with ARVN, and major service differences over the concept and execution of the operation.

At the bottom of all these deficiencies of planning and execution (both American and South Vietnamese alike) lay that old bugaboo, lack of unity of command. Nobody really took charge of the operation; and nobody really coordinated it. As a result, the operation drifted along, blown about by the winds of Thieu's political needs and eventually smashed on the rocks by the storm generated by Thieu's pernicious orders and directives.

In studying Lam Son 719, one gets a feeling of *déjà vu*, a rerun of an old movie of the French generals Valluy and Carpentier and their strategic and tactical concepts of the late forties and early fifties. There was the same old operational concept of an airborne-armored thrust lifted from the European Theater of World War II. There was the same old careless disregard for the effects of terrain, weather, and the road net

on the operation. There was the same cavalier underestimation of the enemy and his capabilities to frustrate the operation. And, finally, there was the same false sense of the superiority of one's own troops and resources.

The longer one ponders the operation, the more one wonders how its architects thought it could possibly succeed. First, the planners should have known that the natural characteristics in the area would impede the operation. The terrain was rugged with few areas suited for fire bases or helicopter landing zones. A road net did not exist. Highway 9 was a single-lane, dirt track susceptible to demolitions and ambushes, dominated by the ridges on both sides of it. The road ran through difficult terrain which prevented off-road and cross-country movement. Tanks could be employed, at best, one abreast and the destruction of a vehicle on the road stalled the entire column. The weather was sure to restrict both helicopter and close air support operations, and on these the success of the operation depended.

To the U.S./ARVN planners, the enemy situation and his capabilities should have been even more intimidating than the area's adverse natural characteristics. They knew (and published) that the enemy had a reinforcement capability which could position a total of at least eleven or twelve first-class NVA Main Force regiments in the area of operations by D + 14, in addition to the *binh trams* and other troops in the area. The planners knew also that Giap had recently moved in some twenty additional antiaircraft battalions with both light (7.6 mm and 12.7 mm machine guns) and medium (23 mm to 100 mm) guns. The Allied intelligence sections and the planners underestimated the tank threat and the NVA artillery capability, although previous operations in the Khe Sanh area and along the DMZ should have warned them to expect heavy concentrations of enemy artillery.

To attack this menacing combination of natural characteristics and enemy forces, the planners committed one understrength ARVN infantry division, the 1st (which had left one regiment along the DMZ), one understrength airborne division, three ranger battalions, some light armor, with a marine brigade as reserve. None of these units had extensive experience in fighting as divisions; none had been trained in combined tank-infantry maneuvers or in any other offensive operations against a first-class foe. The ARVN units were going into Laos without their

American advisors, which, at the least, was bound to bring on problems of coordination of artillery and close-air support.

The American planners should have recognized other debilitating deficiencies which were certain to hamper the operation. The coordination between United States and ARVN units presented monstrous problems of a psychological, linguistical, military, and cultural nature. The shortcomings of the South Vietnamese leadership from Thieu on down were well known. Neither Lam nor his major commanders and staffs were up to the job (again, with the exception of the 1st Division staff). Finally, the operation had no room for error or for contingencies. There was no reserve other than those committed to the operation. There could be no reinforcement or relief.

Yet in spite of what was known about the terrain, weather, and lack of roads in the area, in spite of what was known about the enemy and the deficiencies of ARVN, and in spite of having lost both strategical and tactical surprise, the planners thrust ARVN troops into the maw of a superior enemy force. Not only that, but they gave the ARVN troops the mission to attack the most sensitive area (to the enemy) in the theater, one he would *have* to fight for. Nor was this the full measure of the planner's vagaries. The architects envisioned that this force, without significant relief or reinforcement, would reach Tchepone in three days, and would stay in the objective area at least ninety days.¹⁰ Kissinger is restrained when in describing the plan he writes, "Its chief drawback, as events showed, was that it in no way accorded with Vietnamese realities."¹¹

The one question which overwhelms all others is why did Gen. Creighton Abrams, he of the fiery histrionics and icy calculation, not only approve the operation, but push it on the South Vietnamese and his American superiors? The question is given added force by Abrams' unique qualifications to assess just such an operation. First, he was an intelligent and wise man, a cautious weigher of chances, an experienced soldier, and an armor expert. Beyond these general attributes he knew as much about the nature of Indochina War II as any man in the United States. For the first year of his tour he spent almost all of his time with the South Vietnamese and ARVN, and if anybody knew its limitations, it was Creighton Abrams. He knew the Machiavellian Thieu, the

incompetent Lam, and the other ARVN actors. He knew the condition, morale, and training of the ARVN units.

