

26 DEC 1971

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: US Efforts in Laos Outside the Area
of the Ho Chi Minh Trail

The recent loss of the Plain of Jars to an NVA attack of unprecedented intensity for this area raises several questions concerning the character and level of our response. As you know, we have treated northern Laos for several years as an area of little intrinsic significance but worth a modest cost (a) to keep open the option of eventual restoration of a neutralist buffer between North Vietnam and Thailand, and (b) to minimize the political costs of our air operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail area. However, as the level of warfare has declined in South Vietnam, events in Laos have taken on a proportionately greater significance in both the public and congressional forum and in the amount of US resources devoted to the Laotian war.

I believe that much of the NVA intensification of the war in Laos outside the Ho Chi Minh Trail could be attributed to preceding escalation by friendly forces. Before we undertake the new steps in Laos now under discussion, I would like to give you my views on the several alternatives.

First, we should recognize that a heavy political and military cost would be imposed on the Administration by attempting to effect what would be no more than a marginal improvement in the situation in northern Laos. Already, there is mounting pressure from the Thai for us to commit ourselves to a "total air effort" in the wake of the loss of the Plain of Jars. In return, Bangkok is offering not major reinforcements, but little more than maintenance of present Thai force levels. Moreover, these forces were unable to defend strong, interlocking firebases on the Plain of Jars for any appreciable period of time. They resisted at some firebases, but the evidence -- abandoned weapons, including recoilless rifles and rocket launchers, and the rapid loss of the firebases (given that, to my knowledge, no US firebase has ever been overrun in SVN) -- indicates a rout in the face of enemy ground attacks. The Thai claim that the loss of the firebases was due to NVA 130mm artillery and insufficient US air support is not credible. A few 130's could not devastate the firebases; the real effect was psychological. US air support was as heavy as requested, although weather may have had a temporarily adverse impact on accuracy. For example, every Arc Light strike requested over the past month was indeed flown.

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[pp. 3 of 8]

These facts lead me to conclude:

- We cannot rely upon the Thai to provide either the substantial reinforcements or the fighting spirit needed to stop the NVA in North Laos.
- We cannot win the war in the air; indeed, it is difficult to see what more can be done at present in this regard.
 - Use of air assets alone to locate and destroy a few pieces of well-camouflaged or secured artillery in the mountainous terrain of northern Laos is unreasonable and unrealistic.
 - A major increase in effort would lead to marginal gains at best.
 - A major escalation could result in greater NVA pressure which we would be hard put or unable to counter under current constraints.
- An intensification of the air war in northern Laos entails a high risk of imposing very heavy political and military costs on this Administration, thereby endangering the success of our entire effort.

The basic question is this: do we want to make an all-out effort in Laos with the prospect of little gain and at the risk of undermining our entire political and military position? I recognize the importance of preventing Hanoi from achieving a major psychological victory in northern Laos at this crucial time. However, it is doubtful whether we can do so militarily, even with a surge of US TACAIR and Arc Light sorties.

The alternative is to minimize the significance of NVA advances in northern Laos, as we are now doing successfully, on the grounds that the enemy is hitting there because of his weakened position in South Vietnam. (For example, Souvanna Phouma's government even now controls more territory than it did when Bill Sullivan became our Ambassador in Vientiane, and friendly forces never occupied the Plain of Jars during his tenure in Laos.) At the same time, we should prepare the public for other temporary setbacks, possibly in SVN Military Region II, and combine our effort in the area with counterblows outside northern Laos, wherever most effective.

In sum, I recommend that the Administration move with great caution before extending our commitment and intensifying our effort in northern Laos. This is especially true until we have a much better reading of the enemy's strategic intentions.

