

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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INFORMATION

April 12, 1971

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MEMORANDUM FOR HENRY KISSINGER

FROM: Tom Latimer *J*

SUBJECT: CIA and Lam Son Intelligence Failures

Director Helms has provided you with some interesting reading regarding Lam Son and intelligence. As a result of press allegations that there were intelligence failures in connection with the Lam Son operation, his staff prepared a memorandum listing the charges and the "facts." The upshot of the CIA memorandum (Tab 1) is that there was no failure on CIA's part. Director Helms' covering note to you states that he has sent a copy of this memorandum to the PFIAB. (Tab A)

The CIA memorandum breaks the press charges down into four sets of failures:

- a) the intensity with which Hanoi would react
- b) Hanoi's reinforcement capability
- c) the enemy's anti-aircraft artillery capability
- d) the enemy's armor capability.

On the question of Hanoi's intentions:

- A CIA memorandum dated 21 January 1971 (Tab 2 in Helms' memo) was done at your request and it noted Hanoi's anticipation of allied ground attacks against its infiltration routes in south Laos.
- It also noted the large deployments of North Vietnamese troops to protect those routes, deployments which put the Communists "in a good posture to contest such an operation vigorously and promptly."
- CIA observed that the Communists might evade combat for a few days or longer but in the face of a sustained allied drive

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E.O. 13526, Section 3.5
NW 00-181666 PER SEC. 3.3(b)(1), HY. 7/2/2008
By AM NARA, Date 10/7/2011

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"Hanoi would be likely to do whatever it could to make the position of the South Vietnamese in Laos untenable and it would be prepared to accept the heavy manpower losses this might entail."

- CIA concludes that, far from failing to predict Hanoi's response, it "came about as close to calling the shots as one is ever likely to come in the real world."

As for the enemy's reinforcement capability, the CIA memorandum states:

- A CIA/DIA/State memorandum dated 14 December 1970 (Tab 3) flagged in detail the expansion and buildup of Communist tactical strength in south Laos then in train.
- It estimated overall NVA combat strength in south Laos at about 27,000 men -- 22,000 infantry plus 5,000 artillery, armor and anti-aircraft -- augmented by about 8,000 Pathet Lao.
- The 14 December memo stated that the largest concentration of the newly arrived NVA forces was in the vicinity of Tchepone and that elements of the 320th, 308th, 2nd and 304th NVA divisions were in the Tchepone area.
- It also noted that one or more of the nine regiments of the 304th, 308th, 320th and 325th NVA Divisions not then in Laos could be deployed southward.
- On 3 February 1971 a CIA memorandum (Tab 4) updated the 14 December 1970 memorandum and flagged the presence in the Tchepone area of 11,000 NVA combat troops, plus a pool of about 70,000 in immediately adjacent areas, any of which, it noted, could be easily deployed to the Tchepone area.
- That memo explicitly stated that Hanoi could add some 10,000 men to its 11,000-man combat force in the Tchepone area within a week.

On the anti-aircraft artillery question, CIA states:

- Both the 14 December 1970 memo and an 11 February 1971 memorandum (Tab 5) noted the enemy's anti-aircraft artillery

strength clearly and accurately and the 11 February memorandum, issued eight days before major enemy resistance commenced, stressed that Lam Son 719 would be resisted with all the resources that Hanoi could muster.

Regarding the armor issue:

- CIA memoranda prior to Lam Son 719 did not highlight the probable enemy use of tanks but the 14 December 1970 memo did make explicit reference to the 5,000 NVA artillery, armor and anti-aircraft forces in south Laos.
- The 3 February 1971 update specifically noted the presence of the 198th Armor Battalion and located it as being possibly at the intersection of Routes 23 and 9, a short distance from the Lam Son operation area.

CIA's conclusion is that the charges and allegations of intelligence failures regarding Lam Son 719 are demonstrably without fact.

Attachments



CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

9 April 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger
Assistant to the President for
National Security Affairs

SUBJECT : Allegations of "Intelligence Failures"
in Connection with Lam Son 719

1. As I know you are aware, allegations are currently cropping up in the press, and elsewhere, regarding purported "intelligence failures" in connection with the Lam Son 719 operation. The Max Frankel by-lined story beginning on the front page of the 30 March issue of the New York Times is one example; Stewart Alsop's column in the 12 April edition of Newsweek (actually issued on 6 April), another.

