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THE WAR FOR THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the US Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

GREGORY T BANNER, MAJ, USA
B.S., United States Military Academy,
West Point, New York, 1979

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MAJ Gregory T Banner, US Army

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Name of Candidate: Major Gregory T. Banner

Thesis Title: The War For The Ho Chi Minh Trail

Approved by:

Richard L. Kiper Thesis Committee Chairman
LTC Richard L. Kiper, M.A.

Robert F. Baumann, Member
Robert F. Baumann, Ph.D.

Accepted this 4th day of June 1993 by:

Philip J. Brookes, Director, Graduate Degree
Philip J. Brookes, Ph.D. Programs

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

THE WAR FOR THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL by Major Gregory T. Banner, USA, 157 pages.

This paper studies the lines of communications (the Ho Chi Minh Trail) which went from North to South Vietnam, through Laos, during the Second Indochina War. The purpose of this paper is to study the proposal that the United States, during the Vietnam War, should have used ground forces in Laos to block these routes.

In providing background information, this study examines the nature of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, political and strategic considerations, and US military actions which were applied against the trail network.

Studying the military feasibility of an interdiction effort on the ground, this study finds that the US was physically capable of mounting an operation into Laos to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The finding of this study is, however, that such a move would not by itself have provided a winning solution to the war. Additionally, such an attack into Laos would have had serious adverse consequences for that country and US desires for the region.

The conclusion of this study is that in this case (the Second Indochina War) a ground interdiction of enemy LOCs would not have been a productive course of action.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

A number of authors including General William C. Westmoreland (A Soldier Reports), General Bruce Palmer, Jr. (The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam), Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. (On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context), Norman B. Hannah (The Key To Failure: Laos and the Vietnam War), and Colonel Charles F. Brower, IV (Strategic Reassessment in Vietnam: The Westmoreland "Alternate Strategy" of 1967-1968), have stated or implied that the US should have used its military forces during the Vietnam War to move into Laos and physically block the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These authors have all claimed that such a use of US forces would have dramatically changed the outcome of the Vietnam War. They have likewise laid some blame for America's failure in the war on those who could not see the utility of this course of action or somehow blocked its implementation.

Such an option, as suggested by this distinguished group of authors, deserves serious study. Was this a truly viable option? What were the implications of such a move? Although many authors have listed this as a course the US

should have taken, none of them does an in-depth analysis of the consequences across the political and military spectrum. The suggestion is described in terms of a tactical maneuver with seemingly straight-forward strategic consequences. Was it this simple, and if so, why was this course not so obvious at the time?

This paper will explore these issues and fill a void in the literature. It will explore geo-political, tactical, and strategic implications of such a move to determine whether this "road not taken" was indeed what the US should have done during the Vietnam War.

Significance of the Study

The Vietnam War was viewed differently by different people. Such authors as Harry G. Summers argue that it was a conventional war which the US failed to recognize as such. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., states the opposite and argues it was the conventional approach to the situation which doomed the attempted solutions. This confusion was part of the problem both during and after the war. Regardless of where the truth lies, the debate itself shows how different this conflict was from the way the US normally thought of or prosecuted wars. In this confusion there is much to be learned about politics, strategy, tactics, international relations, and how they all relate in fighting a certain type of modern war.

Besides general lessons about the Vietnam War, this thesis will address one major consideration in particular. This is the problem involved in the interdiction of lines of communications (LOCs). They are defined by the US Army as:

All the routes (land, water, and air) that connect an operating military force with one or more bases of operations and along which supplies and military forces move.¹

In conventional war, LOCs are the life-line of an army. Cutting or harassing them is usually a prime goal of both sides. Likewise protecting one's own supply routes is a key to success.

These goals are no different in unconventional war. If LOCs can be found and attacked this will influence the battle, sometimes decisively. The key, however, is to understand enemy logistics, the nature and importance of particular LOCs, and the ability to attack these LOCs given military and political limitations.

This paper, titled the "War for the Ho Chi Minh Trail," will describe insurgent LOCs and US counter-LOC efforts during the Vietnam War. This will provide a useful starting point for the study and solution of on-going guerrilla problems. As a world leader the US will most likely continue to be involved in such problems as either a participant or advisor. Understanding the success North Vietnam had in operating and maintaining their LOCs, and

US failures at interdiction, provides valuable insights into such problems which the US may again face in the future.

Physical Definition of The Problem

There were three principal LOCs used by North Vietnam in getting supplies and forces into South Vietnam. These were the Laos route about which this paper is focused; sea infiltration along the eastern coast of South and North Vietnam; and a route using ocean shipping into Cambodia and then ground routes to South Vietnam. Of these routes, the sea and Cambodian ones were eventually closed by interdiction efforts and by political shifts in the Cambodian government. Only the Laotian corridor remained open throughout the war. This route also provided the most direct route from North to South Vietnam.

The heart of the interdiction problem in Laos lay roughly from a point where the North-South Vietnamese border formed the demilitarized zone (DMZ) due west to the Thailand border (map, page 142). The principal Laotian town in this sector was Tchepone and the area was long recognized as a hub of North Vietnamese activity. The US and South Vietnamese Combined Intelligence Center described this area by stating:

Because of its strategic location encompassing the convergence of several key supply lines, the Tchepone/Mount Nang Sector is regarded as the most important sector along the infiltration corridor in southern Laos.²

This area west of the DMZ was also the narrowest part of the Laotian panhandle which was adjacent to South Vietnam. (The panhandle widens as it goes further south, see the map at page 142.) For this reason, the shortest distance which could be found to block north-south movement was along this DMZ-Tchepone line. It was the most logical area in which to consider interdiction in Laos and was in fact the only site seriously mentioned in any study of such an effort.

Methodology

Chapters two, three and four will provide background information. They will outline, respectively, the nature of the problem (the infiltration system and North Vietnamese support); US strategic and political efforts as they pertained to the interdiction problem; and military options which the US did exercise in Laos during the war. Chapter five will begin the analysis of the thesis. Within chapter five will be a summation of the recommendations for ground action in Laos (a review of the literature); assumptions which must be made to conduct further discussion; a feasibility study of the proposed tactical plans; and an analysis of the political and strategic implications of the execution of such an option.

Chapter six will then reach conclusions and summarize the implications of this study.

Definitions

Appendix A will list the terminology used in this study. Within the basic research question, the term Ho Chi Minh trail means all of the land (and river) LOCs in Laos which connected North and South Vietnam. In researching American ability to cut these lines, I will look at the assets of the US, South Vietnam, and Laos, and whether those nations could interdict the lines of supply to the point where they would not have been of tactical significance to the North Vietnamese. This research will be directed at both the political capability (the will) and the physical and tactical assets to accomplish the mission.

Even though the country is now unified, I will use the wartime names of North and South Vietnam to refer to the territory which used to be those two countries.

Limitations

This study will be limited to unclassified sources. Within these sources, a further limitation can be considered to be the personal biases of various authors. Written first person accounts (original sources) may be flawed but will be accepted at face value unless contradictory evidence is uncovered. No attempt will be

made to judge the perspective of an author or the accuracy of his information if he was a witness to the event.

Another limitation is the accuracy of data. Statistics from the Vietnam War have been much criticized as being inflated by all sides. No attempt will be made to allow for such inaccuracies. Figures used throughout this study have been accepted at face value. In general, however, figures are used to show trends and patterns in this study. The accuracy of the final analysis does not depend on specific quantitative figures.

Delimitations

In writing this paper, research was limited to the resources available through the Combined Arms Research Library, Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. A number of studies from the Rand Corporation were also obtained directly from that organization.

CHAPTER 2

THE INFILTRATION PROBLEM

Part of the problem in Vietnam was in defining who was the enemy. Was this a war internal to South Vietnam or was it aggression from North Vietnam? Failure to answer this question led to serious disagreement among US policy makers and made it extremely difficult to reach a consensus on possible solutions to the conflict. This was a difficult issue during the war and is still debated in post-war analysis. It is not possible in this study to answer this question. What this study will do is explore one element of the issue, the impact of North Vietnamese logistical and manpower support.

Regardless of Hanoi's intent or the true nature of the southern insurgency, those who have proposed moving into Laos naturally side with the argument that such a move would have been decisive. They believed that by cutting North from South Vietnam, the problems in the south could have eventually been solved.

Chapter two will analyze this concept by examining the supply routes from North Vietnam and their importance to the war effort. It will discuss the geography of the Laotian panhandle, the history and operation of the Ho Chi

Minh Trail, the impact of these LOCs on the war, and a brief description of other LOCs besides those going through Laos.

Geography and Weather of The Area

Geography was a critical aspect of the war in Vietnam. The harshness as well as the incredible variety of terrain posed a number of challenges to US strategic, tactical, and logistical efforts. In regard to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, this was undeniably the case. Although the terrain was of a severe nature, the North Vietnamese had no choice but to make the best of it. In fact, once they found ways to accomplish their missions, the geographical traits of the area were an important asset to the North Vietnamese and an incredible hindrance to US interdiction efforts.

South Vietnam was bordered by North Vietnam (forty-five miles), Laos (300 miles), Cambodia (700 miles) and had a coast of 1000 miles. From the eastern end of the DMZ (between South and North Vietnam), across the Laotian panhandle and to the border with Thailand, was a distance of approximately 170 miles. Of this distance, approximately 125 miles were in Laos and the remaining forty-five miles made up the DMZ.

This stretch of 125 miles in Laos is the area of land about which this study is concerned. For use

throughout the remainder of this paper, this area will be referred to as "The Tchepone Corridor." This name is my invention and is taken from the Laotian town in the vicinity. The line cutting Laos from east to west in this vicinity roughly follows the 17-degree north latitude line.

In isolating the trail network, it is critical to note that in the area of The Tchepone Corridor the western half of the panhandle is flat or rolling hills, gradually inclining down to the Mekong river at the border with Thailand. The remainder, a stretch about sixty-five miles wide, is part of the Chaîne Annamitique mountain range. It is through these eastern sixty-five miles in Laos that most of the traffic of the Ho Chi Minh Trail flowed.

The Chaîne Annamitique mountain range parallels the coast between Vietnam and Laos, with the crest being generally on the Laotian side (map page 142). This range, extending as it does down the western border of Vietnam, provided the causeway for the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In the vicinity of the Tchepone Corridor, these mountains extend up to about 5000 feet. In general the peaks in this area are of less elevation than the mountains to the north and south.

Because of the mountains, the area is crossed by numerous streams and rivers. Generally, such waterways flow southwest in Laos to the Mekong river. They, therefore, in the Tchepone region, were a further

impediment to movement and required extensive bridging. The waterways were, however, useful in the Tchepone area for lateral movement and were used to advantage during the rainy seasons when the water was up and roads were more difficult to use.

Vegetation in the area is almost completely tropical rain forest. It is described as being "rugged and harsh even for the montagnards who inhabit it" Further, "the jungles along these trails are almost impenetrable primeval forests" ¹

Added to the terrain and vegetation is the weather. Annual rainfall in this area is the highest in Laos and averages up to 140 inches a year. ² Most of the rain falls between May and October making overland travel difficult and treacherous during this time. The dry season is the time when trafficability improves and large scale movement is militarily feasible. Although the construction of all-weather routes later in the war permitted a degree of year-round use, for most of the conflict, seasonal variations were the norm.

In summary, the Laotian panhandle is not a nice place. It has incredibly difficult terrain, numerous streams and rivers, thick vegetation, and a rain pattern which causes major seasonal variations in trafficability. The area of the Tchepone Corridor has about sixty-five

miles of such terrain, with a further sixty miles of plain or low rolling hills.

History and Summary of the Ho Chi Minh Trail

During World War II and the First Indochina War, the Vietminh needed and developed effective "backwoods" logistics systems. Included among these were routes which connected the northern and southern parts of Vietnam. With the beginning of the Second Indochina War, this trail network was deliberately improved and operated to support the aims of North Vietnam. Collectively, this system was known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail (map, page 143).

In May 1959 the government of North Vietnam met in Hanoi and approved launching a "People's War" in the south to unify the two Vietnams.³ Among their many considerations were LOCs connecting North and South Vietnam. Early in their planning process (that same month in fact) they ordered the creation of Transportation Group 559. Group 559 had the mission of creating a transportation network in Laos and was the operator of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This and subordinate organizations employed approximately 100,000 people at any given time during the war. These personnel included engineers, porters, drivers, mechanics, laborers, ground security units, anti-aircraft units, hospitals, and a complete

assortment of other administrative and logistical support units.⁴

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was not so much a single route but a network. In general it started with the transportation arteries in North Vietnam, swung west into Laos, south parallel to the South Vietnamese border, and at various points crossed back to the east and into South Vietnam. Some of the trails also went directly across the DMZ and into South Vietnam. The Laotian part of the system continued further south into Cambodia and intersected with a network there which was known as the Sihanouk Trail.

The routes consisted mostly of small trails for personnel movement and roads for vehicles. Personnel generally walked or pushed bikes along narrow foot-paths. These personnel were both porters carrying war supplies and soldiers going south to fight. This means was used throughout the war and constituted both a major asset for the North Vietnamese and one which was extremely difficult to interdict. The terrain also necessitated a vast amount of bridging to span the numerous rivers, streams, and valleys.

Once the roads were established, beginning in 1965,⁵ heavy equipment and supplies were moved mostly by vehicle. Eventually, the engineering effort would make many of the routes all-weather, thus evening out the cyclic nature of infiltration. Intertwined with the original

roads were also the by-passes and detours necessitated by the interdiction efforts and physical destruction of sections of their network. The result in the end was a grid system which allowed rapid lateral movement around bomb damaged areas.

The network (for both vehicle and foot traffic) consisted of the trails, themselves connected by a series of small rest-points, larger storage sites, and a few major base areas manned on a permanent basis. The network, therefore, needed not only soldiers to operate the routes, but also personnel to feed and support the workers. The area around Tchepone was such a hub and was listed as base area complex 604, one of the major locations for movement, storage, and other support activities. (See the map at page 144.) It was in fact the first major base in the route from North Vietnam to the south.

Statistics on the Ho Chi Minh Trail vary but the North Vietnamese themselves claim the length was over 16,000 kilometers and eventually included thousands of kilometers of fuel pipeline.⁶ Construction of roads progressed at approximately 450 kilometers per year beginning in 1965 and peaked at almost 1000 kilometers in 1970 and 1971.⁷ To move forces in daylight, the NVA had camouflaged over 3000 kilometers of road by the end of the war.⁸

Following the 1972 offensive and defeat for the North Vietnamese, they undertook a massive strengthening of their logistical systems as a lesson from that campaign. This construction included an eight-meter-wide all-weather road extending from Tchepone down the western border of South Vietnam, almost to Saigon. They also added thirteen new airfields inside South Vietnam.⁹ Senior General Van Tien Dung (North Vietnamese Army) described the end state of the trail, after the final 1975 victory as such:

The strategic route east of the Truong Song [Chaine Annamitique] Range, which was completed in early 1975, was the result of the labor of more than 30,000 troops and shock youths. The length of this route, added to that of the other old and new strategic routes and routes used during various campaigns built during the last war, is more than 20,000 kms. The 8-meter wide route of more than 1,000 kms . . . is our pride. With 5,000 kms of pipeline laid through deep rivers and streams and on mountains more than 1,000 meters high, we were capable of providing enough fuel for various battlefronts. More than 10,000 transportation vehicles were put on the road. . . .¹⁰

(Note that the information provided in this quote may contradict other data provided on the trail. Such discrepancies are common. Most data has been taken at face value from numerous sources with no attempts at comparison. Most data is generally similar.)

Although much of this activity occurred after the US ground involvement, these specific actions were only an extension of what was already in place. This description

indicates the nature of the effort and how the North Vietnamese viewed their logistics net.

Beginning in 1959 and extending through the end of the war, the North Vietnamese paid great attention to their route through Laos. The Ho Chi Minh Trail represented a considerable investment for them in time, personnel, and equipment. They conquered the terrain linking North to South Vietnam and produced in the end a logistical system which was highly responsive to their needs.

Significance to the NVN War Effort

As the war changed, so too did the importance of outside support and the Ho Chi Minh Trail as a conduit for that support. As the US deployed more forces and escalated its commitment, North Vietnam likewise moved more troops and supplies to the south. This could not have been possible without a functioning transportation system. The culmination of these efforts was the ability in 1972 and then again in 1975 to mount invasions with respectively twelve and seventeen divisions.¹¹ Equipment which was used in these invasions, and of necessity came down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, included T-34 and T-54 tanks, ZU 23 and SA-2 antiaircraft weapons, and heavy artillery pieces.¹²

Regardless of the facts, it was to the benefit of the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong in the south to downplay the role of the infiltration routes. Propaganda

efforts projecting the theme of a purely southern insurgency were highly successful and still obscure a number of aspects about the role of North Vietnam. In general, though, sufficient data is available to show that the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and by extension North Vietnamese support, were critical to the eventual outcome of the war. There were a number of advantages which the trail provided to the southern war. These advantages and uses of the trail can be generally divided into two categories: the actual logistical function of moving men and supplies, and the use of the trail area as a rear zone for the forces in South Vietnam.