Nor was Abrams single-faceted. He was always deeply interested in intelligence and the enemy. He spent hours talking to his intelligence officers and specialists, competent men all, and he thought often and deeply about the enemy situation. So in this area, too, Abrams was immensely qualified to judge enemy reaction and capabilities and their impact on the operation. Finally, he had spent almost four long years of fifteen-hour days in Vietnam. Nothing should have misled him or surprised him. And yet in the words of the South Vietnamese, he and MACV "originated, promoted, and supported" the operation.¹²

Abrams never gave his reasons for advocating the operation, and thus, some speculation is necessary. In the first place, what appears to be irrational in an operation *looked at in the after-light* is often hidden in the fog which precedes that operation. In Lam Son 719, the operation looked vastly different in early February than it did on completion in late March. The planners' expectations just prior to D-day are revealed by this item in an *After-Action Report* already quoted: "It was apparent at this time that United States intelligence felt that the operation would be lightly opposed."¹³ That is one clue; and historically Abrams and his intelligence officers had a point. The Communists had *never* before in Indochina War II resolutely defended their base areas. They had given them up rather than defend them in operations called CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY and in the Cambodian raid. So, based on these precedents, Abrams and the intelligence people had some ground for thinking that the enemy would give up Base Areas 604 and 611, too.

Of course, this estimate was wrong—the operations cited above and Lam Son 719 were vastly different. The other enemy base areas, while important, were not vital. Enemy operations, at a reduced tempo to be sure, would go on, and the areas could in time be restocked. But this did not apply to the base areas in Laos. They were critical, absolutely vital, to Communist operations in South Vietnam. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was in 1971 the *only* means of supplying the entire enemy force in South Vietnam, southern Laos, and Cambodia. If ARVN could cut the trail and keep it cut for three months (until the rainy season arrived when movement became difficult), they would deal a devastating blow to all Communist operations in South Vietnam. In addition, time, in

1971 the key factor in the war, would not permit the enemy to reopen, restock, and resupply the NVA units who would launch the already planned major offensive of 1972. The effect on North Vietnam of a ninety-day stoppage along the Ho Chi Minh Trail would be catastrophic. The North Vietnamese had to oppose Lam Son 719 with every resource they could bring to bear.

And so maybe Abrams thought that Lam Son 719 might be lightly opposed, and maybe he didn't. And if he didn't, there were to "Old Abe" other justifications for the operation. First, there was that factor, time. It was even more vital to the United States and Abrams than it was to Giap and the North Vietnamese. Abrams needed time to upgrade Vietnamization and to keep the enemy off-balance while American combat troops continued their withdrawal. To buy time required a strike at some area critical to North Vietnamese offensive preparations. Neither South Vietnam nor Cambodia were critical. There was nothing much in South Vietnam and Cambodia had been pretty well cleaned out in 1970. Besides, Cambodia was now the end of the line. Destruction there would only inhibit operations around Saigon and south thereof. But Laos was critical. Here, time, in a huge chunk, might be bought.

Abrams, the pragmatist, must have had another thought. That was, if the operation doesn't fully succeed, the North Vietnamese are still going to lose men and supplies, they're going to lose the initiative, and they may get set back not the hoped-for year or two, but six months. But that's time and it was precious. Maybe ARVN gets hurt, but they gain tremendously in experience, and in the final analysis, perhaps thinks Abe, better a half success, or even a partial failure, than doing nothing. Clausewitz probably said it best. He wrote, ". . . we should always try, in time of war, to have the probability of victory on our side. But this is not always possible. Often we must act against this probability, should there be nothing better to do. . . . Therefore, even when the likelihood of success is against us, we must not think of our undertaking as unreasonable or impossible; for it is always reasonable if we do not know of anything better to do, and if we make the best use of the few means at our disposal."¹⁴

On 7 April, shortly after ARVN's forced withdrawal from Laos, President Nixon, in a television broadcast to the nation, proclaimed,

"Tonight I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded"—an Orwellian untruth of boggling proportions. Lam Son 719 had demonstrated exactly the opposite, that Vietnamization had not succeeded. To be sure, it had made progress, but the offensive proved beyond doubt that ARVN still suffered from grave deficiencies.