2. When the Frankel story appeared, I asked for a quick, thorough review of at least the Agency's record in this matter. This request led to the preparation of a detailed memorandum drafted for my eyes only. The Lam Son matter and the stories of alleged shortfalls in the intelligence community's performance, however, was the subject of considerable discussion when I met with the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board on Friday, 2 April. To answer the detailed questions of the Chairman and other Board members, I left with the Board for its perusal the aforementioned 30 March study done by my associates.

3. To be sure we are all operating from a common point of departure, I am attaching hereto for your information the material loaned to the President's Board, so that you will know exactly what information was furnished to them.

Rich


Richard Helms
Director

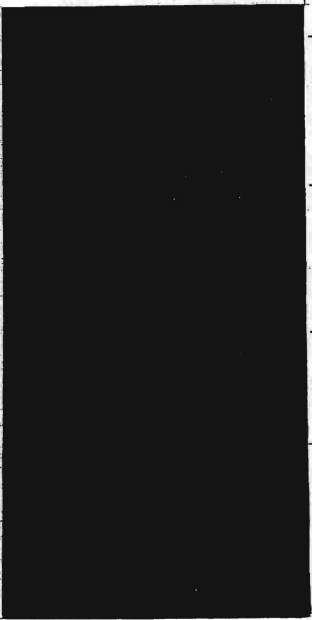
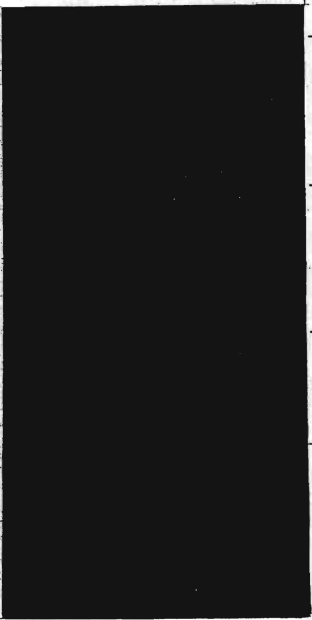
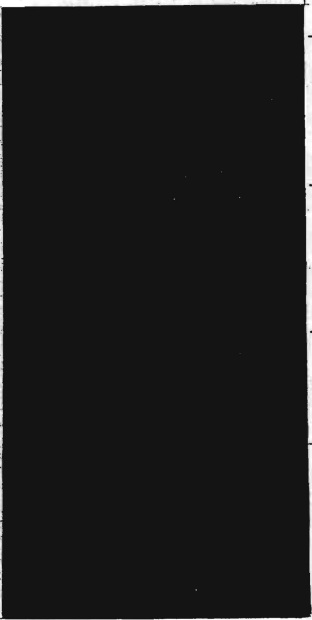
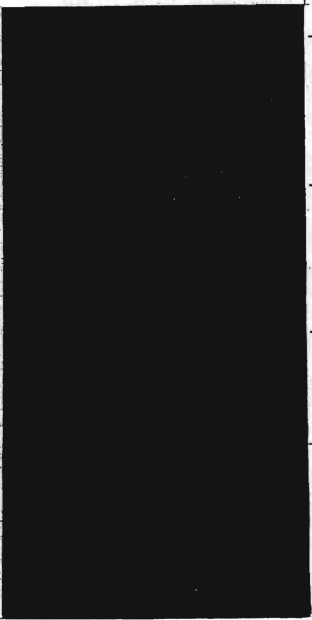
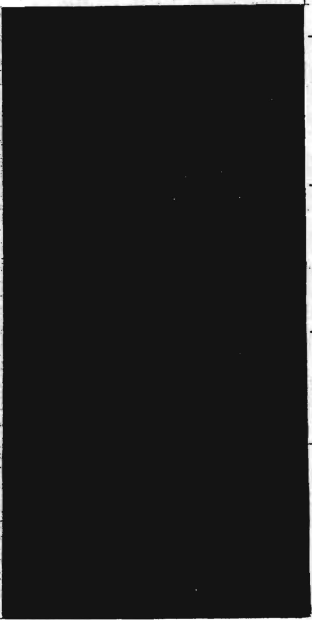