The Flow of Men

The most important role for the Ho Chi Minh Trail was as a route to funnel personnel to the south. The North Vietnamese eventually released a figure of two million personnel who transited the trail during the war.¹³

In the early part of the conflict, personnel infiltration from north to south was mostly in the form of native southerners who had moved north upon the termination of the First Indochina War. They were sent back south to begin the fight again in what became the Second Indochina War. Up to 1965, approximately 40,000 such personnel returned south to form the core of the Viet Cong (VC) forces.¹⁴ An additional influx of northern soldiers into

VC units came after the Tet Offensive of 1968. Following those battles, the VC were decimated and relied heavily on native North Vietnamese to man their ranks. After 1968 two-thirds of all combatants were North Vietnamese (in both VC and NVA units). After 1972 this ratio climbed to eighty percent.¹⁵

Besides providing manpower to VC units, regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) formations also fought in Vietnam beginning in December 1964.¹⁶ In a year, this number had grown from one to possibly nine NVA regiments.¹⁷ By June 1968, the NVA had an estimated 113 infantry battalions in South Vietnam.¹⁸

The infiltration routes allowed the North Vietnamese to increase or maintain force levels as they desired. Table 1 (page 145) shows infiltration figures and force levels for North Vietnamese soldiers in South Vietnam. These figures were very significant and beginning in June 1967 the numbers of NVA maneuver units surpassed those of the VC in South Vietnam. This was the situation for the remainder of the war.¹⁹

The Flow of Supplies

Prior to the invasions of 1972 and 1975, a steady stream of logistical aid made important contributions to the VC and NVA war efforts. This was not as critical as the personnel flow but still was very important to the war

effort in the south. The North Vietnamese claimed that forty-five million tons of supplies passed along the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the war.²⁰ Nevertheless, a majority of all logistics needs during the war were met from within South Vietnam and it was only in certain classes of supply that outside support was really critical.

Table 2 (page 146) shows the NVA and VC logistics requirements for 1969. Almost all of the needs of the comparatively simple forces involved were for food, personal use items, construction materials, and ammunition. Of these, seventy percent of all supplies were obtained in South Vietnam. Further, food made up ninety-two percent of the entire requirement. Looking at the other classes of supply, only in ammunition did most of the needs come in from outside of South Vietnam. Weapons in general had already been infiltrated into the country prior to 1969. The year 1966 especially saw the employment of large numbers of Soviet and Chinese weapons for the first time.²¹ Such weapons could last throughout the war and did not need constant replenishment in huge volumes. This was especially true since personnel infiltrating from North Vietnam could bring their own weapons with them.

In summary, the only critical type of supply which was imported was ammunition. In 1969 ninety percent of all ammunition used by VC and NVA forces came from outside South Vietnam. This is compared to only twenty-six percent

of the food and twenty-seven percent of personal items and construction materials. In absolute numbers, food remained the largest imported commodity, but in importance ammunition was more critical.

Movement From South to North

Although not generally known, the Ho Chi Minh Trail also served as a route from south to north. At times there was a need to move personnel who were so severely wounded that they could no longer serve in the south, cadre personnel requiring more training, and the families of personnel fighting in the south. As an example of the numbers involved, captured documentation indicated that between July 1969 and March 1970 over 4,000 sick and wounded were evacuated from Cambodia to North Vietnam.²² Besides such personnel movement, it can be assumed that captured material, information, and other items of importance were sent north also using these routes.

The Rear Area Bases

Certainly, the movement of men and supplies was the best known function of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. However to view this asset as strictly a supply line is to take a very narrow view. Its importance was indeed logistical, but there were a number of other distinct advantages which such a network provided. The supply line in Laos (and Cambodia) also was the rear area for the forces in Vietnam. The fact

that the line existed meant that the territory was controlled by the North Vietnamese and could be used for other purposes in supporting the war effort.

North Vietnam used Cambodia and Laos as the rear area for their combat forces in South Vietnam. As such, this area provided space for such functions as command and control, maintenance, storage, training, rest and recuperation, sanctuary (for combat as well as support forces), supply procurement, growth of food, and all of the other support functions normally associated with any rear area in wartime. These rear base areas were important and the trail network was the link not only to North Vietnam, but also served as the way to link laterally the bases to each other. By having a relatively safe area along the entire border of South Vietnam, the enemy had a tremendous advantage which proved difficult if not impossible to overcome. One example of the very active role that the Laotian "safe area" played was that in the siege of Khe Sanh, North Vietnamese 122, 130 and 152 mm guns fired from Laos in direct support of those operations.²³

One particular site was found when US and Vietnamese forces went into Cambodia in 1970.

One complex, typical of several others, was discovered by an American air cavalry unit, and dubbed the 'City'. It had 182 storage bunkers each of 1,280 cubic feet capacity, 18 mess halls, a training area, and a small animal farm. It covered approximately three square kilometers, and the storage depot was capable of rapid receipt and issue of large quantities of supplies. From captured documents it was apparent that the 'City' had been in operation for at least two and a half years. The haul of weapons it yielded was enough to equip an NVA regiment.²⁴

When the South Vietnamese went into base area 604 in the vicinity of Tchepone (Operation LAM SON 719 in 1971), they found a similarly large number of enemy assets. Even though they did not stay long, nor do a thorough search, they came up with twenty-six cache sites, eight base camps, three hospitals, twenty-three storage areas, twenty truck parks, fifty-nine anti-aircraft artillery positions, 220 bunkers, 817 fuel barrels, seven 2000-gallon fuel storage tanks, thirty-three kilometers of fuel pipeline, one fuel pumping station, and three surface-to-air missile sites.²⁵ (See the map at page 144 for a diagram showing major NVA logistics bases.)

Other Lines of Communications

This study has concentrated on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the effect of the routes through Laos. To give a complete picture of VC and NVA logistics, the other supply systems should also be briefly mentioned. These were coastal traffic to the east of North and South Vietnam, and

shipping into Cambodia followed by overland transportation to South Vietnam.

Prior to 1965, it was believed that seventy percent of the supplies going into South Vietnam were sent along the eastern coastal route.²⁶ One of the early US successes was Operation MARKET TIME, designed to counter this coastal infiltration. By dedicating the appropriate air and naval assets, it was believed that by the end of 1966 they had cut the enemy down to moving less than ten percent of their supplies by this means.²⁷ This effort only improved as the war went on. Unfortunately the Cambodian problem was a lot more complex.

The Cambodian political leadership from 1965 until 1970 openly permitted communist block ships to unload war materials in Sihanoukville. These supplies were then transported by land to the VC and North Vietnamese camps located in eastern Cambodia.²⁸ One estimate states that 100% of the enemy's external needs in III and IV Corps areas, along with two-thirds of the needs for II Corps area, came to South Vietnam through Cambodia.²⁹ Table 2 (page 146) indicates that for the year 1969 an equal percentage of incoming supplies (fourteen percent) came from both Laos and Cambodia.

Cambodia was a very significant transit zone for support. However, the North Vietnamese perhaps saw that they might not always have such easy access. In 1965 they

began extending their LOCs from Laos, south into Cambodia. This extension was dubbed the Sihanouk Trail and opened for business in May 1966.³⁰ When the Cambodian ports were closed to North Vietnam in 1970, support to the southern part of South Vietnam and the use of the Cambodian sanctuaries continued. This fact made the Tchepone corridor all the more important because after 1970 almost all of the external support going into South Vietnam had to be routed through this area.

Summary

The sheer size of the effort and number of personnel indicate the importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the North Vietnamese. The sea and Cambodian routes (from ports in Cambodia) were also important but they eventually were closed. The Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos was the most direct route and in the end it was the only one left open to the North Vietnamese. Massive numbers of personnel and a significant amount of supplies passed through the Tchepone Corridor during the war. Following US withdrawal, the trail was the route used to position and supply forces for both the 1972 and 1975 offensives. Without the trail, neither of those offensives could have occurred as they did and the war up to that time would have been dramatically different.

In concluding this chapter therefore, it appears that some basic premises of the Laotian invasion proposal are valid. North Vietnam played a very significant part in the southern war. If it had been cut off from South Vietnam, the war would have been very different. It remains to be discussed why this did not occur, how significant this change would have been, and if it could have been decisive in the eventual outcome of the war.

CHAPTER 3

POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Behind all major decisions in the war were political and strategic considerations - the "big picture" issues as seen by US military and civilian leadership. The response to the problem of North Vietnamese support was no different. Ultimately it was the US higher leadership which decided not to pursue a Laotian invasion. An explanation of the major issues affecting their thinking is therefore key to understanding this subject. The main issues were: the general US policy towards Laos; an early infatuation with unconventional warfare (UW) (vs. thinking in terms of conventional war); a lack of a regional strategy to fight the war; political problems in the US; and considerations of Russian or Chinese involvement. Together or separately, these issues were the largest reasons why proposals to move into Laos were not adopted.

US Policy Towards Laos

The US began to assume primacy in Southeast Asia following the defeat of the French. However, America's first real challenge was not in Vietnam, but in Laos. The result of this challenge was that the US entered into an

arrangement with the North Vietnamese to maintain at least the facade of an independent Laos. This arrangement in fact allowed the existence of the Ho Chi Minh Trail while tying US hands in taking any effective counter-measures.

Geographically Laos was, and still is, in a key but precarious position. It has borders of 200 miles with China, 800 miles with North Vietnam, 300 miles with South Vietnam, 300 miles with Cambodia, 1000 miles with Thailand, and 150 miles with Burma. The territory of Laos has been fought over and marched over for centuries.

Laos became an independent state in 1954 but was immediately beset by internal problems. The government was supported by the French and Americans but faced a challenge by the communist Pathet Lao who were supported by North Vietnam. A struggle ensued which resulted in large scale civil war. To support the Pathet Lao and their own purposes (turning Laos into a fellow communist state and securing lines of communications to South Vietnam), the North Vietnamese deployed forces into Laos and had approximately 6,000 soldiers there in 1961.¹

The US understood the importance of Laos. In January of 1961, President Eisenhower, in briefing President-elect Kennedy, stated that it was imperative that Laos be defended and that this country was the key to all Southeast Asia.² Both administrations were firmly committed to supporting a strong, anti-communist, bastion

against all comers.³ Slowly, however, the US began to realize that this goal was not within its reach and that the initial hard-line attitude was flawed. It became evident that neither the government, military, nor social structure was capable of being the efficient, coordinated, dedicated power America wanted. One study described the problem faced by US leaders:

Hardly a country except in the legal sense, Laos lacked the ability to defend its recent independence. Its economy was undeveloped, its administrative capability primitive, its population divided both ethnically and regionally, and its elite disunited, corrupt, and unfit to lead.⁴

Further, "The material from which to build a firm opposition to communism was not to be found in Laos."⁵

As the situation became heated in 1962, a major international conflict developed around the civil war in Laos. The US unfortunately found itself in a difficult situation since the government which it supported appeared hopelessly inept. The choice appeared to be either introducing US forces or finding some negotiated option.⁶ One contemporary analysis listed the possible requirement for 300,000 soldiers and nuclear weapons if the US took the military option.⁷ Needless to say, this was not an attractive course of action. The US chose instead to accept the reality of the situation, seek negotiation and find the next best solution in what became the 1962 Geneva Accords.

The Geneva Accords resulted in what has been termed the "neutralization" of Laos. This term came to signify both what the Accords established and what the US supported for the remainder of Laos' non-communist existence. One general definition was that:

In effect, U.S. policy had taken a sharp turn away from the goal of a strong, anti-Communist Laos toward the concept of a Laos that would be neutralized, policed by international agreement, and governed by a coalition of the right-wing, Neutralist, and Communist factions.⁸

The concept was that all other countries would leave and a coalition government would rule in Laos. In major discussions with the Soviet Union (as the other great power concerned with the issues) the US negotiator, Averell Harriman, received a number of guarantees. While signing the accords, the Soviet Union promised to force compliance by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnam. This included stopping the use of Laos as a supply route between North and South Vietnam and requiring all North Vietnamese forces to leave Laos.⁹ North Vietnam also signed the Accords, agreed to these conditions, and vowed to support the neutralist government of Laos.¹⁰

This agreement ended the overt fighting and international conflict. It also kept America from possibly getting sucked into a war. It was perhaps the best the US could get from the situation. Washington was happy and hopeful as President Kennedy stated, "It is a heartening

indication that difficult, and at times seemingly insoluble, international problems can in fact be solved by patient diplomacy."¹¹

Unfortunately, the communists lied. It became apparent, as early as the same month the Accords were signed, that North Vietnam was not going to withdraw their forces.¹² Averell Harriman later stated that "We must recognize that the North Vietnamese did not keep the Laos Agreement of 1962 for a single day."¹³ These facts, and Soviet unwillingness to discuss the problems further,¹⁴ put America back in a difficult situation. Should the US disregard the Accords or try to make the most of them in spite of communist non-compliance?

The fact is that even though the Accords were hopelessly compromised, the process of creating them had changed the situation in Laos. The US had first of all "saved face" and the Accords had allowed both the American and Soviet governments to defuse an international crisis. Secondly, just by the threat of intervention, the US caused the communists (North Vietnam, Pathet Lao, Chinese, and Soviet) to understand at that time the importance placed on Laos and stopping overt communist expansion. For them, the specter of Korea suggested that the US might indeed be willing to send military forces to fight. The signing of the Geneva Accords was therefore the time for the communist

leadership to change tactics and be more subtle about their approach.

Because the situation had somewhat changed and the US was getting something out of the arrangement (probably the best to be hoped for), the US government in the end thought it in their best interests to "play the game." As long as no overt force threatened the neutralist government, the official policy was to support the Accords. America complained about North Vietnamese violations and the existence of the Ho Chi Minh Trail was public knowledge. The principal use made from such information was, however, to justify slight deviations from the Accords or simple propaganda.¹⁵ Completely scrapping the Accords was not a goal because the US apparently had no better options.

North Vietnam's policy was to grant the US the goal of maintaining neutralization, as long as they could continue to pursue their primary objective, unification with the south.¹⁶ In terms of control of terrain, this situation became a "tacit understanding." The North Vietnamese were granted use of the Laotian panhandle if they would not conquer or allow the Pathet Lao to conquer the rest of the country. The Pathet Lao retained control in the northeastern parts of Laos. The neutralist government was allowed to rule in those areas not occupied by North Vietnamese or Pathet Lao forces.¹⁷

Since the problems in South Vietnam were already becoming more important in 1962 and 1963, Laos slipped into the background. This apparently was where all parties wanted Laos and support for the Geneva Accords, for better or worse, no matter how superficial, was the instrument to maintain a status quo. It became a part of the "tacit agreement" that the fate of Laos would be decided by results in South Vietnam. It was not in the larger interests of the US or North Vietnam to break this "tacit agreement" and provoke a change to the Laotian situation. This philosophy controlled American policy towards Laos for the remainder of the Second Indochina War.¹⁸

Since the "solution" in Laos was political, US policies in Laos were dominated by the State Department and the US Ambassador at Vientiane (Laos). The most influential of these ambassadors was William Sullivan, a career State Department officer, who held the post from 1964 through 1968. His position was that:

Laos wasn't the center of activity and since we didn't wish to get the United States forces directly involved in a confrontation there while the confrontation was being pursued in South Vietnam, it was decided not to take an overt cognizance or [the breakdown of the Geneva Accords].¹⁹

Ambassador Sullivan opposed military activities in Laos designed to support the war in South Vietnam. He maintained paramount control of all US activities, military or otherwise, in country. He opposed US ground action in

Laos, and closely scrutinized air attacks.²⁰ In tribute to his opposition, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was labeled "Sullivan's Freeway" by MACV.²¹ He was, however, doing his job in accordance with the wishes of the State Department and ultimately the President. The neutralization of Laos and adherence to the Geneva Accords was a national policy.

The result of the policy towards Laos was opposition to any military action there which threatened to upset the status quo. The decision of the US government was to self-impose limits on military actions in Laos. They maintained this position throughout the war in Vietnam. Any attempt to change this policy had to run a gauntlet of arguments and weigh gains versus losses. No one was able to negotiate that course and change the basic US position.

The "Unconventional Warfare" Mindset

An invasion of Laos and the establishment of a barrier defense would have been a conventional operation aimed at severing North Vietnamese infiltration. One of the arguments against this move was that it utilized conventional operations in an unconventional war and thereby missed the real problem. The proposal to invade Laos ran contrary to an "unconventional warfare" mindset which permeated the thinking of many US leaders and bureaucrats. This mindset tended to see the entire war as

an unconventional problem and viewed with suspicion proposals for conventional solutions.