As a result of Lam Son 719, in June 1971, MACV began efforts to overcome those weaknesses which were curable. Command post exercises for ARVN units were initiated to teach air-ground coordination and combined infantry-tank operations. At General Abrams' urging, General Vien appointed a committee to develop a combined arms doctrine suitable to the Vietnam environment. The committee produced the *Combined Arms Doctrinal Manual*, which was approved late in 1971. General Abrams advised his field elements and advisers that the manual was forthcoming, and directed them to give "dynamic support to the early introduction of the new mode of tactics."¹⁵

Realizing that in Lam Son 719 the North Vietnamese T-54 medium tanks had outgunned the ARVN M-41 light tank, MACV equipped one South Vietnamese tank battalion with the heavier United States M-48's. Similarly, one ARVN artillery battalion received the 175mm self-propelled guns to combat the Russian 130mm guns in the hands of the NVA. But these upgrades were grossly inadequate. All ARVN tank battalions should have been given the M-48, and several of the artillery battalions should have received the lethal 175mm gun. The episodes regarding the M-48 tanks and the 175mm guns revealed one of the significant weaknesses of Vietnamization. Throughout the life of this policy, the upgrading of the RVNAF came about in reaction to a prior modernization in the weapons or tactics of the NVA. Therefore, the NVA were always at least one step ahead of the RVNAF. Vietnamization was a running story of "too little, too late."

Nor were all the deficiencies revealed by Lam Son 719 confined to the South Vietnamese ground forces. Years later, General Hinh, analyzing Lam Son 719, stated, "The 1st Air Division, Vietnam Air Force, did not play a significant role in providing close air support for I Corps forces. Its participation and contributions were rather modest even by RVNAF standards."¹⁶ Actually, the South Vietnamese Air Force had no role in Lam Son 719. Its absence highlights the tremendous gap between *conceiving* an operational air force and *having* one. The training, equipment, and maintenance problems necessary to improve both the

South Vietnamese Air Force and Navy had been discussed, but they made even ARVN's difficulties pale by comparison.

Pacification, which the South Vietnamese had come to consider a facet of Vietnamization, continued the great gains it had made in 1969 and 1970. By the end of 1971, the Hamlet Evaluation System showed that 97 percent of the villages and hamlets of South Vietnam were either totally secure or relatively secure.¹⁷ As usual, the naysayers disputed not only the accuracy of the figures, but their implications. Pacification officials in the field noted that, even if the figures were correct, they represented the control and suppression of the enemy, and not the allegiance of the people to the South Vietnamese government. Nor, according to its detractors, did the HES accurately reflect growing war weariness in both civilians and military, which in turn generated tactical accommodations between the two sides and inaction against the Viet Cong. Nevertheless, when compared with the other "tracks" the United States was following to end the war (Vietnamization, troop withdrawals, and negotiations), pacification was the big winner in 1971.

The two phenomena which in 1969-1972 undermined American efforts in Vietnam—demoralization of the military and antiwar dissidence—continued apace. Again, no one knows to what depths the morale and discipline of the ground forces in Vietnam sank in 1971. Every indication, however, shows that the depth of the plunge in the army's spirit exceeded those of the years of 1969 and 1970, and those years were wretched enough. The number of general and special court-martials (those trying serious offenses) in Vietnam in 1971 was 26 percent greater per capita than in 1969 and 38 percent greater than those of 1970. In 1971, "fragging" incidents (generally attacks against officers and noncommissioned officers) ran at 1.75 per 1,000 strength compared to .35 for 1969 and .91 for 1970. The year 1971 saw an increase in the most serious military offenses—insubordination, mutiny, and refusal to perform a lawful order. The conviction rate for these crimes per 1,000 soldiers for 1969 was 0.28, for 1970 it was 0.32, and for 1971 0.44. Desertion and absent without leave rates also showed an increase.