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PER SEC. 3.3(b)(1)

Attachments 

1.  - "An Assessment of Allegations Regarding an 'Intelligence Failure' in Connection with Lam Son 719," Copy No. 1
2.  - "Probable Reactions of Various Concerned Parties to a Possible Allied Action in South Laos," Copy No. 7
3.  - "Communist and Friendly Forces in Laos," Copy No. 8
4.  - "Disposition and Strength of Communist Combat Units in South Laos, Southern North Vietnam, and South Vietnam's Military Region 1," Copy No. 8
5.  (ER IM 71-25) - "The Growth And Current Deployment Of The Laotian-Based 559th Transportation Group," Copy No. 16
6.  "EXTRACTS FROM SPECIAL OPERATION SITUATION REPORTS," Copy No. 1

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PER SEC. 3.3(b)(1)

30 March 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: An Assessment of Allegations Regarding an "Intelligence Failure" in Connection with Lam Son 719

I. THE CHARGES

1. Background. In recent days there have been remarks in the press and other media -- plus, apparently, at least some conversations in the upper reaches of the official community -- regarding an alleged "intelligence failure" which purportedly contributed to problems encountered in the execution of Lam Son 719. Two fairly specific and representative examples of the charges now in circulation can be found in the Tuesday, 30 March 1971, city edition of the New York Times in by-lined articles filed from Washington by Max Frankel (on page 1), and from Saigon by Iver Peterson (on page 15).

2. Mr. Frankel's article is headlined, "Nixon Aides Insist Drive in Laos Was Worth Price." It opens with the following lead:

"President Nixon has begun to review the post-mortem studies of the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, which cover some serious military misjudgments as well as claims of strategic benefit."

On the intelligence issue, the key paragraph is the fifth:

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

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This thought is echoed in a sentence in the eighth paragraph, which reads:

"The surprising enemy resistance, it is acknowledged, cut short both the reach and the duration of the invasion."

It appears again in a sentence in the article's final paragraph:

"At the middle levels of government here, the re-examination of the Laos venture have (sic) provoked quarrels about responsibility for poor intelligence."

3. Mr. Peterson's article is headlined, "Americans in South Vietnam Attribute the Setback in Laos to Faulty Planning and Intelligence." It plays similar themes from a Saigon perspective:

"United States Army advisers and other observers in the field are ascribing the South Vietnamese Army's performance in Laos to difficulties the allies had failed to anticipate

"Both American and South Vietnamese officers have also conceded that poor planning and a lack of intelligence coordination contributed to the South Vietnamese problems. They confessed early that they had not allowed for the enemy's use of tanks

"The lack of sound intelligence about the enemy's movements and assets was compounded, the American advisers say, by traditional rivalries between the South Vietnamese units, which often failed to share what they knew

"The magnitude of the enemy's anti-aircraft firepower also caught the allies by surprise."

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PER SEC. 53(b)(1)

4. Specific Allegations. Embedded in statements such as those cited above, and others of similar ilk now in circulation, are four sets of specific charges on areas of alleged "intelligence failure" with respect to the Vietnamese Communists' response to Lam Son 719.

a. That US intelligence failed to estimate accurately the intensity with which Hanoi would resist the Laos incursion and, hence, seriously underestimated the severity of combat that actually took place -- i. e., we misread Hanoi's intentions.

b. That US intelligence failed to estimate accurately the forces Hanoi had available in Laos to contest Lam Son 719 and, further, seriously underestimated the reinforcement capabilities Hanoi in fact demonstrated during the course of the fighting.

c. That US intelligence in particular underestimated the Vietnamese Communists' anti-aircraft artillery capabilities in the Lam Son 719 operational area.

d. That US intelligence failed to recognize the North Vietnamese capabilities in the field of armor.

II. THE FACTS

5. We have not had time to research the record of the entire US intelligence community in light of the above charges, but we have examined the Agency's record in considerable detail. Because the charges deal primarily with alleged prediction failures we have concentrated on those portions of the record dealing with predictions of future enemy behavior rather than our reportage of events and enemy deployments as the actual battles evolved. Lam Son 719 was launched on 8 February. The Communists initially avoided major contact as they endeavored to size up the situation and in the operation's early days, enemy activity was largely confined to scattered harassment. The first major enemy effort at serious resistance came on 19 February, when the Communists launched an intense attack against the 39th ARVN Ranger battalion on high ground just above Route 925, some three miles inside Laos. The comments and findings outlined below are based on Agency assessments and reports published between 14 December 1970 and 11 February 1971.