The early 1960s saw a preoccupation with unconventional warfare (UW) and counter-insurgency within the United States. Led and directed by President Kennedy, study of UW became a main focus for the government and military.²² This was rightly based on an analysis of world problems and the types of challenges the US was facing in Vietnam and elsewhere. For policy and strategy formulation, the effect was unfortunately to see problems and solutions, at times, in terms of UW only. A fault with the dogmatic approach which sometimes resulted was that anyone trying to put a conventional twist on a proclaimed unconventional situation was branded a heretic. As the debate developed in Vietnam, people chose to line up on one side or the other with apparently no room for both views. General William E. DePuy, a senior commander in Vietnam, thought the environment was such that:

If you were 'for' counter-insurgency, you were 'against' conventional military thinking. Military operational plans were regarded at best as unnecessary and at worst reactionary, unenlightened and stupid.²³

The result was constant debate and in-fighting to define the problem. Creating policy and a strategy to fix the problem was even more difficult. Specifically, in regard to an invasion of Laos, General DePuy believed such a proposal "was not in harmony with perceptions in

Washington, including the focus there on counter-insurgency."²⁴ Colonel Harry Summers believes that the US failed strategically because it "took the political task (nation building/counter-insurgency) as [America's] primary mission and relegated the military task (defeating external aggression) to a secondary consideration."²⁵ Author Norman Hannah describes State Department views that Vietnam was "a political problem of winning the allegiance of the people rather than a military problem. . ." At about the same time, General Earle Wheeler was quoted as stating that "The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military."²⁶

These various opinions only go to show that there was much disagreement about the enemy and how to handle him. For those who favored the UW view of the war, the implication was that efforts beyond the borders of South Vietnam were not only unnecessary but might also prove counter-productive.²⁷

Eventually the US did respond with tools such as the bombing campaign. This was still a relatively limited operation and one designed to "shape the battlefield" in South Vietnam. The dispatch of ground forces either to Laos or North Vietnam would have been an escalation far out of line with the US philosophy and goal of keeping and winning the war in South Vietnam.²⁸

As with any issue, it takes strong arguments to change the status quo. To change the status quo of the Vietnam War (no US forces in Laos), would have required a consensus within the administration that North Vietnamese support was indeed key, if not essential. During the war, and in spite of much data (itself suspect by many government personnel), the US could not get such a consensus. The policy remained to win the war in South Vietnam and treat the war as essentially unconventional.²⁹

Regional Strategies

One of General Westmoreland's complaints during and after the war was the fact that his powers were limited to South Vietnam.³⁰ The fact that different US agencies or military commanders were in charge in the different countries of Southeast Asia, meant that US efforts were fragmented and disjointed. There was no unity of command in theater at the military or political level. There was, further, no regional focus, but rather a collection of individual US leaders, each responsible for their own "piece of the pie." In comparison, for the North Vietnamese "the three Indochinese countries were strategically inseparable and the Communist side made its treatment of them dovetail as mutually supporting legs of a unified strategy."³¹

The US commander in South Vietnam only controlled forces in that country (with few minor exceptions). Other US military forces in Southeast Asia came under the Commander-In-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC). General Westmoreland states that "my responsibilities and prerogatives were basically confined within the borders of South Vietnam."³² He suggested a "Southeast Asia Command" to centralize military operations in theater; however this type of structure was never created.³³ One of the possible reasons arguing against a larger command, and specifically ground actions in Laos, was the perception that this was "empire building" on the part of the MACV commander.³⁴

In regard to many issues, even in South Vietnam, General Westmoreland also states that he clearly came under the ambassador and was his "deputy for military matters."³⁵ The ambassadors in all the countries together with the State Department were very influential in the formulation of policy and strategy. The role of the ambassador in Laos has already been discussed. Equally autonomous was the ambassador in Thailand. General Westmoreland referred at one time to Ambassador Martin (Thailand) and Ambassador Sullivan (Laos) as "Field Marshals" because of the power they held.³⁶

Even within the Department of State above ambassadorial level there was confusion. Vietnam came under a special interdepartmental Task Force which reported

to the White House. Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand reported through the Office of Southeast Asian Affairs.³⁷

This disjointed situation was recognized by many people but it was never fixed. Early in the war the Pentagon placed its objections to the command and control situation in writing, by stating that:

The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that our position in Cambodia, our attitude toward Laos, our actions in Thailand, and our great effort in South Vietnam do not comprise a compatible and integrated US policy for Southeast Asia. (JCS Memo to the Secretary of Defense - 22 January 1964)³⁸

The result of this lack of centralized direction, was that the US had no regional strategy to counter that of North Vietnam. US organization resulted in a focus on:

the ground war in terms of South Vietnam alone, a geographic definition that lacked symmetry with that of our enemy who made no secret of the fact that he was fighting the Indochina war and who used Laos and Cambodia with impunity.³⁹

In tackling specific issues such as the infiltration routes in Laos, the MACV commander was reaching outside of his area of operations and responsibility. He had to justify any request for operations and more times than not, his requests were denied.⁴⁰

This was not only a practical problem, but it also reflected an attitude about the nature of the war. The US was fighting for the most part on one battlefield while the North Vietnamese had a campaign plan for the theater.

Their system worked better than did that of the United States.

Internal United States Problems

Of course, the war was a major political event within the United States. It was an issue of supreme importance in the 1968 and 1972 elections, was the subject of mass protests throughout the period, caused a lot of political debate, and disrupted governmental processes and goals. These internal problems had major implications both at home and in Vietnam.

As the war progressed and General Westmoreland thought more and more about the Laotian problem, political obstacles kept pace with his ideas for a ground invasion. In 1965 when he first considered going into Laos, he did not have the troops available. Around 1968, when formal proposals were made by General Westmoreland, President Johnson was under enormous pressure at home and would not permit any such move.⁴¹ One of the political statements which President Johnson had made earlier was that he would not "broaden" the war.⁴² With time and increased protest in the US, any consideration of breaking this pledge faced an increasingly difficult challenge. This was perhaps locked in concrete after President Johnson's famous 31 March 1968 speech in which he included again his position not to widen the war.⁴³

With such debate about the war going on at home, it was inevitable for the field commanders to become involved. One author contends that General Westmoreland "was drawn into the partisan debate and muted his pessimism" about the strategy and progress in the war. In other words, he became trapped by optimistic political statements, and could not propose a major change in policy, which would have indicated some fault with US actions up to that point.⁴⁴

Military strategy is supposed to be dictated by political policy, not political problems. In Vietnam the US saw too much of the latter and not enough of the former. The discussion above has given just a few examples of the internal strife which effected the options which the US was able to exercise or even consider in Vietnam. This was just one of many problems which beset American efforts in the war and specifically inhibited any proposals for an invasion into Laos.

Russia and China

Vietnam was one battle in the Cold War. As during the Korean War, the US viewed Vietnam as an active but secondary theater. The focus of the American government remained on larger strategic issues and any possible conflict with the Soviet Union or China. Such a conflict had two aspects. The Soviet Union or China could have

become directly involved in Southeast Asia, or, by weakening itself through an involvement there, the US could have become vulnerable elsewhere in the world.

China and the Soviet Union were the primary suppliers of North Vietnam and the southern insurgency. Their aid reached a high point in 1967 with approximately \$930 million of combined goods. Two-thirds of this package was in military items.⁴⁵ They also provided a great deal of political and diplomatic support such as that already discussed in the case of Laos.

In regard to a threat of direct intervention, the problem (because of geography) was more one of China than the Soviet Union. In the realm of international politics and communist propaganda, it is of course hard to tell where the truth lay. The Chinese had, in 1965, stated that they were willing to allow their soldiers to fight with the South Vietnamese.⁴⁶ They also did not hesitate to use the example of Korea in suggesting that they might be willing to send forces elsewhere again.⁴⁷ Regardless of the validity of these threats, they were taken seriously and often used to counter any suggestion of "dangerous" moves by the United States.⁴⁸ One author has stated that President Johnson's over-supervision of the American bombing campaign in North Vietnam was a direct result of his fears of Chinese reaction.⁴⁹

In retrospect, the threat of the US being dangerously weak because of Southeast Asian commitments was real. American forces world-wide were depleted by the war. In December 1967 most units in Europe, the US, and Korea were rated "not combat ready."⁵⁰ Viewing Vietnam as only a part of the cold war, the Joint Chiefs of Staff worried continually about the big picture and an overextension of resources.⁵¹ From this perspective, any widening of the war would only make things worse.

American confusion about Chinese and Soviet intentions was to their advantage and to the advantage of their North Vietnamese and Viet Cong allies. No matter how small, the threat of intervention in Southeast Asia, or action elsewhere, had to be taken into account. Critics argue that the fault of American leaders was not in recognizing the risk, but that "we took counsel of these fears and in so doing paralyzed our strategic thinking."⁵²

Summary

Vietnam was a very complicated war politically (as well as tactically). There were a number of major issues which governed the thoughts and actions of the principal players involved. Since political and strategic considerations were always paramount, any reason to stay out of Laos faced severe opposition. The cumulative effect

of several political and strategic reasons was enough to make any such move almost insurmountable.

CHAPTER 4

INTERDICTION--MILITARY ACTIONS

In spite of US political and strategic restrictions, military operations were conducted in Laos. These were limited and, as has been shown in chapter two, the flow of men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail continued throughout the war. Nevertheless, these military efforts contributed to the war effort by draining North Vietnamese resources. The fact that these operations failed to halt infiltration meant that the US needed to consider the ground assault as described in this paper. For that reason, we need to understand what was attempted in order to understand fully why an invasion was seen as the only remaining option.

For the broader purpose of this paper--providing a history for possible future use--a study of US military activities in Laos is instructive. Because of the restrictive environment and nature of the enemy, the US attempted a number of unique and innovative solutions. A study of the war in Laos, therefore, provides numerous lessons on the application of military power in a Low Intensity Conflict environment.

Even though Laos was a secondary theater, it was the scene of a great deal of fighting before, during, and after US participation in the war in Vietnam. There were actually two different zones of action in Laos following the 1962 Accords. The first conflict was a continuation of the problems which existed before the 1962 agreement. It was the fight in northern Laos between the Pathet Lao (Laotian Communists) and the forces supporting the Laotian government. The second "war," geographically separated from the first, was the battle for the Ho Chi Minh supply lines in the Laotian panhandle (southern Laos). Although the fighting in the north is not the subject of this paper, it was a part of the overall problem America faced and it was a part of the overall strategy of the North Vietnamese. Also, in discussing agencies, terms, forces and activities, the two "wars" are often confused. For that reason it is imperative to describe briefly this northern "war" before moving on to the operations conducted in the south.

The Northern "War"

The 1962 Accords were from the start a facade, but they did allow the US and Soviet Union to withdraw gracefully from an escalating problem. The result did not end the civil war inside Laos; it merely defused the immediate concerns of the outside actors. Because the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese retained control of

sections of Laos, the Accords de facto condoned a partition of the country along the lines of the cease fire.¹ The shooting war soon began again, although under modified conditions. The outside actors (mainly the US, USSR, and North Vietnam) were committed to keeping the violence under control and maintaining the status of Laos as a secondary theater. What came about was a situation in which:

the fighting was not only inconclusive but deliberately so. Neither the United States nor North Vietnam was seriously seeking a final solution for Laos' problems in Laos. It was accepted that the fate of Laos would be decided elsewhere--to wit in Vietnam--and that in the meantime it would be inadvisable to sponsor actions which threatened the facade of the Geneva Accords. There thus appears to have evolved an unwritten mutual prohibition against attacks on targets judged to be of critical value to either side.²

Essentially, what came out of the Geneva Accords was a continuation of the same problems but with less international visibility and less real capacity for evolving into an international problem. The US contribution to this arrangement was a commitment to the Laotian government but an equal commitment to the Geneva Accords. Among other practical considerations, one of the stipulations was that the US would not introduce military forces into the country. (The North Vietnamese had the same prohibition but chose to ignore it. At the time of the Accords they were believed to have had 6,000 personnel in country; few of whom departed.)³

As the civil war began again in northern Laos, the US had to balance its support for the Laotian government and the '62 Accords. The US did in fact violate the Accords, but only to a limited and very controlled degree. The American government consciously "played the game" to the end.⁴ The military support which the US did provide was kept at a low level so as not to create problems for the US or Laotians. In general, assistance fell into three areas: support for guerrilla forces, support for the Laotian military, and direct activities by US aircraft.

Support For Guerrilla Forces

The Pathet Lao was based in the northeast part of Laos, in the areas bordering on North Vietnam and China. They maintained a largely conventional presence and government in these areas; the official Laotian government was incapable of mounting any effective resistance. The US response was to support local tribes in a guerrilla war against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese forces. (It was estimated that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had 15,000 personnel in northern Laos in 1968.)⁵ This guerrilla army numbered 30,000 by 1967.⁶ This operation was run by the Central Intelligence Agency, not the US military. It was for such guerrilla forces that Air America and other civilian contract organizations were mainly created and used.

Support For the Laotian Military

The US had a conventional Military Aid Program to provide equipment and training to the Laotian Armed Forces. The organization and operations were closely scrutinized and many of the activities were routed through Thailand and through organizations such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID). Military personnel in country were forbidden from going on combat operations and were limited to certain locations and activities. In September 1969, 309 US military personnel were in Laos. The US also contracted with other countries to provide personnel for specific support functions (maintenance, etc.).⁷

Direct Activities By US Aircraft

The US Air Force took an active part in the northern war. It was decided early that air support was critical and neither the Laotian Air Force nor the guerrillas were capable of doing the job. Beginning in 1964, Operation BARREL ROLL provided USAF aircraft for combat operations against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese. Attack sorties (not including any B-52 strikes) totaled 15,144 in FY 1969 and 42,279 in FY 1970. (The jump in air strikes from 1969 to 1970 was the result of a bombing halt in North Vietnam and the availability of more assets for strikes into Laos.) These strikes

supported the northern guerrilla army in interdiction and sometimes close air support roles.⁸

This war in northern Laos was a part of the entire southeast Asian problem. Despite certain similarities to other activities, it was maintained as a separate issue, relatively remote from South Vietnam, and largely kept out of the spotlight. Even though everything in theater was related, it was the war in southern Laos which more directly affected US activities in South Vietnam.

The Southern "War"--The Ho Chi Minh Trail

The United States undertook numerous military operations to interdict the flow of men and supplies to the south. The goal of most of these actions outside of South Vietnam was in fact to halt North Vietnamese support for the war in the south. (The war in northern Laos, just discussed, was the major exception to this rule. Efforts in that region were directed at the Laotian problem as essentially a separate issue.) In various ways, the US tried both to convince the North Vietnamese to stop their support, and block those efforts when intimidation and "subtlety" failed.

The actions which the US undertook against the Ho Chi Minh Trail network in Laos were an extension of the larger campaign. These efforts grew from the conviction that outside support to the enemy forces in South Vietnam

was very important and that action should be taken with the military forces available to America. As has been noted, the US applied military power selectively, based on political constraints. These constraints never allowed the US to invade Laos and cut the trail. What they did do was allow a series of lesser programs. These programs fell into two categories: the air campaign (with some limited ground reconnaissance by US personnel), and the support provided to Laotians (in their own country) to disrupt the North Vietnamese supply network there. Each of these activities will be discussed in turn.

As an adjunct to the programs instituted by the US, a final effort which must be mentioned was Operation LAM SON 719. This was a South Vietnamese invasion of Laos in 1971. It was supported heavily by US air assets but the ground forces were all South Vietnamese. It was aimed directly at Tchepone and was the only attempt during the war to put conventional ground forces in Laos in any number. As such, it was an attempt to conduct the type of operation discussed in this paper.

The Air Campaign

As with the entire war effort, the air campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos was a gradual affair. The initial involvement was in conducting training missions for the Laotian Air Force following the departure of the

French. US reconnaissance planes then began finding targets for the Laotians. As the war escalated the US began conducting operational missions. Eventually the US Air Force and Navy reached the point where they were fully committed and were doing everything possible with air power to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail. These actions, as in the attacks against North Vietnam itself, did not stop the flow. Air power could not do the job but it was as far as the US was willing to go.

The air war in the Laotian panhandle can be described in terms of the operational names used by the United States. STEEL TIGER, TIGER HOUND, and COMMANDO HUNT were the general names used for the Laotian interdiction campaign. These air operations oriented on specific areas or targets during certain years. IGLOO WHITE was the program name for the employment of sensors in Laos and the use of the sensor information in targeting and attacking the trail network. These four operations, taken together, constitute the heart of what the US tried to do, to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. In addressing these efforts, it is best to describe them each and then as a whole describe the effect which they had.

STEEL TIGER, TIGER HOUND and Studies and Observation Group
Reconnaissance

STEEL TIGER and TIGER HOUND

The limitations of the Geneva Accords of 1962, which the US chose to abide by, prohibited US forces from entering Laos. The technical loophole used was the application of US air power based elsewhere, and used over Laotian territory.

Beginning in May 1964, Operation YANKEE TEAM sent US reconnaissance aircraft into Laos to find the enemy and pass targeting information to the Laotian Air Force. Such activity did not go unmolested and eventually the US recognized the need for attacks on anti-aircraft positions and strikes in support of search and rescue operations.⁹

As the problems increased in South Vietnam and as the evidence of infiltration mounted, President Johnson authorized outright attacks on the trail network in Laos (and North Vietnam).