While military discipline and morale showed a constantly worsening trend, the major problem in 1971 in Vietnam was drugs. In the army, the number of offenders involved with hard drugs, mostly heroin, increased from 1,146 in 1970 to 7,026 in 1971—almost seven-fold. This vast growth of hard drug usage was even more disturbing when one

considers that the mid-year troop strengths had decreased from 404,000 in 1970 to 225,000 in 1971. In effect, hard drug use per capita was fifteen times higher in 1971 than in 1970.

But accurate statistics can mislead, and those cited above must be interpreted. Beginning in 1970 and intensifying in 1971, the services shifted their approach to drug usage. Initially, drug usage was viewed as a criminal offense, but in late 1970 and throughout 1971, military authorities came to see drug users not as criminals, but as sick people requiring treatment. Soldiers on drugs were encouraged to take advantage of amnesty offers, detoxification centers, and drug counseling programs. So, while in 1969 and 1970 soldiers tried to hide a drug problem, in 1971 they confessed their dependency to obtain punishment-free treatment. Even with this caveat, the evidence shows that the drug problem in the United States Army in Vietnam had reached epidemic proportions.

Nor was the drug problem in 1971 confined to the army alone. Marine commanders believed that 30 percent to 50 percent of their men had some involvement with drugs.¹⁸ The marine corps continued to treat drug abuse as a criminal offense, but the last marine commander in Vietnam, Maj. Gen. Alan J. Armstrong, contravened official policy and in effect established a system of treatment with immunity. The drug problem in all services in Vietnam became so serious that it came to the president's attention. On 18 June 1971, the secretary of defense sent a message to all services informing them of a presidential directive that the drug problem be given urgent and immediate attention.

Military derelictions were not confined to drug abuse and offenses by individuals against the United States Code of Military Justice. Units, both large and small, were derelict also. The "search and evade" missions continued to increase. Laxness became the order of the day. In the Americal Division—a "hard luck outfit" if there ever was one—fifty NVA sappers overran a fire base held by 250 Americans, killing thirty and wounding eighty-two. General Westmoreland, who reviewed the case, called it "... a clear case of dereliction of duty—of soldiers becoming lax in their defense and officers failing to take corrective action."¹⁹ The secretary of the army took disciplinary action against two generals and four other officers in the division.

The causes of the collapsing morale and discipline of the ground forces in Vietnam have been discussed. Antiwar dissension, idleness, boredom, drugs, racial tension, Vietnamization, troop withdrawal, the

permissiveness of the sixties, the long inconclusive war, and failures of leadership all played their part. What had been a minor decline of spirit in 1969 had become, by 1971—to use a term much bruted about then and later—a "crisis in command." On 19 July 1971, Lt. Gen. W. J. McCaffrey, then CG, United States Army, Vietnam, published a report on the morale and discipline of the army troops in Vietnam, in which he admitted that "discipline within the command as a whole had eroded to a serious, but not critical degree. . . ."²⁰ Another view was submitted by a retired career marine officer and analyst, Robert D. Heinl, when in an article in the *Detroit News* in June 1971 he wrote, "By every conceivable indicator, our Army that now remains in Vietnam is in a stage of approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near-mutinous."²¹ The truth probably lay somewhere between McCaffrey's judgment of "serious but not critical" and Heinl's "approaching collapse."

It is easy to exaggerate this collapse of morale and discipline in Vietnam. The many well-led army and marine units carried on in the historically high standards of those services. Army units within the United States continued to do their jobs. By 1971 the vaunted United States Army, Europe, which had been gutted by constant levies for Vietnam, began to regain its professionalism. The American armed services have a massive momentum. From time to time they may stagger, but in the words of the army song, they keep "rolling along." With the advent of the volunteer army and the withdrawal of the American troops from an unpopular and unwinnable war, the armed forces were, once again, on the road upwards.