6. The Intentions Question -- Predictions of Overall Enemy Behavior. On 18 January 1971, Dr. Kissinger requested an Agency assessment -- to be prepared quickly on a very close-hold basis, but drawing on all intelligence available -- of probable North Vietnamese, Soviet, Chinese Communist, Lao and Thai reactions to a raid into the Tchepone area of Laos mounted by an ARVN force of at least two divisions backed by US air support (of all types) but with no US ground force participation. This memorandum was prepared by a small group of senior Agency officers with, collectively, a broad spectrum of expertise. It was sent to Dr. Kissinger on 21 January. At his request, copies were also sent to the Departments of State and Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We know from oral comments and reactions received that this 21 January memorandum was circulated among the command and senior staff levels at the White House, State Department, Defense Department and the JCS involved in planning or approving US participation in Lam Son 719.

7. This 21 January memorandum (Attachment 1) merits rereading in its entirety, especially paragraphs 10-15, which deal with "Probable North Vietnamese Reactions." We explicitly noted Hanoi's anticipation of allied ground attacks against its infiltration routes in south Laos, the large deployments of North Vietnamese troops dispatched in the second half of 1970 to protect these routes, and the additional deployments within North Vietnam to facilitate defense of the Laos Panhandle -- deployments which we said put the Communists "in a good posture to contest such an operation vigorously and promptly." We then went on to observe that if such an operation were launched, the Communists might evade combat "for a few days or even longer," but predicted that in the face of a sustained allied drive:

"Hanoi would be likely to do whatever it could to make the position of the South Vietnamese in Laos untenable and it would be prepared to accept the heavy manpower losses this might entail."

We concluded the North Vietnamese section by noting, again, that

"For all these reasons Hanoi can be expected to contest the Tchepone raid with whatever resources it can muster."

8. Our 21 January memorandum accurately predicted not only the North Vietnamese response but also the responses of the Lao, Communist Chinese, Soviets and the Thai. In short, there was no "intelligence failure" so far as this Agency's predictions were concerned. Instead, in this instance we came about as close to calling the shots as one is ever likely to come in the real world.

9. The Overall Enemy Strength and Reinforcement Capability Question. The question of Communist strength in Laos has long been a matter of major concern to the whole intelligence community. During November and early December 1970, CIA -- in coordination with DIA, NSA and the Department of State -- prepared a thorough, detailed study on this topic entitled, "Communist and Friendly Forces in Laos." This study was published on 14 December 1970 and would have been readily available as a base-line work to all senior US officials involved in or witting of plans for Lam Son 719. The study (Attachment 2) flagged in explicit detail the expansion and buildup of Communist tactical strength in south Laos then in train. It noted the creation of new tactical control elements (e. g., the 968th Front) and the expansion of logistic commands (e. g., the 559th Transportation Group) in the Panhandle area. It estimated overall NVA combat strength in south Laos at about 27,000 men -- 22,000 infantry plus 5,000 artillery/armor/anti-aircraft -- augmented by about 8,000 Pathet Lao forces, many NVA-encadred.

10. In discussing the Communists' south Laos buildup, this 14 December 1970 memorandum made the following explicit observations (in paragraph 31) about what came to be the Lam Son 719 operational area:

"The largest concentration of the newly arrived NVA forces is in the vicinity of Tchepone, where the headquarters of major combat units are located along the major lines of communication to the west, southwest, and southeast of this area. Forward elements of the 320th and 308th Division headquarters have been identified west of Tchepone near Route 23, while the 48th Regiment, 320th Division, has been operating to the southwest, just north of Muong Phine. The headquarters of the 2nd NVA Division, the 141st and the 9th Regiments, and 5th Independent Battalion also have been located southwest of Tchepone along Routes 23 and 9. [REDACTED]"