Operation STEEL TIGER began in April 1965. This was meant as an adjunct to ROLLING THUNDER attacks begun in March against logistical targets in North Vietnam. The STEEL TIGER area of operations was in the part of Laos west of North Vietnam (north of the DMZ and Tchepone). In December of 1965, TIGER HOUND began, encompassing the remainder of Laos south of Tchepone (and adjacent to South

Vietnam).¹⁰ Air Force attack sorties in Laos included 16,000 in 1965; 77,000 in 1966 and 89,000 in 1967.¹¹

During this time, one of the weaknesses which was immediately identified in this air campaign was in intelligence. Aerial reconnaissance had specific limitations, especially in the jungle. Because of this, US forces in South Vietnam received permission to send limited numbers of US personnel into Laos under the direction of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam--Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG).

Studies and Observation Group

Operation LEAPING LENA had utilized Vietnamese troops to perform reconnaissance missions in Laos beginning in 1964. There was doubt about the value of the information these soldiers were obtaining and so permission was requested from Washington to send US soldiers. Approval for US entry into Laos was granted on 21 September 1965. Operations were planned both to obtain hard, reliable intelligence on the trail network and to support interdiction efforts. The Studies and Observation Group (SOG) had already been created by MACV to conduct clandestine activities against North Vietnam; in 1965 operations into Laos, under the name SHINING BRASS, were added to its missions.¹²

The first operation by US soldiers was conducted beginning on 18 October 1965. This first mission confirmed an area of enemy activity and eventually called in eighty-eight sorties by US aircraft onto a depot area.¹³

The SOG continued operations in Laos throughout the war. SHINING BRASS was renamed PRAIRIE FIRE. As operations expanded into Cambodia, SOG was organized into subordinate headquarters, named Command and Control North (CCN), Central (CCC) and South (CCS). CCN, based at Da Nang, controlled operations into the area around Tchepone. Eventually, SOG operations employed 2,500 Americans and 7,000 natives (Vietnamese or other local personnel).¹⁴ In total, seventy-six Americans died on SOG missions in Laos.¹⁵

COMMANDO HUNT and IGLOO WHITE

IGLOO WHITE

Early US efforts in Laos suffered from limited intelligence both for targeting and bomb damage assessment. Aerial reconnaissance and limited numbers of ground teams could not provide the coverage needed. In 1968, the US deployed a functional, large-scale sensor system to provide real-time intelligence on enemy activities in Laos. This system was called IGLOO WHITE and the integrated attack system based on it, was called COMMANDO HUNT.

There were a variety of efforts during the Vietnam War aimed at using advanced technologies to solve various battlefield problems. One common need which existed throughout the war zone was to find an elusive and well camouflaged enemy in difficult terrain. A primary answer which the US developed was in the area of sensors and remote surveillance systems. (For clarity, all such programs will hereafter be referred to as the Electronic Battlefield (EB) systems. This name is derived from among other places, the congressional inquiries into such programs held in 1970 and 1971).¹⁶

The eventual development of EB systems had their start in several events and personal decisions coming together at generally the same time.

In response to the bombing campaign which the US was waging in the north and growing US protests against this campaign, Professor Roger Fisher (Harvard Law School) made a proposal which reached the Secretary of Defense through John McNaughton (assistant to the SECDEF). He is recorded, in January 1966, to have outlined a plan for a barrier across the DMZ and Laos, to prevent North Vietnamese movement of men and supplies. His concept was that such a program, carried out in sparsely populated areas, was more humanitarian, feasible, and a better use of available assets than the bombing of North Vietnam.¹⁷

At the same time, Secretary of Defense McNamara was growing disenchanted with the results of the bombing effort and was looking for better options which would accomplish the mission, but cause less political turmoil. An option offering a reasonable alternative was welcomed and the Secretary decided to refer the barrier proposal to one of his advisory groups for further study.¹⁸

The Jason Committee was one of several bodies which tried to find answers to various problems encountered in Vietnam. This was a "think tank"--a body of civilian experts such as college professors--who were asked by the government to come together and apply their collective wisdom for the service of the nation. Among many problems they were asked to solve was the one of enemy infiltration from North Vietnam.

On 30 August 1966 the Jason Committee presented their findings to Secretary McNamara. Their report consisted of an analysis of efforts to date, a description of NVA logistics, and their proposal for a solution to the problem. Their conclusion was that the air campaign against North Vietnam and parts of Laos was not working and would not work. They proposed instead a concentration of efforts along the DMZ and then west into Laos. According to their analysis, an air-supported anti-infiltration barrier in Laos could be put in place. Specifically, they proposed for Laos an integrated system using sensors,

visual reconnaissance (from aircraft), and a constantly replenished mine belt. This entire program would be accomplished by air and together with a ground-supported system along the DMZ would cost approximately \$800 million per year.¹⁹ In accordance with his search for a new strategy in the war, Secretary McNamara saw this proposal as a possible solution.

The barrier may not be fully effective at first, but I believe that it can be made effective in time and that even the threat of its becoming effective can substantially change to our advantage the character of the war. It would hinder enemy efforts, would permit more efficient use of the limited number of friendly troops, and would be persuasive evidence both that our sole aim is to protect the South from the North and that we intend to see the job through.²⁰

Secretary McNamara therefore liked the proposal, thought it was the best option he had to work with, accepted the Jason Report findings and recommendations, and began coordination within the Defense Department for almost immediate implementation.²¹

Secretary McNamara directed the creation of a joint organization to oversee research and development of such a system as outlined by the Jason Committee. This organization was called the Defense Communications Planning Group (DCPG). (This organization was renamed the Defense Special Projects Group (DSPG) in 1971. For simplicity, the acronym DCPG will be used to refer to programs developed throughout the life of both organizations (1966-1972).)

The DCPG was created on 15 September 1966. LTG Alfred Starbird (US Army) was appointed director. In January of 1967, this agency was granted the highest national priority for access to anything it needed, thus reflecting the importance which Secretary McNamara attached to it. The SECDEF further tasked all of the services with supporting the DCPG in any requests which were submitted.²²

The DCPG was tasked with developing the electronics for a barrier across the DMZ and into Laos. MACV was required to plan for and provide the ground and air assets. The SECDEF ordered the beginning of the DMZ barrier (ground component) in March 1967 and the first sensors were dropped in Laos in December 1967. (This specific operation was called MUSCLE SHOALS. The same program later changed its name to IGLOO WHITE.)²³

IGLOO WHITE developed rapidly into a massive effort. Between 1966 and 1971, its budget was \$1.7 billion²⁴ and the net in Laos comprised approximately 20,000 sensors.²⁵ The system began with these air emplaced sensors dropped at known or suspected logistics sites. These sensors recorded vibration, motion, sound, and sometimes smells. Aircraft kept overhead received the sensor information and passed it to the Infiltration Surveillance Center (ISC) located at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. Massive computers at the ISC recorded the data. Communications assets allowed target information to be

passed either to air controllers or directly to attack aircraft.²⁶ This was an incredible system described as "the most comprehensive, sophisticated application of technology in Vietnam."²⁷ To do something with the information, however, US forces needed to attack the targets as they were found. That was the function of Operation COMMANDO HUNT.

COMMANDO HUNT

COMMANDO HUNT was initiated on 15 November 1968. It combined IGLOO WHITE with attack assets which were available because of the 1 November bombing halt over North Vietnam. The objective was to concentrate on an interdiction campaign in Laos and parts of South Vietnam.²⁸ The average number of attack sorties on the trail prior to this operation was 150 per day. Beginning in November 1968 this number jumped to 450.²⁹ In 1969, total Air Force (South Vietnamese and US) attack sorties were 242,000 in Laos and 289,000 in South Vietnam. The next year and in 1971 more attack sorties were flown in Laos than in South Vietnam.³⁰ For the Air Force, COMMANDO HUNT in Laos was the single largest operational activity from 1969 through 1971.

Results of the Air War

By any measure US efforts against the Ho Chi Minh Trail were massive. Equally clear is the fact that they

failed to stop the flow of men and supplies from North Vietnam.

Between 1965 and 1971 the US dropped over 1,150,000 tons of bombs on the Laotian trail network.³¹ As was already mentioned, COMMANDO HUNT was the major effort for the USAF between 1969 and 1971. Added to tactical aircraft sorties, B-52s made almost 23,000 attacks in Laos between 1969 and 1971.³² COMMANDO HUNT operations utilizing the AC-130 gunship claimed 7.34 truck hits per sortie in 1970. In 1971 they claimed to have damaged or destroyed eighty-nine percent of trucks attacked, for a total of 6,000 truck kills in 1971.³³ IGLOO WHITE and SOG provided such detailed intelligence as the locations of fifty-nine infiltration "truck stops" with six-digit grid coordinates for most of them.³⁴ (Six-digit coordinates provide the location within a 100 X 100 meter area.) These unfortunately were only impressive statistics. The infiltration continued.

Without a doubt, this air campaign made infiltration costly. An Air Force estimate in 1970 claimed that only 21,000 of 68,000 tons per day was getting through the supply system.³⁵ Because of the importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail though, the North Vietnamese dedicated the assets needed to keep it open. More importantly, they could plan for attrition. Supplies from China and Russia were far more than they actually needed on the ground in

the south.³⁶ It was also impossible to keep the trails closed. Personnel on foot could walk around bomb damage and teams of laborers could repair roads faster than the US could destroy them. Following massive B-52 strikes on the Mu Gia pass for example, trucks were again moving within two days.³⁷ It was the classic case of the giant trying to stomp on the ants; US forces just could not get all of them. In analyzing the problem, it did seem to be one of attack systems. IGLOO WHITE generally found targets, but in the difficult terrain, aircraft had trouble accurately hitting them.³⁸ Even when the US did destroy something of value, it was either replaced or repaired rapidly. For all of the assets, money, and lives poured into this campaign, it was not enough. Air action did not accomplish the mission; ground attack seemed to be the only recourse to halt infiltration.

Laotian Guerrilla Forces

The Royal Laotian Government (RLG) was incapable of combating the combined Pathet Lao/North Vietnamese forces in northern Laos. In the southern panhandle, the RLG was equally limited in its capacities. It was in fact believed by the RLG leadership that stopping North Vietnamese operation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail "had no direct relationship to RLG security goals."³⁹ Further, when faced with evidence of North Vietnamese forces in Tchepone, one

government leader replied, ". . . this was of no great import because that terrain belonged to Vietnam anyway."⁴⁰ This reflected not only the weakness of the RLG but also their attitude about spending assets on this remote and mostly useless part of their country.

The inability of the Laotians to act, coupled with growing concern about North Vietnamese activities in Laos, led to a search for alternatives by the United States.⁴¹ This "something" was the air campaign described above. It also included the arming, training, and employment of Laotian forces. As in the north of the country, the US organized local tribesmen, who disliked the North Vietnamese anyway. The US used these tribesmen as guerrillas in their own local areas.

The US began using Laotian irregulars for reconnaissance of the trail network in 1964. Gradually these units were expanded into companies and battalions. Originally these forces were separate from Laotian forces (created, equipped and directed by the US) but gradually began coordinating with and using some Laotian army personnel. The mission, however, remained separate as these guerrilla forces were used against the trail network in eastern Laos, an area regular Laotian forces never approached.⁴²

In the late 1960's, the guerrilla forces in the southern part of the panhandle (Laotian Military Region IV)

numbered approximately 4000 soldiers, organized in nine battalions.⁴³ These forces operated in small teams to harass the North Vietnamese, collect intelligence, and at times call in US and Laotian Air Force air strikes.⁴⁴

Operating as small units, the Laotian guerrilla forces could harass the North Vietnamese (as could US SOG operations) but they were never capable of interdicting traffic. Small operations were a nuisance, which they protected against, but the North Vietnamese did not see a need to attack the main guerrilla base areas in the western panhandle.

Beginning in 1970, the situation changed in Laos based on the new government in Cambodia. As has been mentioned, the change in Cambodia closed the ports there to North Vietnamese supply operations. The Ho Chi Minh Trail became the only logistical route open to the North Vietnamese. It therefore became absolutely critical and the North Vietnamese treated it that way. Where they were once content with the eastern one-third to one-half of the Laotian panhandle, they began in 1970 to expand westward and consolidate their hold on the area.⁴⁵

Beginning in 1970, the Laotian Army and guerrilla forces were on the strategic defensive as the North Vietnamese mounted a series of offensives. The guerrillas in southern Laos were reorganized along more conventional lines and began to work more directly under Laotian army

control. Attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail appear to have all but ceased as the battle lines moved further west into Laos.⁴⁶

In the north of Laos the fighting had likewise escalated, although it was the Pathet Lao, not the North Vietnamese who provided most of the units. The result of all this turmoil was another peace conference and another treaty, signed by the Laotian government and the Pathet Lao, on 4 September 1973. Without describing details, this document cemented the fate of Laos and the long slide to full takeover by the Pathet Lao. It is probable that the departure of the US from South Vietnam had been the signal to lift the restrictions on Pathet Lao operations in Laos. This second treaty was more wasted paper and served Communist desires very well.

In the south it caused a cessation of hostilities and a de facto granting to the North Vietnamese of control over what they owned at the time (a large majority of the panhandle).⁴⁷ The treaty included a demobilization of the regular army and irregular forces. The US military and other personnel who had supported the army and guerrillas departed.⁴⁸ All military forces within Laos ceased to be a threat to North Vietnamese ambitions or personnel. Among other results, this allowed the redistribution of North Vietnamese forces which had been essential in Laos up to that time.⁴⁹

At this point the massive logistical net which North Vietnam had created was freed from any interference and could operate at full capacity. It was the end to a long and arduous campaign waged by North Vietnam. Their efforts to insure logistical soundness had in the end triumphed.

During this long and difficult struggle there was another challenge to the Ho Chi Minh Trail not yet mentioned. This was an attempt by South Vietnam to place ground forces in the vicinity of Tchepone. The operation was named LAM SON 719 and it took place in 1971.

LAM SON 719

The desire of the US to extract itself from Vietnam gave rise to some interesting policy changes in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Among the operations conducted or supported were invasions into Cambodia and Laos. What could not be done during the height of the war apparently could be justified as part of the departure of US forces.

The Cambodian invasion occurred in the summer of 1970. It was conducted by both US and South Vietnamese forces. The goal was to destroy NVA and VC assets in Cambodia and set back their plans for offensive action in 1970.⁵⁰ Objectives were largely achieved. US and South Vietnamese forces inflicted massive losses on the enemy. This appeared to be a good way to gain time for the

American withdrawal and to better the training of South Vietnamese forces under the programmed labeled as Vietnamization.⁵¹

Operations into the Tchepone region of Laos appeared to be a good option for many of the same reasons. The goal was to disrupt enemy logistics at a critical point and interfere with any planned offensive operations. Additionally after the Cambodian operations, South Vietnam believed they had, and wanted to keep, an element of momentum.⁵² From the US perspective, offensive operations could also gain more time for Vietnamization and there was some thought that an enemy attack could disrupt the US election in 1972.⁵³ Even though committed to withdrawal, President Nixon was also not above playing "hard-ball." He wanted to send a clear signal that the US was still deeply committed to the survival of South Vietnam.⁵⁴

Operationally, LAM SON 719 was organized as a strategic raid. The goal was to reach Tchepone, disrupt all enemy activity in the area, and then withdraw. There was no intent to remain in Laos.⁵⁵

For this operation, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) deployed thirty-four battalions into Laos.⁵⁶ These included Airborne and Ranger battalions, the 1st Infantry Division, a Marine Brigade, and the 1st Armored Brigade. Total forces were listed at approximately 16,000 soldiers.⁵⁷ The US was limited in Laos to providing only

air support because of the December 1970 Cooper-Church amendment. US advisors were likewise not allowed to participate with the units they normally worked with.

The operation began on 8 February 1971. Without pursuing the tactical details, it was generally a bad show on the part of the ARVN. The weather was a problem; they advanced haltingly; and numerous tactical deficiencies were revealed. North Vietnamese air defense assets were heavy and they launched counter-attacks which included tanks and heavy artillery. Held on the ground short of their objective, the ARVN finally conducted an air assault to capture Tchepone on 6 March. Three days later, President Thieu of South Vietnam ordered a withdrawal.⁵⁸ The operation officially ended on 6 April.

Numbers vary but as with most operations, the enemy seemed to take far greater casualties. Saigon claimed approximately 13,000 enemy killed and listed their own losses at 1,146 dead.⁵⁹ The US lost 253 killed and missing, and 1,149 wounded.⁶⁰ The reason for these numbers was the massive US air effort to support LAM SON 719.

During this two month period the US had 100 helicopters destroyed and 618 damaged. US fighters and bombers flew over 9,000 sorties, dropping over 50,000 tons of bombs. The air movement to Tchepone was the largest of the war with over 120 helicopters involved.⁶¹ To a large

degree, what success the South Vietnamese had was very dependent on these air assets.

Overall, however, the operation was not judged a success. The ARVN had performed poorly and had not shown any ability to operate competently. Both Presidents Nixon and Thieu were demoralized by the results. Although large quantities of supplies were captured or destroyed, without forces remaining around Tchepone, the supply line was again operating within a week.⁶²

Summary

In the final analysis, the US did not interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail with the tools it chose to employ. America either misjudged its capabilities, or did not value the target enough to employ the correct tools. In trying to define what went wrong, the answer probably lies in a combination of these two factors.