The demoralization of the ground forces in Vietnam was accompanied by growing antiwar dissidence at home. Lam Son 719 once again brought out the antiwar dissidents in full force, and their ranks were growing rapidly. The liberals, leftists, and draft-dodging students were joined by two new groups. The first, a coalition of blacks and Hispanics, opposed the war not only on moral grounds, but because it diverted huge sums from the Great Society programs. The second group was a loose coalition of liberal Vietnam veterans opposed to the war. These groups constituted what social scientist John Mueller called "Believers." "Believers" supported or opposed the war regardless of national policy. "Followers,"

the other category, will "react like hawks if the president is pursuing a forceful or war-like policy, like doves if he is reducing war or seeking negotiation."²² Thus, Nixon, by stressing Vietnamization, troop withdrawal, and negotiations, turned more and more of the "followers" into doves. In turn, each United States troop withdrawal or backward step only increased their appetite for more. As a result of the disastrous television coverage of Lam Son 719 and the growing disgust with the inconclusive struggle, popular support for the war dropped to an all-time low in April 1971.

The Democrats in Congress were quick to exploit this growing antiwar sentiment. In late March 1971, House Democrats approved a resolution calling for the termination of the United States involvement in Indochina by 1 January 1973. The action then shifted to the Senate. Senator McGovern proposed to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee a bill which would have the Americans out of Indochina by 31 December 1971. Fulbright, the committee chairman, held widely publicized hearings featuring those who favored the bill calling for unilateral withdrawal. The McGovern measure eventually appeared in slightly modified form as an amendment to the military conscription bill. On 16 June, the Senate defeated the amendment.

But the doves fought on. On 22 June, the Senate approved the Mansfield Amendment, which declared that it was United States policy that all American troops were to be withdrawn from Vietnam within nine months after the approval of the extension of the draft. The wording was later changed in conference from "nine months from passage" to "earliest practicable date."²³

While the Democrats in Congress sought to undermine the president's war policies and negotiating options, the antiwar activists took to the streets. On 24 April, the leaders organized two massive demonstrations—one in San Francisco which drew 150,000 people and one in Washington of 200,000. The Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) made their appearance in the Washington demonstration along with Coretta King (Martin Luther King's widow) and an associated group of leftists such as Abner Mikva and Bella Abzug. Thousands of protesters marched in other American cities demanding an end to the war and a unilateral withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam.

The big demonstration, however, was scheduled for 2 May in Washington, where the protesters had vowed they would "shut down the

government." On 1 May, however, the government forces seized the initiative and routed 10,000 demonstrators from their campsite along the Potomac River. The demonstrators regrouped the next day and on 3 May began their campaign of blocking roads and "trashing" Washington. The police cracked down and eventually some 12,000 protesters were arrested and held in the practice football field of the Washington Redskins. Most of the detainees were freed, but the back of the demonstration had been broken. Nevertheless, antiwar dissent remained a powerful and influential force throughout 1971.

Lam Son 719 impacted indirectly on negotiations. Negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam had lain dead in the water since October 1970. Now with Lam Son 719 completed, Henry Kissinger hoped that the time might be ripe to resume attempts at settling the war by diplomatic means. He reasoned that North Vietnam might prefer to negotiate rather than face the prospect of sporadic forays into its base areas. Beyond that hope, the growing pressure of the antiwar dissidents and the efforts of Congress to legislate a total United States withdrawal in some destructive time frame impelled the administration toward an effort at negotiations, as forlorn as the prospects appeared.

The president fired the preparatory barrage of rhetoric by giving a series of speeches in April 1971 which stressed continued United States troop withdrawals and repeated the negotiating offer of October 1970. The United States negotiating offensive jumped off on 31 May 1971, when Kissinger met secretly with the North Vietnamese chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho, in Paris. The secrecy of not only the contacts, but the negotiations themselves, would later give the administration severe problems with Congress and the news media.

At the 31 May meeting, Kissinger made several proposals which he thought the North Vietnamese would find tempting. He repeated the proposal made on 8 October 1970, that the United States no longer required NVA troops to withdraw from South Vietnam. This offer was the critical bait with which Kissinger hoped to hook the wily North Vietnamese. And in this judgment he was sound, for, as is now known, this concession, plus United States withdrawal, constituted the indispensable prerequisite of the Communist negotiating position. Kissinger proposed also that all PW's be exchanged immediately, and indicated that the United States was prepared to set a deadline for the withdrawal of

this issue the gap in perceptions was enormous. The North Vietnamese were convinced that sooner or later the United States would trade the Thieu government for peace. This, however, was the one thing that Nixon would not do. Kissinger, on the other hand, believed that this point, like the others, could be negotiated into some solution short of dismantling the Thieu government. The series which culminated on 13 September showed how wrong both parties were, at least in 1971.