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~~_____~~ the 9th Regiment has relocated to an area southwest of the town of Saravane in Saravane Province, however, and its former role in Savannakhet Province appears to have been assumed by the 48th Regiment. The forward element of the headquarters 24B Regiment, 304th Division, and the headquarters of the 3rd Regiment, 2nd NVA Division, are both south of Tchepone, the latter near Ban Bac. The 1st Regiment, 2nd NVA Division, is currently unlocated but is believed to be in the general area south of Tchepone. In addition, two battalions of the 675B Artillery Regiment have been identified in Saravane Province. "

11. This December 1970 base-line memorandum was also quite explicit (in paragraph 38) on the reinforcement ^(Pa) capability question:

The flow of Communist combat forces to south Laos appears to reflect Hanoi's concern for the security of its remaining logistical route to its forces in the south. . . . In addition, one or more of the nine regiments of the 304th, 308th, 320th, and 325th Divisions not currently in Laos or known to be deploying southward in North Vietnam could be deployed southward. Elements of all of these units have had combat experience against allied forces.

12. On 3 February 1971 we published a memorandum entitled, "Disposition and Strength of Communist Combat Units in South Laos, Southern North Vietnam, and South Vietnam's Military Region 1." This paper was distributed on 4 February to Secretary Laird, Deputy Secretary Packard, JCS Chairman Admiral Moorer and Joint Staff Director, Lt. General Vogt in the Defense Department, Dr. Kissinger in the White House and Under Secretary U. Alexis Johnson in the Department of State. In essence, it constituted an amplification adding details to some of the estimates given in our 21 January predictive memorandum and an update of those portions of the December 1970 base-line study immediately relevant to the impending Lam Son 719 operation.

13. This 3 February memorandum (Attachment 3) also merits rereading in its entirety. It flagged the presence in the Tchepone (i. e., Lam Son 719) area of 11,000 NVA combat troops plus a pool of about 70,000 in immediately adjacent areas (11,000 elsewhere in south Laos, 40,000 in North Vietnam below Vinh, 19,000 in South Vietnam's MR 1), any of which could be easily deployed to the Tchepone area within a week's time. It noted unit shifts and patterns keyed to enhancing Hanoi's considerable reinforcement capabilities in opposing Lam Son 719. This 3 February memorandum explicitly stated (in paragraph 9):

The size of the commitment Hanoi is willing to make cannot be quantified with high assurance. Hanoi is obviously determined to fight and to make things as difficult as possible for the South Vietnamese. Hanoi could, for example, decide to send some troops directly across the DMZ in a flanking maneuver against the forces deployed along Route 9. But assuming a decision to reinforce Tchepone, we would estimate, given the large number of forces currently deployed north of the DMZ, that a reinforcement of as much as a division equivalent -- some 10,000 men -- could be made without seriously impairing North Vietnam's defensive capabilities. Whether Hanoi would be willing to raise the ante even further depends on a number of considerations. Foremost among these are Hanoi's view of the urgency of keeping the Laotian supply route operative and its readings of US intentions north of the DMZ.

14. In sum, the level of expanded and expanding Communist strength in south Laos was unambiguously flagged by this Agency, in coordination with other concerned community components, on 14 December 1970. On 3 February -- five days before Lam Son 719 was launched -- we informed senior policy-level officials that the NVA had 11,000 first line combat troops already deployed in the Lam Son area (plus logistic and other elements also armed), that reinforcement preparations and movements were already in train, that this 11,000 figure could easily

be raised by 10,000 additional first line NVA combat troops within a week's time, and Hanoi had ample additional combat troop resources nearby if it wanted to dispatch further reinforcements to the battle. We also observed (as cited above) that "Hanoi is obviously determined to fight and to make things as difficult as possible for the South Vietnamese." In the strength and reinforcement capability area, therefore, we also called the shots on developments much as they actually occurred as the battle unfolded (NVA ground combat strength in the battle area peaked at around 30,000). Furthermore, we submitted these reinforcement estimates well before the allied operation commenced.

15. The Anti-Aircraft Artillery Question. The specific issue of Communist anti-aircraft artillery capabilities was covered in the general surveys of Communist strength in Laos mentioned above. The 14 December base-line memorandum noted the 5,000 NVA and 1,000 Pathet Lao combat forces in south Laos assigned to artillery/armor/anti-aircraft units. That same memorandum observed (in paragraph 10) that nearly 60% of the Communists' artillery, armor and anti-aircraft units in Laos were deployed in the south. It noted specifically:

"The higher percentage in the south results from the large number of anti-aircraft personnel assigned to the 559th Transportation Group to protect its routes and way stations."