For the political reasons already discussed, the US chose to use very limited numbers of its personnel and local irregular forces in Laos. Missions were limited to reconnaissance and a limited harassment role. To block the trail, the only tool the US tried to use was air power.

An incredibly complex sensor system was built. This system was deployed to direct enormous air assets. This was the best the US could do and it was not enough to accomplish the mission. The US could not overcome the

terrain and an enemy who was committed to overcoming all obstacles.

Without doubt the North Vietnamese paid dearly to maintain their LOCs in Laos (and North Vietnam). They had to divert massive assets to building and supporting their network. Many of the personnel and supplies sent south never completed the journey. The North Vietnamese, though, made sure that enough did make the trip. Their flexibility and adaptability won out over the politically constrained efforts of the United States.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATIONS AND ANALYSIS

This study has described the strategic, political, geographic, and tactical factors which were of relevance in examining the problems posed by the Ho Chi Minh trail. It is now time to analyze this data and proceed to the central question. Was it indeed feasible for the US to move ground forces to the vicinity of Tchepone and permanently disrupt the flow of men and supplies? Would this have been a worthwhile course of action? What might have resulted?

In the analysis of these questions, chapter five will be divided into five parts. The first part will review the literature which discusses proposals for a ground interdiction effort in Laos. The chapter will outline and summarize plans discussed by General Westmoreland, General Palmer, and others to paint a picture of what type of action might have been attempted. The second part will analyze this proposal to determine if it was militarily feasible. These sections will suggest a logical size for the American force which would have been used in a Laotian invasion. Taking that information, part three of this chapter will define the time period during the war when militarily and politically the US was

capable of pursuing this course of action. Beyond the feasibility question, the fourth section will explore the "what ifs" to determine the possible ramifications if the US had indeed chosen this course of action. The last and final section of this chapter will summarize the arguments made for the invasion into Laos.

Review of The Literature and Proposals

What might have occurred if the US had chosen to mount an invasion of Laos to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail? By conducting a review of the literature I will consolidate the major ideas on this subject and theorize what an operation might have looked like on the ground. This process will serve to summarize the proposals which were made and will provide one "generic" proposal for future discussion in this paper.

In looking at the various authors, the writings of General William Westmoreland and General Bruce Palmer, Jr. are the best sources for postulating what the tactical plan might have been. Many other authors such as General William E. DePuy, General Cao Van Vien, Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., Colonel Charles F. Brower, IV, and Mr. Norman Hannah, have also discussed this option. There is, however, a lot of similarity and they quote from each other's works. This second group of authors also spend most of their time discussing why the option was not

exercised or how strategic problems were interrelated. This is a very valuable contribution and the writings of these authors were used heavily in other parts of this paper. The purpose of this section of chapter five, however, is to outline the specific tactical proposal for the use of US or allied forces. For that purpose, the writings of Generals Westmoreland and Palmer are the most appropriate and are the best sources for original proposals made both during and after the war.

General William C. Westmoreland

General Westmoreland was the Commander of the Military Assistance Command--Vietnam (MACV) from 1964 until 1968. His is the name most often tied to the war and he was in fact the one on the scene who dealt with the problems the US encountered. In his book A Soldier Reports, he describes various aspects of the strategic and political situation which ebbed and flowed during the course of the war. The infiltration problem and the Ho Chi Minh Trail were very much a part of the problems he faced.

There were two proposals which were different from those studied in this paper but were aimed at solving the same problems. These will not be examined in detail but are only mentioned to understand some of the thought processes which did occur.

As early as 1961 an attempt was made to mobilize world concern and place forces from many countries across the DMZ and Laos as an international, UN-type force. This idea was still alive in 1964 and was based on a five division force. There were, in the end, political and logistical constraints which could not be overcome and the plan could not be organized.¹ Once more, in 1966, the idea was proposed and approved by Australia, New Zealand, and Korea, only to be killed in Washington for reasons including those described in chapter two.²

A second "tactic" was to improve the road network which ran from South Vietnam (just below the DMZ), across Laos to the Thailand border. This was proposed as part of regional development plans, but the engineers involved would need protection and the area around the road would have to be secured. This was apparently too transparent an attempt to block the trail and was likewise disapproved.³

As for the use of American troops, General Westmoreland discussed the use of US combat formations in Laos a number of times. He stated that "from the first I contemplated eventually moving into Laos to cut and block the infiltration routes of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, . . ."⁴ He discussed three different plans which were written during his time in Vietnam.

The first plan, devised in 1964, was credited largely to General Harry W. O. Kinnard, commander of the

1st Cavalry Division, and had support from General Harold K. Johnson, Chief of Staff of the Army. This plan called for the 1st Cavalry Division to move by air into south central Laos (the Bolevens Plateau, 125 miles south of Tchepone), a US Marine Division to move west from the DMZ and capture Tchepone, and two other divisions (one US, one ARVN) to enter southern Laos and move up the panhandle. Following operations and the elimination of enemy forces, it was planned for "a portion of the force" to remain in the vicinity of Tchepone.⁵

A second plan (Plan EL PASO I) was devised in 1968. This called for three divisions (two US, one ARVN) to move west from the vicinity of the DMZ and capture Tchepone. A fourth division would come east from Thailand and link up with the others. Thai forces would operate further south in the Laotian panhandle to destroy North Vietnamese forces there.⁶

A variation of EL PASO I was EL PASO II which envisioned fewer forces available and planned for four US brigades to strike from the DMZ to Tchepone.⁷

In his book, General Westmoreland discusses these plans which were all written, but never executed, during his time as MACV commander. His subordinate during part of the war, General Palmer, re-looked the issues afterwards and made some related but different recommendations.

General Bruce Palmer, Jr.

While in Vietnam, General Palmer served in a number of positions including serving as the Deputy Commander of the US Army, Vietnam. In 1968 he was the person tasked by General Westmoreland to work on the EL PASO plans and so was intimately familiar with those options.⁸ In his book, The 25-Year War, General Palmer outlines his own ideas on what would have been some better tactical and strategic options for the US during the war. These are suggestions made in his book and there is no indication how or if they were proffered during the war.

A main difference from General Westmoreland's approach is that General Palmer envisioned a huge majority of all US forces concentrated in the northern part of South Vietnam and, if possible, across the Tchepone corridor. If a Laotian invasion was not allowed, he proposed (in his book) curving US and other allied forces (principally the Koreans) along the north-western border of South Vietnam. In both scenarios, the intent would have been to use US forces principally to counter infiltration, leaving the counter-insurgency war in the south, to the South Vietnamese.⁹ As an example of the forces which might have been committed, General Palmer lists a three-corps field army with six divisions and a separate brigade on line, with "other US Army combat units . . . in army or corps reserve."¹⁰

General Palmer proposed a different strategic orientation for US forces from that which was actually used. His ideas, however, generally parallel and use the same initial tactics to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Summary of The Proposals

Between Generals Westmoreland and Palmer, and all other proposals encountered in researching this paper, it is possible to outline a "generic" plan. The similarities in the tactical proposals are great and can be consolidated into one concept of what the US hoped to accomplish. Without doubt, upon receiving permission to execute, much more planning would have been required, but the general ideas would not have changed much. This "consolidated plan" is proposed here simply to provide a basis for further analysis and evaluation.

If this plan had been implemented, US units would have launched a force to capture and hold Tchepone. Other units would have attacked into the Laotian panhandle to hunt down enemy units, base areas or transportation nodes. Diversionary units (probably USMC) might have been placed off-shore to threaten an amphibious assault in North Vietnam. Eventually, a line from the DMZ and across the Tchepone corridor would have been occupied.

This assault would have been the main strategic effort in theater. These forces, especially those in the

far north, would have received priority for close air support, artillery, logistics, and all other categories of support. Air assets would have been heavily used against any large enemy formations identified in either Laos or North Vietnam.

After a period of intense combat and the establishment of positions, the forces would have settled into a defense which the North Vietnamese would have been forced to attack if they wished to get to South Vietnam. The hope and expectation was that the forces in place could hold this line against all assaults, preventing the passage of any large formations and most, if not all, of the minor attempts at penetration. The North Vietnamese lines of communications through the Tchepone Corridor and DMZ would have been permanently cut. The assumption behind this change in strategy is that the US and ARVN would have retained sufficient combat power in South Vietnam to continue with pacification efforts there. (In fact, the basic premise of this idea is that forces would have been more efficiently used in Laos and would have helped win the war sooner.)

Attempting to describe the forces which might have been committed to this operation is difficult to do; rational possibilities would have changed depending on the year and the actual plan. General Westmoreland discusses options mostly in the range of three to five US

divisions.¹¹ General Palmer suggests a force of three US divisions along the DMZ, another three used for the drive into Laos, plus some units in reserve.¹² General William DePuy argues logically that seven divisions could have been assigned to the effort if carried out in 1969. (He uses figures from a book by Shelby Stanton titled The Rise and Fall of an American Army. In this book, calculations show that in 1969 approximately sixty percent of US forces were involved in fighting North Vietnamese forces one way or the other. The logic used is that these soldiers (seven divisions in 1969) could have been diverted to fighting North Vietnamese forces more effectively along the DMZ/Tchepone corridor area, than in South Vietnam.)¹³

Besides the American forces involved, the US would have requested units from other nations to assist in the effort for political as well as practical reasons. As has already been described, other nations at various times had already agreed to provide forces to this type of operation. The South Vietnamese actually did invade Laos during LAM SON 719. There is every reason to believe, therefore, that the US could have organized a coalition force to move into Laos.

Trying to summarize all of these ideas is difficult, but again, for the purposes of discussion, we must describe a "ball park" figure. That figure seems to be about four US division-equivalents for the move into

Laos, with a total of seven divisions for the subsequent occupation of the defensive line (including the DMZ). US commitment to this effort would have been two-thirds to three-quarters of the force for a total of six US divisions at a maximum.

This picture of how such a campaign might have occurred, with the forces required, incorporates the tactical thoughts of the authors previously listed. Assuming that this summary accurately captures the intent, this paper will now examine the proposal to see if it was feasible and what might have resulted.

Feasibility Study

If the US had launched an invasion of Laos, with the intent of permanently blocking the Ho Chi Minh trail, there is no doubt that the war would have been changed. The first question to be asked, however, is, "was this feasible?". Would the US tactically have been able to launch and sustain such a move?

There are an enormous number of variables involved in any discussion of a battle which never happened. This is further complicated by the fact that in America's Vietnam wartime experience, retreat was almost always an option for the enemy. In the case of the proposal made by this paper, however, a North Vietnamese vital interest would have been threatened. It is difficult to judge the

nature and violence of their reaction, especially for an army which traditionally seemed to disregard high losses when it suited their purposes. Nevertheless, the judgment of many Vietnam scholars is that in a conventional fight, head-to-head, the North Vietnamese Army could not defeat the US Army. One of the main proponents of this position is Colonel Harry G. Summers who states:

On the battlefield itself, the [US] Army was unbeatable. In engagement after engagement the forces of the Viet Cong and of the North Vietnamese Army were thrown back with terrible losses.¹⁴

In analyzing this belief, especially in relation to this paper, I will first discuss empirical data which confirms this position. Second, I will list some analytical reasons which also indicate that such an invasion would have succeeded.

Empirical Support

In applying the Vietnam experience of the United States against a possible "conventional" war with North Vietnamese forces, it is very unlikely that the US could have been defeated. Even allowing for inflation, the combat statistics from the war show that almost without exception the American Army held terrain, took objectives, and inflicted far greater casualties on the enemy than they took themselves. To quantify this observation and apply it to a possible Laotian invasion, there are several ways to analyze the situation; two methods will now be explained.

One technique is based on kill ratios during the war and a second is based on a Rand Corporation study.

Kill Ratios

One measure used to quantify and compare combat effectiveness was the kill ratio of friendly to enemy soldiers. By using this figure from the war, we can compare man-for-man how to judge a possible fight in Laos. The analysis below is not exact, yet by listing averages and relying on trends, the conclusions indicate overall superiority of American forces.

General Westmoreland claims that the ratio of enemy to friendly killed was between 3:1 and 4:1 between 1965 and 1968. This number then went up higher after 1968.¹⁵ A 1967 Department of Defense memo echoes similar figures.

The 3 to 1 ratio [of enemy to US KIAs] is supported by results in battle. Our forces routinely defeat enemy forces outnumbering them two or three to one. In no instance has a dug-in U.S. company been overrun, regardless of the size of the attacking enemy force, and nothing larger than a company has come close to annihilation when caught moving.¹⁶

Other official publications claim kill ratios far higher.

(See Ewell, Julian J. and Ira A. Hunt, Jr. Sharpening The Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis To Reinforce Military Judgment. Vietnam Studies Series. Washington, DC: Department of The Army, 1974.) Of course all statistics are suspect, and body counts or kill ratios from the Vietnam War have been especially condemned. Without

further investigation (far beyond the scope of this study) the figure of 3:1 will be accepted for further analysis.

For ease of comparison, this 3:1 ratio will now be applied to US and NVA battalions. The "model" US infantry battalion had a strength of 920 personnel.¹⁷ Allowing for some shortfalls, if a US battalion could field 800 soldiers and fight at 3:1 odds, they could handle 2400 NVA soldiers. NVA battalions averaged between 300 to 600 personnel during the war.¹⁸ If they could field 500 soldiers per battalion, that would mean that one US (800-man) battalion would be generally equivalent to five (500-man) NVA battalions. This 5:1 ratio will now be applied to the forces which might have been involved in a Laotian campaign.

Section one of this chapter listed the forces which might have been used in an invasion. These forces were four divisions (thirty-six battalions) for the initial operation followed by seven divisions (fifty-six battalions) for the subsequent occupation. In using the 5:1 ratio, that would have meant in general analysis, the North Vietnamese would have had to muster 180 battalions initially or 280 battalions later, to have seriously challenged this operation in Laos.

Enemy reaction during LAM SON 719 is a good measure of what forces the North Vietnamese might have been able to react with against the US in Laos. It would have been on the same terrain and therefore the same time and distance

factors would have dictated the enemy response. During LAM SON 719, the North Vietnamese eventually deployed thirty-six infantry battalions to the area of operations.¹⁹ Compared to their calculated need for 180 battalions, they would have fallen far short in meeting initial US moves. Following a certain amount of reaction time, we should assume that the next phase of North Vietnamese attacks would have been far better organized and would have used all of their available forces.

In 1972, when the Easter Offensive was launched, the total NVA force (in the entire Army) was listed at fifteen divisions and twenty-six separate regiments.²⁰ This force totals 213 battalions. Taking this as a high figure for what might have been hurled against an established US position in Laos, the NVA would have again fallen short of their calculated needs (280 battalions). Additionally we can assume that being in the defense with probably few rules of engagement limiting US firepower, American forces would have done even better than the "Vietnam normal" in this type of engagement.

This analysis has taken one approach to verify that the US could have moved into the Tchepone Corridor and then held in a defensive posture there. A second source of confirmation for this position can be found in a Rand Corporation study conducted in 1971.

Rand Corporation Study

During the withdrawal of the US from Vietnam, infiltration continued to be a problem. One proposed solution studied by the Rand Corporation was a barrier defense not through Laos but along the entire border of South Vietnam.²¹ (Referred to hereafter as the report.) While this proposal will not be studied as a whole, much of the analysis and data used within the study is of value. It describes how a force could have been established to block the type of threat posed by the North Vietnamese. The analysis in this report indicates that in the second phase of an operation in Laos, the US could have built a defensive system which would have prevented infiltration.

The report studied a linear defensive system. ("Linear" meaning that forces would have been in fixed and permanent sites along a defensive line.) There are other ways in which the US might have chosen to employ forces, a completely mobile defense being one of the most obvious. For the sake of discussion, however, the report offers one technique for accomplishing the mission. Additionally, any forces placed in Laos would have needed some fixed facilities from which to operate. This would have been increasingly so the longer these forces remained in position. Regardless of how the operation began, to establish a credible defense some aspects of a linear-type

system would have been required. This Rand study, therefore, has some validity as not only a hypothetical proposal but also one which may have indeed been used.

The defensive line proposed in the report was based on battalion strong points behind a linear obstacle belt consisting of sensors, mines, wire, a berm, and other obstacles. The obstacle belt would have been approximately 150-300 meters wide. Heavily fortified blockhouses would monitor the belt and the main battalion strong point would have been located somewhat to the rear. These positions would have been well supported by artillery and aviation assets. Mobile reserve forces would also have been available to counter any attempt at large scale penetration.²²

The report contains a great deal of analysis into the rationale for, construction of, costs, and justification for this program. For my purposes I will simply state a few of the pertinent findings. The most important element was that in operation this system would require approximately one battalion on line per ten miles of front. This was mostly based on the idea that battalion base camps, located behind the actual line, would contain 155mm artillery. In the proposed configuration, a base camp every ten miles would ensure artillery support along the entire front.²³ Since the DMZ-Tchepone Corridor Line is approximately 170 miles long, this would require

seventeen battalions on line. Allowing one battalion to the rear for every two on line (for local reserves, rotation of forces, etc. . .), this would require a total of approximately twenty-seven battalions. This equals three divisions, which is far less than the seven divisions in the force already proposed. If needed and available these extra divisions would have been used for corps-level reserves to counter major enemy assaults and would have provided sufficient forces for that purpose.