There was one more negotiating spasm in 1971, one last attempt by Kissinger to compromise the sticky point of the future of the Thieu government. He proposed "that a new presidential election be held within six months after the signing of a final agreement. The election would be run by an electoral commission, including Communists, under international supervision. One month before the election, Thieu would resign and his function would be assumed by the president of the South Vietnamese Senate."²⁹ The offer was transmitted in writing to the North Vietnamese in Paris. After agreeing to a meeting date of 20 November, the North Vietnamese on 17 November canceled the session without commenting on the new United States proposal. Thus, negotiations in 1971, while on occasion seeming to hold promise, in the end failed.

Nobody knows for sure what made the North Vietnamese so intractable. One school of thought holds that the whole North Vietnamese scenario of negotiations in 1971 was a classic example of "talking while preparing to fight," a camouflage to cover preparations for the 1972 offensive. Tang, the PRG minister of justice, confirms this, writing, "Meanwhile in Paris Le Duc Tho was treating Henry Kissinger to a brilliant display of 'talking and fighting,' using the negotiations to cover as long as possible the next real move in the war, the upcoming dry season campaign in the South."³⁰ In the same passage he describes the North Vietnamese insistence on the removal of Thieu as a North Vietnamese "ploy," designed only to prolong negotiations as a cover for the preparation of the offensive.

Another school believes that the North Vietnamese wanted to negotiate sincerely, but that a combination of factors drove them into an uncompromising stance. Kissinger believes that the divisions within the United States encouraged the Communists to hold out for Thieu's ouster, in effect, for United States capitulation. Military reasons also dictated that the North Vietnamese should hold out. The NVA were in dire straits in South Vietnam, almost moribund, and pacification was making huge

strides, forcing the Communists to negotiate from a position of weakness, a stance they feared and abhorred. Above all, however, Le Duan and company wanted one more throw of the military dice. Lam Son 719 had convinced them that they could defeat the South Vietnamese on the battlefield, even if ARVN had American air support. Thus they might gain all by a major offensive in the spring of 1972.

And as 1971 drew to a close, this major NVA offensive loomed closer. As early as late December 1970 and January 1971, the NVN Politburo had convened the 19th Plenary Session of the Lao Dong Party, a meeting of the Central Committee which always indicated that major policy decisions were in the offing. This one was no different. The Party issued announcements once again that the war had priority over economic development. This pronouncement suggests that the old argument between the "North Vietnam firsters" and the "South Vietnam firsters" was being refought, but no concrete evidence is available.

The 19th Plenum had reached the momentous decision to launch an all-out, conventional invasion of South Vietnam in 1972 to win the war militarily. Shortly after the conclusion of the Plenum, Le Duan departed for Moscow to obtain the conventional weapons which the offensive would require. Beginning in the spring of 1971, trucks, T-54 tanks, SAM missiles, MIG 21's, 130mm guns, 130mm mortars, the heat-seeking, shoulder-fired SA7 antiaircraft missile, plus spare parts, ammunition, and POL poured into North Vietnam and began to make its way south down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

So, late in 1971, as negotiations collapsed, NVA units and heavy equipment began to move into place just north of the DMZ. General Abrams and the Joint Chiefs wanted to bomb the concentrations, but Nixon demurred. Finally, when the North Vietnamese refused to even meet Kissinger on 20 November and then shelled Saigon a few days later (another violation of the "unwritten agreements"), Nixon ordered that bombing raids be reinstated south of the 20th Parallel to impede the Communist build-up just north of the DMZ. He limited the period of the attacks from 26 to 30 December when the college campuses were clear of students. In this connection, one must note that by now the antiwar dissidents were influencing not only governmental policy and strategy, but battlefield tactics and timing as well. Nixon's ploy availed him little; the domestic outcry was, in Nixon's words, "immediate and intense."³¹ There were the usual shrill charges that Nixon was "wid-