16. After the 3 February Tchepone area combat strength/reinforcement capability study, we did an update assessment of "The Growth And Current Deployment Of The Laotian-Based 559th Transportation Group." This memorandum was distributed to all concerned customers on 11 February, three days after Lam Son 719 was launched but eight days before major enemy resistance and counter-attacks commenced. Table 1 of that memorandum (Attachment 3) specifically cited, by number, 31 anti-aircraft artillery battalions known to be subordinate to the 559th. It also identified 13 such battalions (again by individual unit number) known to be associated with the four Binh Trams whose immediate operating areas were to be encroached upon by the ARVN incursion (BTs 9, 27, 33 and 41). Since we flagged the enemy's anti-aircraft artillery strength clearly (and accurately) and stressed that Lam Son 719 would be resisted with all the resources Hanoi could

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muster, we find no basis for the allegation that US intelligence seriously underestimated the enemy's anti-aircraft capabilities or the intensity with which these capabilities were used.

17. The Armor Question. Our memoranda and estimates submitted before Lam Son 719 was launched did not highlight the probable enemy use of tanks. The 14 December base-line memorandum, however, did make explicit reference to the 5,000 NVA artillery, armor and anti-aircraft forces in south Laos and that memorandum's summary again makes reference to armor units (paragraph 42). The 3 February memorandum updating, and concentrating on, the immediate threat to the impending Lam Son 719 operation specifically noted (in Table 1) the presence of the 198th Armor Battalion whose precise location could not be fixed but was flagged as being possibly near Muong Phine, the intersection of Routes 23 and 9 (i. e., about 30 kilometers from Tchepone via the easily traversable Route 9). Thus our pre-Lam Son 719 memoranda did note the presence of enemy armor as a resource already available to the Communists who, we also noted, would probably resist Lam Son 719 with every resource they could muster.

18. The Special Operations Situation Reports. In addition to the memoranda and estimates cited above, on 29 January Dr. Kissinger's office requested that we begin submitting daily situation reports recounting and assessing all available intelligence, signs of enemy foreknowledge or activity, etc. that might relate to or affect Lam Son 719. These reports (SOSRs) were submitted from 29 January through 8 February to the White House, the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In them -- as illustrated by the excerpts appended hereto as Attachment 5 -- we flagged, reported and assessed the clear and steadily mounting indications that the Communists were readying themselves for battle, intended to put up the fiercest possible resistance, and were particularly intent on maximizing their use of anti-aircraft artillery to harass and contest allied troop landings and the aerial support of ARVN ground operations. These intelligence warning flags were hoisted in virtually every report submitted during the ten days prior to 8 February when the first Lam Son 719 units actually crossed the Laos border.

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III. CONCLUSIONS

19. The above data, in our view, conclusively demonstrate that in a variety of written documents submitted to senior US policy echelons well in advance of the actual events, this Agency correctly predicted the nature, pattern and intensity of the North Vietnamese military response to Lam Son 719, the combat troop resources available to the North Vietnamese in the target area and their reinforcement capabilities, the Vietnamese Communists' anti-aircraft capabilities and their firm intent to make maximum use of them, and the presence of North Vietnamese armor in the proposed battle area. We therefore believe that the charges and allegations of "intelligence failure" now coming into circulation as noted in paragraphs 1 and 2 above are demonstrably without foundation in fact.

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Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs

Attachments

1. [REDACTED] - "Probable Reactions of Various Concerned Parties to a Possible Allied Action in South Laos," Copy No. 7
2. [REDACTED] - "Communist And Friendly Forces In Laos," Copy No. 8
3. [REDACTED] - "Disposition and Strength of Communist Combat Units in South Laos, Southern North Vietnam, and South Vietnam's Military Region 1," Copy No. 8
4. [REDACTED] (ER IM 71-25) - "The Growth And Current Deployment Of The Laotian-Based 559th Transportation Group," Copy No. 16
5. EXTRACTS FROM SPECIAL OPERATION SITUATION REPORTS
[REDACTED] Copy No. 1

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