The report does not presume to guarantee victory. It does discuss the need to test the barrier system and states that the enemy would have attempted to devise countermeasures. Based on probabilities it does predict close to one hundred percent effectiveness countering small group infiltration and a low of forty-nine percent effectiveness against the worst possible enemy threat.²⁴ This is, however, only at the barrier itself and only using a one-battalion-deep force. With support by mobile forces, this effectiveness ratio would rise. This barrier (in the report) was also planned inside the borders of South Vietnam, using South Vietnamese units, with a relatively shallow zone of operations. In the DMZ-Laotian scenario, US units would have been the main forces and would probably have used long range weapons (artillery and air) to a greater battlefield depth. The integrated defense which

the US could have built would have been highly effective against all likely threats.

Summary

This section has used two methods to analyze the proposed operation into Laos. Although numerous variables existed and we can only guess at many parameters, the analysis confirms the feasibility of this course of action.

Beyond the mathematical aspects of this analysis, there are some logical reasons which support this conclusion. These will now be discussed.

Analytical Thoughts

If the US had chosen to enter Laos with the intent of staying and permanently blocking the Ho Chi Minh Trail, there are some thoughts which can be deduced about this operation. These ideas are the thoughts of the author of this study. While not conclusive, they offer some reasons which seem to be logical and would indicate ultimate US operational success in Laos.

Any move into Laos would have indicated a change in US policy, if not the entire strategy for fighting the war. Most likely this change would have committed America to achieving tactical success in the zone of operations. It would have brought about a face-to-face battle with the North Vietnamese and the US military would not have been able to hide behind any excuses if it was beaten. Defeat

by North Vietnamese forces would have meant moral collapse of the US military and probably loss of the war, as the French had been defeated tactically in the First Indochina War. The US could not let that happen and would therefore have committed and then supported the forces with the appropriate assets. (Much like the operation at Khe Sanh.) Once embarked on this course, the US would have been committed to winning. Withdrawal from Laos would have been to admit defeat and the result would have most likely been a withdrawal from all of Indochina. The US could not have easily extracted itself from Laos and would have therefore dedicated those assets necessary to assure success. This line of reasoning means that if committed forces turned out not to be sufficient for the job, the US would have reinforced to the required level until success was achieved.

On the ground, it is likely that such a move would have resulted in a better operational focus for our forces. Although "defend along a line" scenarios (such as in Korea) have their own frustrations, it would have been far better than the types of operations being conducted in Vietnam. Tactical operations during the war were frustrating and measures of success were difficult to define. Because this operation in Laos would have been "normal" combat and would have provided clear objectives, the US Army would have embraced it and would have done it well. The rise in

morale, ability to pursue a mission for which the Army was trained, and advantages of working in one specific area, would have all made it a mission the US would have "liked." The results would have been better mission performance.

Arguments

One author, Andrew Krepinevich, Jr., argues against the feasibility of an anti-infiltration force. His main points in opposition are that an end run through Thailand would have flanked the defensive line, Korean forces would not have participated, and actual wartime experience along the DMZ showed how difficult such a fight might have been.²⁵

Debating an end run through Thailand is one of those "what ifs" which is difficult to analyze accurately but it does not seem that this was a great danger. The situation with Thailand was far different from that of its eastern neighbors. Both geography and the political situation protected Thailand.

While the mountains in the eastern Laotian panhandle protected the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the terrain in the west is increasingly open and flat. At the border between Thailand and Laos is the Mekong river. The combination of open terrain and this major river presented a formidable obstacle to conventional and unconventional forces. North Vietnamese units moving to the west into

Thailand would have been increasingly exposed to US and Thai attacks the further west they went. Crossing and maintaining a route across the Mekong river would have been extremely difficult. Any flanking attempt would have also forced the North Vietnamese to operate with longer LOCs the further they progressed. In contrast, US and Thai forces would have had a distinct advantage with shorter and more direct LOCs with which to supply their forces. In any attempt to attack into Thailand, geography would have been completely on the side of the Thai and US forces.

Adding to the difficulties of attacking into Thailand would have been the relative stability and strength of the Thai government and armed forces. Thailand was a major supporter of the US war effort in Vietnam. They provided bases within their country and an infantry division which fought in South Vietnam.²⁶ They were never colonized by a western power and had a long history as an independent nation. Thailand was never threatened by the type or level of insurgency which ripped through Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Attesting to their stability even further is the fact that after the fall of Cambodia and Laos, with communist nations virtually surrounding them, Thailand remained free. It does not seem likely that North Vietnam could have provoked an internal guerrilla war.

A conventional invasion would also have been politically difficult. An overt attack could not have been

viewed as anything except outright aggression. It is unknown what international reaction might have occurred but it would have been very difficult for North Vietnam to fabricate any justification for their actions. Most likely world opinion would have been on the side of Thailand. This could have led to some form of military assistance from a number of different countries including the US.

The combination of geography and the political strengths of Thailand would have been very difficult for the North Vietnamese to overcome. It is not likely that North Vietnam was capable of conducting operations in Thailand to flank a force in Laos or for any other purpose.

In regards to the use of Korean forces, Andrew Krepinevich does not cite a reference to substantiate his claim that the Koreans would not have participated. As indicated by General Westmoreland, the Koreans reacted favorably when the proposal for a Laotian invasion was put to them in 1966.²⁷ In any event, an invasion of Laos did not depend on each and every allied force which had units in Vietnam. South Vietnam, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand also had combat units which could have been used. It is likely that any shortfalls could have been made up (in Laos) by units from these countries (especially South Vietnam).

Although highly speculative, an additional possibility is that this move into Laos might have

attracted forces from countries not yet committed to the Second Indochina War. One thought behind the barrier is that it would have highlighted the aggression from North Vietnam. This theme would have been propagated at every opportunity. In that context (rather than fighting an internal civil war in South Vietnam) it is possible that other countries might have joined the fight. This would have reduced the burden on those nation's forces which did participate in the war.

The final argument made is that wartime experience along the DMZ was a good indicator of how things might have progressed in Laos. While the fighting was especially difficult along the DMZ, the type of barrier projected in this study was never built, and so the comparison cannot be made.

Quang Tri Province (the furthest north in South Vietnam) presented a number of obstacles to military planners. Political constraints limited US units from taking certain actions to counter or attack North Vietnamese forces. At different times during the war, restrictions existed on air attacks, naval gunfire, or ground movements into the DMZ or North Vietnam.²⁸ The Laotian flank was already exposed and being used to move North Vietnamese units, so a linear defense would have been useless. Lastly, not enough US units were available to provide any type of permanent border force. The result of

these conditions was that General Westmoreland chose to employ a "strongpoint obstacle system" south of the DMZ.

By his description, these strongpoints were:

fire-support and patrol bases, designed to channel the enemy into well-defined corridors where [the US] might bring air and artillery to bear and then hit [the enemy forces] with mobile ground reserves.²⁹

In practice, this meant not defending on any type of line, but rather holding key positions and counter-attacking when targets were identified.

In many respects, US operations in this area were no different from any other part of Vietnam. Units maintained secure bases, contributed to the local pacification effort, and fought with main force units when they were identified. The reason why this was more difficult along the DMZ, was that North Vietnamese forces were closer to home in Quang Tri than any place else in South Vietnam. Some of the more difficult battles of the war, such as that for Khe Sanh, were in this province and reflected some of the enemy's strengths there. Quang Tri was the province with the highest percentage of US deaths during the war. (sixteen percent, from 1967-1972.)³⁰

Nevertheless, as in the case of Khe Sanh, the North Vietnamese did not win, even where they had such advantages. US forces consistently held their positions and inflicted great losses upon the NVA. Besides the American casualties, this was the part of South Vietnam

where it was estimated most of the NVA and VC soldiers were killed.³¹

The fact that US forces were generally successful does seem to argue in favor of this proposal rather than against it. The higher casualty rate only indicates the intensity of the fighting, using the tactics which were applied. It does not necessarily prove or disprove how the complete barrier concept would have done if it had been tried. The conclusion, therefore, is that wartime experience along the DMZ had some relevance to this issue but does disprove the feasibility of the barrier.

Summary

It appears logical to assume that the US could have militarily accomplished this proposed move into Laos. By comparison of the forces involved and because this operation would have allowed the American Army to do what it was best at (conventional war), operational success would have been very likely. Once the green light had been given, the US would have gone through the military planning process, probably studied the issues raised by Krepinevich, and any problems would have been solved before or during operations.

Having described the type of operation which might have occurred, this study will now examine the time period

during the war when an invasion of Laos could have taken place.

Timing

In order to put an invasion of Laos into perspective, it is necessary to postulate the timing of such an operation. Because of both military and political considerations, there was a limited period when this was a course of action upon which the United States would, or could have, embarked.

Military Timing

For the purposes of this analysis, only the forces actually deployed to Vietnam will be considered to have been available for a Laotian invasion. To look outside of Vietnam at other units, the mobilization of reserves, or other options, is beyond the capability of this study.

Based on the analysis previously conducted in this chapter and on US strength in Vietnam, it is possible to define a specific time period when sufficient units were available in country.

The previous analysis listed a probable US need to provide six divisions to a combined invasion force in Laos. This number equates to fifty-four battalions. Combining both US Army and Marine Corps assets, there were at least fifty-four battalions in Vietnam between June of 1966 and June of 1970.³² Operations at either end of this period

would have used all US assets in country. It is probable that some units would have been needed elsewhere and so the time period would have logically been further within this window. Without more analysis into other requirements, the period shown (June 1966-June 1970) will be kept to indicate the absolute time limits within which a Laotian operation could have occurred.

Such a military analysis is comparatively easy. Much more difficult is to define a period when political and strategic considerations limited US options.

Political and Strategic Timing

Chapter three described how political and strategic limitations kept the US from invading Laos. These various conditions existed throughout the war and remained as a constant hindrance. It is not possible to define a time when any political window opened to permit an invasion and occupation as described in this study. Nevertheless, it is possible to propose a period when the window closed permanently.

Towards the latter part of US involvement in Vietnam, several events marked a change in American attitudes towards further involvement in that nation. The first major occurrence was the Tet offensive which began in January of 1968. This offensive had the effect of greatly amplifying the anti-war movement and calls for a US

withdrawal.³³ An attitude of defeat was felt both inside and outside the government and "any effort to broaden the war was virtually doomed given the gloomy atmosphere in Washington."³⁴

In February of 1968 President Johnson directed a new study of the war and options open to the United States. This was accomplished by the Clifford Group, named after Clark Clifford, who replaced Mr. McNamara as Secretary of Defense on 1 March 1968. The Clifford Report reflected the pessimism of the time, warned against further US commitments, and led the way to a US withdrawal.³⁵ Shortly thereafter, President Johnson instituted a bombing halt over most of North Vietnam, called for negotiations to end the war, and announced that he would not run for re-election in the 1968 campaign.³⁶

President Nixon took office in January 1969. He immediately initiated a major study of the war in the form of National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM1).³⁷ Following this study, the policy of Vietnamization was announced on 10 April 1969. This policy and the plan which came from it called for a US withdrawal and a system to hand over the war to the South Vietnamese.³⁸ The first US combat forces began leaving South Vietnam later that year.³⁹

In July of 1969, President Nixon further codified the national mood and his intentions by stating what

became called the Nixon Doctrine. Among other parts of this doctrine was the principle that the US would help or continue to help other nations in trouble. The caveat was that America expected them to assume the primary responsibility for providing the manpower and doing the fighting.⁴⁰ This had world-wide connotations for future US actions. At the time, it applied directly to the withdrawal from Vietnam and the US commitment to hand over the fighting to the ARVN.

Through 1968 and 1969 the US became increasingly dedicated to withdrawing its forces from Vietnam. It may appear to be a contradiction, but offensive actions such as the renewed bombing campaign, and the incursions into Cambodia and Laos were meant to help the process. These were limited operations by which President Nixon hoped to get some breathing room for Vietnamization and convince the North and South Vietnamese that the US was not abandoning its ally. These actions were a part of the negotiation and withdrawal process. They were not meant to broaden the war.⁴¹

Unfortunately, it was difficult for the President to articulate his thinking and convince the American public where he was going. Reaction in the US centered on action, not intent, and the anti-war movement was flamed by these operations. One specific reaction in Congress was the Cooper-Church Amendment of December 1970. Following the

Cambodian incursion, this law prohibited any repeat of this type of operation. Specifically it banned US forces from operating on the ground inside of Cambodia or Laos,⁴² thereby closing the door on any invasion proposals.

Summary

The US had sufficient forces for a Laotian invasion beginning in June of 1966. Militarily, this option was not supportable after June of 1970. When did this option become impossible for political and policy reasons?

The discussion above shows that the Cooper-Church Amendment (December 1970) marked a clear decision point. The political upheavals and changes in US policy, however, made this an unlikely option long before this time.

Beginning with the Tet offensive in January 1968, the US began on the road to disengagement and withdrawal. This course was probably irreversible and inevitable given the growing opposition within the US. A change in strategy requiring a long term commitment of US forces in any capacity, was probably beyond hope. For that reason, if the US had not changed its policy, invaded Laos, and shown some success prior to January of 1968, it was probably too late.

Although this is an interpretation, a rule which appears valid is that if the US were to have gone into Laos, earlier would have been better than later. General

Palmer in his book states that, "the time to have taken this different direction was in 1966."⁴³ Colonel Brower, in looking at General Westmoreland's attempts at proposing a Laotian invasion, states that, "the time for a full consideration of such alternate strategies had been missed in 1967."⁴⁴

A complete turn-around in US concerns was always possible but not likely. Once the war was lost in America, the public and the government had no appetite for innovative strategical experiments. The US reached this culmination point in early 1968 and could not recover.

Regardless of the timing, if the US had pursued and decided on this course of action, what would have resulted? Was the answer to our dilemma in Vietnam a blocking force across the Tchepone Corridor?

Ramifications

Having shown earlier that an invasion of Laos was militarily feasible, I will now turn to possible ramifications. These ramifications indicate that the proposed invasion of Laos was not a good idea and would not have been the panacea answer to our involvement in Vietnam.

There are several important reasons why an invasion into Laos would not have resulted in great gains for the US or South Vietnam. These reasons include the presence of

the Cambodian LOC, the ability of the VC to drag out the war almost indefinitely, and the impact on Laos itself.

The Cambodian LOC

As has been indicated in chapter two, the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos was only one of several LOCs for the North Vietnamese. The Cambodian LOC was also important and gave North Vietnam until 1970 an equal capability for moving supplies and men. Cutting the Tchepone Corridor would have therefore caused great inconvenience but would not of itself have been a decisive factor in NVA and VC logistics.

As Table 2 (page 146) indicates, of the NVA and VC logistics needs in 1969, fourteen percent of total supplies came through Laos and fourteen percent through Cambodia. Even if the US had totally cut off the supplies through Laos, there is no reason to believe that this would have had decisive results in South Vietnam. The main importance to the VC and NVA was that they would have lost approximately half of their ammunition supply. This is significant but it was not a war-stopper for them. The nature of the insurgent war allowed the units in the south to pace themselves according to their logistical and tactical capabilities. Less ammunition would have meant fewer operations but not a cessation of operations. In any

event, there were other options for increasing the flow of ammunition to allow for a cut Laotian LOC.

As the Cambodians were openly allowing the transit of supplies,⁴⁵ North Vietnam could have arranged an increase or diversion of supplies to the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. Since the ships carrying these supplies were mostly Soviet, Chinese, or eastern block, the US could not have stopped this route without making another major policy decision to do so.⁴⁶

US interdiction of the personnel flow from North to South Vietnam would have been far more important to the North Vietnamese war effort. The records indicate that almost all of the personnel from North Vietnam went south by way of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Blocking this route would have required a major alteration in their personnel movement organization. There is no reason, however, why the North Vietnamese could not have moved personnel as well as supplies through the Cambodian ports. Since the US conspicuously avoided threatening or damaging the ships of other nations (USSR, China, eastern block), such ships could have been used by North Vietnam to ferry troops. This would have been very inconvenient but it was possible. If this was the only choice open to the North Vietnamese it is very possible that they would have exercised it.

By March of 1970 when the government of Cambodia changed, the US was firmly committed to withdrawal from

Vietnam. This was far too late in the war to be launching a major offensive in Laos. As has been indicated above, cutting the Tchepone Corridor prior to closing the Cambodian LOC also, would not have been decisive. Only by doing them together could the US have achieved the types of results which would have made the effort worthwhile.

The conclusion, therefore, is that cutting the Tchepone Corridor would have greatly changed the war but, by itself, would not have been decisive. Even without the supplies which came through Laos, the war could have continued. With the route through Cambodia open and free from attack, supplies and men could have been sent there and into South Vietnam.

VC Durability

Among the data presented in the previously discussed Rand Corporation study, there is a section which projects the effect of interdiction on NVA and VC strengths. This study predicted that it would have been many years before an effective barrier would have had decisive results within South Vietnam. Ultimately the NVA and VC maintained the ability to prolong the war and adjust their tactics to counter an anti-infiltration system.

The Rand paper studied a barrier proposal cutting off infiltration from all neighboring countries. Looking at infiltration, recruiting, and NVA/VC strength figures,

the report predicted how various degrees of effectiveness would influence the war effort. Assuming that an effective counter-insurgency campaign was continued in South Vietnam (continuing at the 1969 level), the report predicted that with an eighty-five percent effective barrier, enemy personnel strength in the south would approach zero in 4.2 years. However, if the enemy could cut his average losses in South Vietnam in half, the report indicates it would take close to 10 years to achieve these results. The time would also increase if North Vietnam chose to increase its infiltration attempts. A low figure of 150 personnel per day (the number of personnel North Vietnam attempted to get into South Vietnam per day) was used in this 10-year scenario. At the time of the study the real rate was approximately 300 per day.⁴⁷

The keys to successful results were, therefore, in the hands of the enemy according to this study. Regardless of what the US or South Vietnam did, the enemy retained the initiative by adjusting their tactics to the situation. This is something they proved very capable of doing throughout both Indochina wars, and this type of flexibility was a part of their protracted war doctrine.

Regardless of an interdiction campaign, the insurgency still would have continued within the south. Since this study is looking in isolation at only one change to the way the war was fought, there is no reason to

believe that any changes would have automatically occurred in South Vietnam. The insurgency there could have dragged on indefinitely.

The Laotian invasion therefore could not of itself provide victory; it would have established a Korean-type border defense, but, in the case of Vietnam, with a war and enemy both behind and in front of the barrier. This important difference would have hindered the progress of South Vietnam in developing its economy, government, and military as South Korea did. The danger, of course, is that the insurgency would have continued; the US would have tired of the effort and, following withdrawal of the US, some type of northern invasion could have still occurred. A modern author agrees in general with this position by arguing strongly that the war always was within South Vietnam to win or lose.

Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr. in his book The Army in Vietnam argues specifically against the idea of a Laotian invasion to isolate the battlefield. He believes that the major problems of the ARVN and the internal pacification effort would not have been addressed by this proposed solution. He states that the US sent ground combat units into the war because the ARVN was losing badly. Handing the war back to the South Vietnamese would not have solved the main problem. He makes other points but argues emphatically that a barrier in Laos would not have helped

the war effort because it addressed a subsidiary, not the real issue.⁴⁸

There are, therefore, many questions about the conduct of the war which are not answered even if we assume that a Laotian operation would have been successful. A barrier in Laos would have solved some but not all of the problems faced by the US and South Vietnamese. Without answers to the remaining questions, such as the conduct of the counterinsurgency campaign in South Vietnam, we cannot assume that an invasion of Laos would have been worthwhile.

Impact on Laos

A final point to be considered is the impact on Laos if an invasion had been mounted in that country. If the US had invaded the panhandle in the vicinity of Tchepone and been successful in its efforts, the result, among others, would have been a partition of Laos with a northern Communist half.

It has already been stated (chapter three) that Laos continued to exist as a neutral state only at the pleasure of North Vietnam. The NVA limited its activity and support only in exchange for use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.⁴⁹ With this informal arrangement broken by the US, North Vietnam would have had no reason to restrain the Pathet Lao or its own support in northern Laos. Part of

the original problem which led to the "neutralization" of Laos was a recognition by the US that:

if the DRV [North Vietnam] wished to increase its military effort with the aim of seizing all of Laos, the RLG [Royal Laotian Government] could not resist for long without direct, massive outside assistance.⁵⁰

In this chess-game scenario, if the US blocked the trail, North Vietnam would have taken northern Laos almost immediately. It is very unlikely that America would have been willing to counter this move with armed forces. Defending all of Laos was clearly not a course of action the US was willing or able to take.

This move and counter-move line of thinking was expressed in one 1969 study of Laos.

Under present circumstances, the DRV's military presence in Laos actually reduces the danger of an American or Thai attempt to put in ground troops to seal off infiltration to South Vietnam, because of the threat that in the face of such an attempt the NVA would indeed overrun the rest of Laos.⁵¹

This study goes on to reiterate the "tacit understanding" that was the basis of the US-North Vietnamese position in Laos. The government of Laos remained neutralist and North Vietnam was allowed to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail. If one of those conditions changed, the other side would have had no reason to restrain itself.

US hope in Southeast Asia was to save all of the region from communist expansion. Until the US departed, it had largely succeeded by the strategy and tactics which

were applied. As long as neither America nor its allies made any drastic moves, they at least had the hope that South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos could have been saved. A move into Laos would have changed this situation with the almost immediate result of giving to the communists all of Laos north of whatever line we chose to establish. For a course of action with no guarantee of success (for South Vietnam), this would have been too much of a sacrifice.

Summary

An invasion of Laos and defense of an anti-infiltration line would have seriously changed the nature of the Second Indochina War. Because of the complicated political and strategic implications, it is difficult to tell where this might have led. Almost to a certainty this move would have included an abandonment by the US, of all Laotian territory north of this defensive line. This loss would not have automatically been countered by an immediate gain for South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were committed, resilient, and well organized. It is not likely that the US could have undertaken a Laotian invasion after 1968; prior to that year the Cambodian LOC remained open. Even assuming a 100% successful interdiction effort, the war in South Vietnam would not have been won in many years, if at all.

Having explained some of the arguments against an interdiction effort, there remains the question about the advantages of this proposal. As outlined in chapter one, many respected and knowledgeable authors have come out in favor of this proposal. Why is this so and what are the merits of this option which warrant such support?

Advantages and Discussion

In the literature there are many arguments why an invasion of Laos was thought to be a good option for US forces. Ultimately, these arguments prove that hind-site is not always 20-20.

Advantages and Counter-Arguments

General Palmer, in his book The 25 Year War, summarizes most of the arguments which were made in favor of this plan to place US forces in Laos. He states that logistics would have been concentrated and easier, the defensive mission would have been a better and more efficient use of US forces, and the US would have gained the strategic initiative by forcing the North Vietnamese to attack this line. He believes that an efficient barrier would have allowed the development of the South Vietnamese army, economy, and government by allowing them to grow behind a protective screen. Among other advantages, such a screen would have kept the main "big war" in the north and the level of destruction in South Vietnam would have been

reduced. He further predicts that such a strategy would have reduced US casualties and costs. This would have allowed the diversion of funds to South Vietnam, furthering the counterinsurgency effort. An effective defensive line would also have ended the necessity for the bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Besides saving lives and dollars this would have denied North Vietnam a valuable propaganda tool. A further propaganda victory would have been won by the US having forces deployed in a line where their only mission would have been defending against northern aggression. Lastly, General Palmer believes that all of these reasons combined would have forced North Vietnam into serious peace talks, something which never happened, the way the war was prosecuted.⁵²

Colonel Summers echoes many of these sentiments as he uses excerpts from a speech given by General Palmer in 1977. He goes on to add that at the strategic level, the US erred by giving the initiative over to the North Vietnamese. He quotes Clausewitz as stating that victory can only be produced by taking action, not by "waiting on events." Colonel Summers' analysis was that US strategy in the war was passive and was not designed to lead to a decision. An invasion of Laos would have changed that and forced the North Vietnamese to react to US moves.⁵³

Mr. Norman Hannah also argues at the strategic and operational level. He states that the main US error was in

not seeing the larger Indochina picture. His belief was that the war was always one of northern aggression and the US was diverted by the southern insurgency away from the menace to all of Indochina. He proposes that the US should have seen where the real threat was and acted on it by conducting theater level operations (in Laos).⁵⁴

Other arguments generally follow these which have been highlighted above. There is merit in what has been said or predicted. There are also flaws in the logic and analysis.

The first point which must be mentioned is the depth in which this issue is discussed. As was mentioned in chapter one of this study, no work has made a complete analysis of all parameters involved. (That was the reason for this paper, to accomplish such an analysis for the first time.) General Palmer states his position on this subject in seven (out of 210) pages of The 25 Year War. Colonel Summers uses the analysis of General Palmer and summarizes it on one page in On Strategy. Other arguments such as that by General DePuy are made in relatively short magazine articles. In all fairness to these authors, their works are much broader than just this one issue. They do not devote much time to go into the depth required to state or support their positions well.

Mr. Hannah devotes an entire book to the Laotian issue but as a former Department of State employee has a

different focus than these retired soldiers. Most of The Key To Failure is a chronology of political decisions and interaction during the war. He spends little time analyzing the feasibility or consequences of a move into Laos. His premise that the US had no regional focus or strategy is correct; however, the solution is not analyzed in any detail.

Given the relative brevity of the positions taken by these authors, the second major shortcoming is the lack of historical perspective into the timing of this course of action.

The authors above all wrote after the war had ended. Incorporated into their thought processes were a number of key events which occurred late in the war. These include: the decimation of the VC during Tet and subsequent reliance on North Vietnamese manpower, relatively successful pacification efforts once Vietnamization began (1969), and the change in the Cambodian government in 1970. All of these events contributed to the concept of a successful blocking action in Laos, yet they may not have occurred if this Laotian operation had taken place before 1968 (as it needed to). To have changed US strategy would have changed North Vietnamese strategy. This thought process can lead to infinite "what if" problems but it must be accepted that things would have changed. The assumption that everything needed to support the "Laotian strategy"

would have still occurred in the war, gives little credit to the VC or NVA. As with any alternate course of action, the ramifications must be worked out to the end of the problem. This has not been done or addressed by these authors.

A third issue is that of the effects on Laos. None of the military authors mention the consequences, long or short term, to the country where this operation would have occurred. Most of Laos would have been sacrificed almost immediately if the US had chosen to put forces there in a blocking position. Mr. Hannah, whose entire book revolves about the Laotian question, barely mentions this consequence. His comments only refer to saving Vietnam and "part of Laos." He does not mention Laos north of the line. This issue is a critical omission across the board by all authors.

There are other issues and this study agrees with many of the points made by these authors. As has been stated before, for example, the assault into Laos and subsequent defense were tactically feasible. General Palmer for one, explains this facet of the proposed operation well. In the final analysis, however, there is no compelling evidence that these authors had a better solution than those leaders on the ground who were making the hard decisions. There are also many complications

which these authors do not address. Without further explanation, their views on this point cannot be accepted.

This leads us to a final condemnation of this proposal, and that is how it was treated by General Westmoreland and others who were "on the ground," making the hard decisions.

Discussion

In an apparent contradiction, it does not appear that General Westmoreland or any of the senior military leaders during the war truly supported this option. While they may have been wrong in their assessment, there also exists the possibility that they understood all of the issues at the time much better than anyone writing after the fact.

The initial step leading to the Jason project (chapter four) was a memorandum written first by Mr. Roger Fisher, then slightly changed by John McNaughton, and sent to Secretary McNamara. In the second (McNaughton) memorandum the proposal was for a barrier supported by soldiers on the ground in Laos. This plan was sent for comment through the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) to "his subordinates" which logically would have included the MACV commander. On 7 April 1966 the CINCPAC replied that:

It would require a substantial diversion of available combat and construction resources and would place a heavy strain on the logistics support system in Southeast Asia, all in a static defense effort which would deny us the military advantages of flexibility in employment of forces.

In the same message, the CINCPAC "recommended against such a barrier as an inefficient use of resources with small likelihood of achieving US objectives in Vietnam."⁵⁵

Why, when presented an opportunity to comment on the barrier proposal and the chance to move forces into Laos, would the CINCPAC argue so forcefully against it? The answer lies in the overall strategy being used to fight in South Vietnam.

General Westmoreland believed that the US could win in South Vietnam by conducting a "war of attrition." More accurately, he thought that this type of war was the only one which he was allowed to wage given the political limitations in place.⁵⁶ He thought that "U.S. national policy was not to conquer North Vietnam but to eliminate the insurgency inside South Vietnam."⁵⁷ With this focus on South Vietnam and access to the same MACV studies used in this paper, it is very likely that General Westmoreland did not see an invasion of Laos as a cure-all. When he did propose operations in Laos and Cambodia, it was simply to extend the battlefield, not alter the strategy. This would explain why he and the CINCPAC would have argued against a specific type of operation in Laos which demanded that they

use the forces a set way. They disagreed with the strategical shift and tactical implications which would have impinged on their freedom of maneuver. In their view then, getting into Laos would not have served their purposes under the prescribed terms.

General Palmer described this same idea in regards to a JCS concept of operations presented in August 1965.

The document:

included land actions in the Laotian corridor and in the DMZ area, but only as an element of a U.S. basic strategy that visualized the employment of U.S. forces, along with Vietnamese and third country forces, to defeat the enemy inside South Vietnam and to extend governmental control over all the country.⁵⁸

General Palmer added that:

The Army chief of staff, General H.K. Johnson; the commander of U.S. Army Pacific, General John K. Waters; the MACV commander, General Westmoreland; and NSC advisor W.W. Rostow also proposed similar ideas [for a Laotian invasion]. None, however, were truly alternative strategies, but were encompassed within an Americanized war of attrition conducted throughout South Vietnam.⁵⁹

In prioritizing his efforts, General Westmoreland clearly placed internal operations over any move at interdicting infiltration directly. In using available forces from Australia and Korea he considered placing them along the DMZ but instead used them elsewhere and stated that "the force for the DMZ might be created when those [other] jobs were completed."⁶⁰ He appeared to view a blocking force in Laos as an extra step if he could spare

the forces, not as an operation which could win the war by itself. He stated that:

I recognized that blocking the trail would require at least a corps-size force of three divisions, and I would be unable for a long time to spare that many troops from the critical fight within South Vietnam.⁶¹

Furthering the position that General Westmoreland was not fully sold on the merits of a Laotian invasion was a paper by Colonel Charles F. Brower, IV. Discussing the time period 1967 and 1968, Colonel Brower describes a number of moves which indicate General Westmoreland's desire to put ground troops in Laos. The study suggests that General Westmoreland attempted to change from his attrition strategy in South Vietnam to a strategy based on isolating the battlefield. Regardless of the motivation, this paper states that General Westmoreland, for a variety of reasons, did not forcefully put forward his ideas. A cautious and weak approach by General Westmoreland and the JCS in offering this "alternate strategy" to the President, resulted in it being barely considered.⁶²

One interpretation of this study is that possibly General Westmoreland understood the limitations of a Laotian invasion and therefore was not willing to propose it forcefully. Regardless of the reasons for going into Laos, he did not appear to be convinced enough of its ultimate utility to even demand that the question be given a fair hearing.

The conclusion to be reached from all of this information is that during the war, the personnel on the spot were not as interested in a move into Laos as authors since the war have been. While much criticism has been leveled against various leaders during the war, the burden of proof still has to fall on those who would level the criticisms. On this particular issue, that burden of proof has not been met and it must be assumed that those on the ground had more complete information than those writing many years later.

Summary

In comparing the benefits versus the negative impact of the proposed invasion of Laos, the evidence points away from this course of action. The gains are verbalized in terms of hopes and wishes. The US hoped to block permanently all interdiction and that by itself this would have made a difference in the southern war. The US hoped that the effort could have been sustained long enough to end the war with a free South Vietnam permanently established. The contrary argument raises real issues which have not been answered. What about Laos? How would the southern insurgency have been defeated? What would have kept the North Vietnamese from using alternate supply routes (Cambodia)? How long could the US have maintained this effort or could the South Vietnamese have taken over?

There are too many unanswered questions to accept that a permanent blocking position across the DMZ and Laos would have been the answer to the many problems faced by the US in this conflict. The finding of this study, therefore, is that this was not the panacea answer which authors, historians and former participants have been hoping to find.

This was an unconventional war and a very complicated one at that. The political and strategic ramifications of an invasion of Laos outweighed any military gains which might have been made. We will never know what might have happened. Without considering all ramifications, however, the US would have created more problems than it solved.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has studied the problem of infiltration through Laos during the Vietnam War. Further, it has asked whether the US should have moved forces into Laos to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail, as a way to win the war. The conclusion reached is that this was a militarily feasible course of action but one whose overall worth is questionable. Going into Laos would not have stopped infiltration because of the availability of routes in Cambodia until 1970. The initiative for the war internal to South Vietnam would have still remained with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. Lastly, the consequences to Laos would have been traumatic and devastating. For these reasons, this would have been an ill advised move if taken as a sole remedy to US dilemmas in fighting the war.

Beyond answering this original question, there are some other issues, related to and derived from this paper, which need brief discussion. These issues involve the future implications of this study. What questions should American soldiers and politicians ask themselves if they are ever to find themselves fighting insurgents again? How

should the US advise allies and friends about unconventional wars?

Future Implications

In analyzing the topic of this paper, a number of subsidiary or supporting issues have been addressed. These issues were important to the prosecution of the Second Indochina War and will most likely be important in future wars of this nature.

LOC Interdiction

Is it useful to interdict guerrilla lines of communications? This paper has studied and rejected the proposed placement of US units as a blocking force in Laos during the Vietnam War. It does not rule out across the board the concept of using conventional forces to cut LOCs to insurgent groups. On the contrary, the tactic has been used with success in other unconventional wars such as in Algeria and the Spanish Sahara. LOCs are important targets in all types of conflict and should be attacked and cut if possible.

What this paper states is that in this case only, this particular tactic would not have brought about the desired result (victory in the war). The military operation was possible but would have been counter-productive. It is in the nature of unconventional wars that there are often no simple tactical solutions.

Political and strategic ramifications must always be studied and taken into account. External LOCs in an unconventional war are an especially tricky and delicate problem. Sometimes, for political or tactical reasons, secure LOCs must be conceded to the insurgent and the counter-insurgent must then explore other roads to victory. That is the nature of this type of war.

Use of Conventional Forces

One of the unanswered questions facing all counter-insurgent planners is the use of conventional forces in an unconventional setting.

The desire of regular military units is to conduct conventional operations which are the closest to what they know, understand, and are hopefully good at. The danger which this study suggests is that this desire will lead to proposals which do not support the overall mission. In other words, because the interdiction of LOCs is a job which conventional forces might relate to easily, they may create the justification to do that mission. It is the problem of creating a job for the tool, regardless of whether the job is appropriate. Conventional forces by their composition and training are very good at some missions and virtually useless at others. The limitations increase in unconventional warfare settings and go even higher when a force must operate in an alien environment.

Nevertheless, if the interdiction of LOCs would support the war goals, this may be an excellent use of conventional forces. If the US were to find itself fighting overseas in another guerrilla war, it should consider using its forces in a counter-LOC role for the same reasons why this was considered in Vietnam. These reasons include the fact that host nation forces are better suited to internal operations, counter-LOC operations usually occur along a border which is or can be depopulated, placing American forces in one area is easier logistically, technology can help counter-LOC operations and such operations are therefore often well suited to US forces, and politically it would be easier for US troops to defend against external actors than fight guerrillas within a country.

Feasibility of Counter-LOC Operations

This study has shown that in the case of Laos, the counter-LOC mission was feasible. If the geography supports the mission, it is possible with the proper personnel and material assets to establish an effective barrier system. The US can generally bring those types and quantities of assets to a battlefield. (For a detailed description of one type of barrier system, see Schaffer and Weiner, Border Security in South Vietnam.)

Limits of Technology

This study has shown that a maximum effort, applying all US resources less ground troops, failed to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This was a clear lesson in the limits of technology.

Although this issue involves the highly volatile subject of inter-service rivalries, the evidence is clear. There are some jobs which only a ground soldier can do. Any claims to the contrary have not yet been proven in combat.

Technology does get better every year and at some point may take the place of the man on the ground. It is critical that when such a claim is made, it is tested before being relied upon.

Unity of Command

This study has touched on the confusion in US policy and the level of internal disagreement about the conduct of the war. America had no unity of purpose or command in Indochina. The result was inefficiency and friction.

In any future war, conventional or otherwise, adherence to the basic principles of war should be a goal. In the organization of US political realms it may be necessary to create a regional ambassador. This person would have the power to organize and direct the ambassadors

from several countries towards the solution of a mutual problem. Likewise, a military sub-unified commander-in-chief should have responsibility for the region and all US forces in the zone of conflict. All of these political and military commanders should be on the scene and should be empowered to take action in solving the problems they encounter.

Unity of command is a basic necessity for any efficient operation, either at the political or military level. This is axiomatic yet lack of such a system in Vietnam was a major shortcoming in America's approach to the war. These mistakes should not be repeated in any future conflict.

Idiosyncrasies of Unconventional War

This study has pointed out some of the difficulties of fighting an unconventional war. As a general catch-all lesson, it must be recognized that such conflicts are unique unto themselves and are very different from conventional war. The enemy, the environment, internal politics, international pressures, strategy, and tactics, all interact in a complicated way. It is a strange environment which has its own rules.

In concentrating on one facet of the Vietnam War, this paper has shown the implications of these many

aspects. They were equally present and influenced all of the important branches of that war.

In this modern age, the Vietnam War presented an immense challenge for which the United States was not prepared. The secret to preparation for future conflicts of this nature, is study and understanding. Only by knowing what went wrong in Vietnam, the general nature of unconventional warfare, and the specific nature of the conflict we may choose to engage in, will we have a chance of success.

Other Questions

This study has been limited to one specific aspect of the Vietnam War. It has though touched on a number of important issues and has suggested other questions which are of importance today. Answering these questions may be critical to any future counterinsurgency war in which we may be involved.

What is the current state of technology which may be applied to a future counter-LOC effort? Does the US Air Force think it has progressed to where it could successfully interdict LOCs through air power alone? What is the state of US Army doctrine which would apply in establishing a linear defense in a low intensity conflict scenario? Does US national doctrine allow it to view entire regions and devise, where appropriate, regional

solutions for problems? Does the US integrate all US agencies so that it can pool knowledge and exert a unity of effort in solving problems? What is the state of the intelligence system so that America can gain an accurate understanding of the enemy it may fight? How does the US military expect to organize combined operations with other military forces who may need help in fighting insurgents?

These questions and others indicate the great complexity of unconventional warfare. It is not impossible but it is very difficult. We must thoroughly analyze both the enemy and ourselves to ensure that our capabilities are properly utilized on the battlefield.

Conclusion

This paper has unfortunately not solved a problem, but rather has argued against a solution proposed by others. The problem remains and many other questions about the Vietnam War continue to haunt us. That, however, is what makes this war such an excellent one to study for professional education. It was arguably the most difficult challenge faced by the US in its existence. America made many mistakes but in fairness also did a lot of things right. Studying the situation and knowing the difference is the key to future success. The US should be willing to learn from the past so that it will not repeat its mistakes again.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

- ARPA. Advanced Research Projects Agency. DOD organization tasked with finding and implementing technological solutions to battlefield problems.
- DCPG. Defense Communications Planning Group. Department of Defense organization (1966-1970) tasked with organizing and implementing The McNamara Line.
- DSPG. Defense Special Projects Group. Successor to the DCPG (1970-1972).
- ISC. Infiltration Surveillance Center. US site in Nakhon Phanom, Thailand tasked with monitoring surveillance activities of the Ho Chi Minh trail.
- The Jason Committee. DOD advisory committee convened to study the war in Vietnam and make recommendations.
- Operation BARRELL ROLL. Interdiction effort in Laos begun December 1964. This was the first authority for active air attacks by US forces.
- Operation COMMANDO HUNT. US air interdiction campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1968-1973.
- Operation DANIEL BOONE. SOG operations into Cambodia beginning in 1967. Renamed SALEM HOUSE.
- Operation DEWEY CANYON II. First phase of Operation LAM SON 719.
- Operation DIE MARKER. Official name of project known as the McNamara Line, an electronic and physical barrier along the DMZ. Construction began in April 1967.
- Operation DURANGO CITY. MACV plan for utilizing conventional combat forces in North Vietnam.
- Operation ELDEST SON. SOG operations to capture, booby-trap, and replace NVA/VC ammunition.

Operation EL PASO. MACV plan for US ground forces conducting ground offensive into Laos (1968).

Operation FRISCO CITY. MACV plan for utilizing conventional combat forces in North Vietnam.

Operation HIGH PORT. MACV proposal in 1967 to deploy Vietnamese forces into Laos (with US support).

Operation IGLOO WHITE. Successor to Operation MUSCLE SHOALS.

Operation LAM SON 719. SVN attack (with US air support) into Laos to interdict logistics lines. (1971)

Operation LEAPING LENA. SOG operations into Laos (1964).

Operation MARKET TIME. Sea interdiction operation by the US Navy, begun March 1965.

Operation MUSCLE SHOALS. Operation to use unattended ground sensors in Laos to monitor logistics movements. (Became Operation IGLOO WHITE.)

Operation NIAGARA. Air operations in support of battle of Khe Sanh. Involved a diversion of resources and many of the electronic assets used for infiltration interdiction efforts.

Operation PACIFIC GROVE. MACV plan for placing US amphibious forces off of North Vietnam to threaten invasion (feint).

Operation PHU DUNG. See Operation SHINING BRASS.

Operation PRAIRIE FIRE. See Operation SHINING BRASS.

Operation SALEM HOUSE. See Operation DANIEL BOONE.

Operation SEA DRAGON. Sea interdiction campaign (Oct 1966-Nov 1968).

Operation SHINING BRASS. SOG operations into Laos to collect intelligence on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Begun in 1965. Also known as Operation 35. Renamed PRAIRIE FIRE in 1968 and PHU DUNG in 1971.

Operation STEEL TIGER. US air interdiction campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the northern part of the Laotian panhandle (north of Route 9). Begun in April 1965.

Operation STRANGLE. WWII air interdiction campaign in Italy.

Operation STRANGLE. Korean war air interdiction campaign.

Operation TALLY HO. Air interdiction attacks by the US in North Vietnam.

Operation TIGER HOUND. US air interdiction campaign against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the southern part of the Laotian panhandle (from Route 9, south to the Cambodian border). Begun in December 1965.

Operation TRAFFIC COP. Sea interdiction campaign (1966).

Operation WATER PUMP. Training mission for Laotian pilots (1964).

Operation YANKEE TEAM. Operation to provide US reconnaissance to support Laotian combat aircraft and activities. Begun in May 1964.

Project DRAG HUNT. MACV study of Laotian invasion options (1967).

Project MASON. MACV project to develop what become known as Operation DIE MARKER/The McNamara Line.

SAC. Scientific Advisory Committee. Group of civilian technical experts who advised the DCPG/DSPG.

STANO. Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Night Observation - Army term for family of technological programs and systems designed to help units acquire and observe enemy forces. Includes such things as sensors, night vision aids, etc...

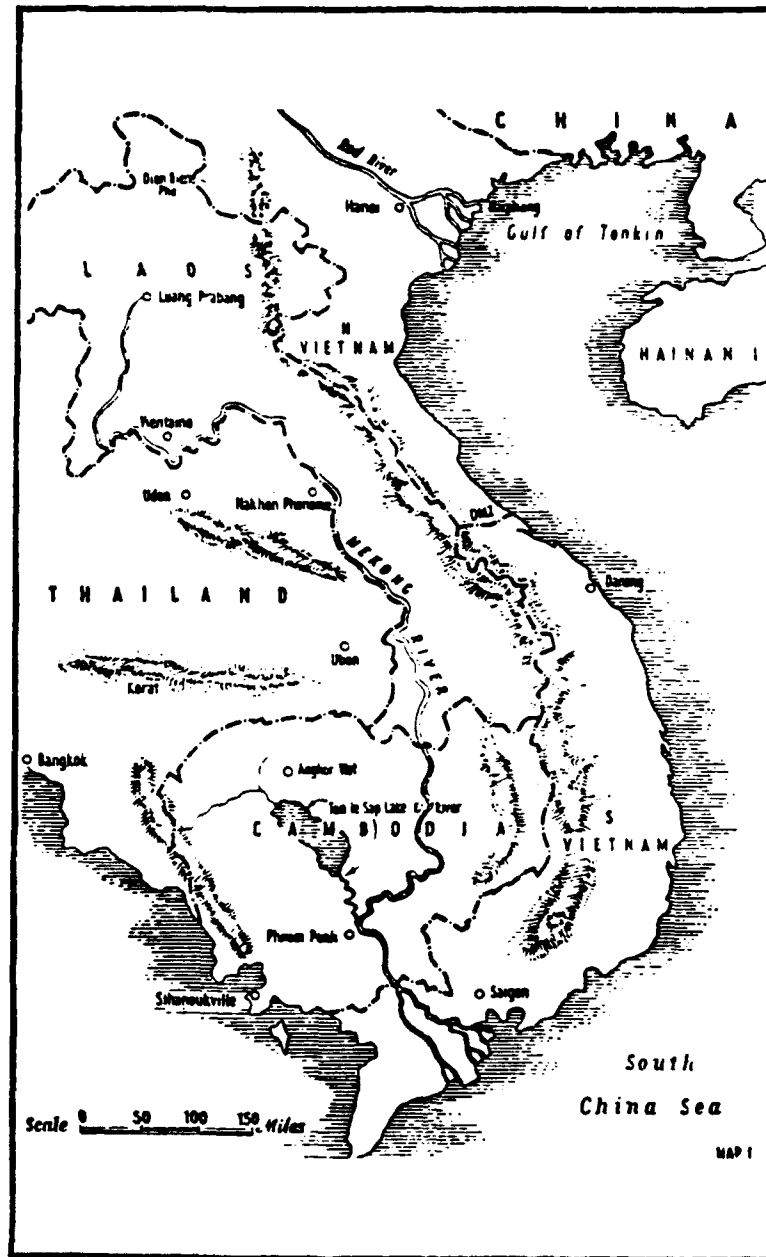
WHITE STAR Mobile Training Team. US Army training team assigned to Laos from 1959 - 1962.

APPENDIX B

FIGURES

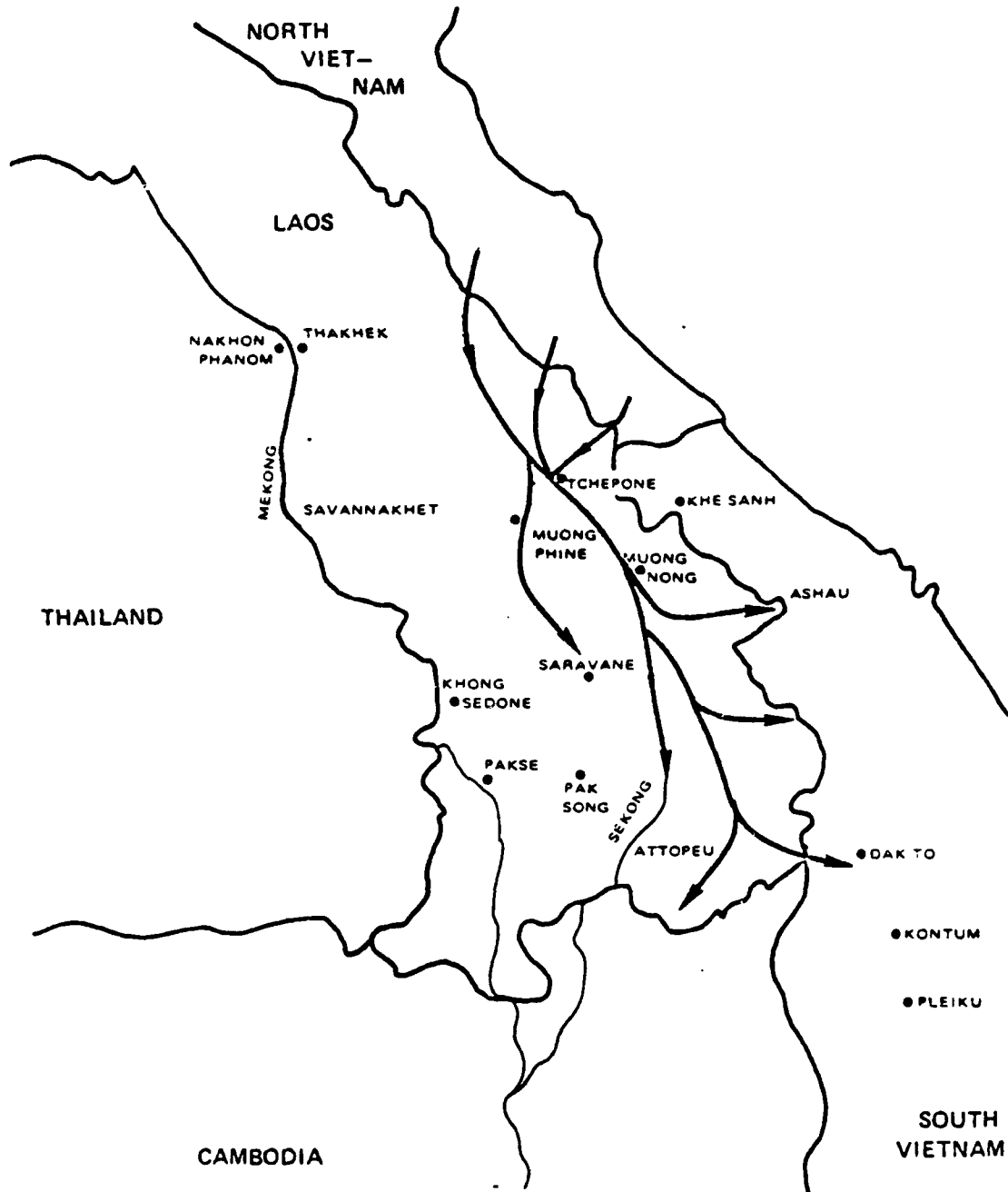
MAP 1

SOUTHEAST ASIA



Source: Edgar O'Ballance, The Wars in Vietnam: 1954-1973 (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1975), [Opposite Title Page].

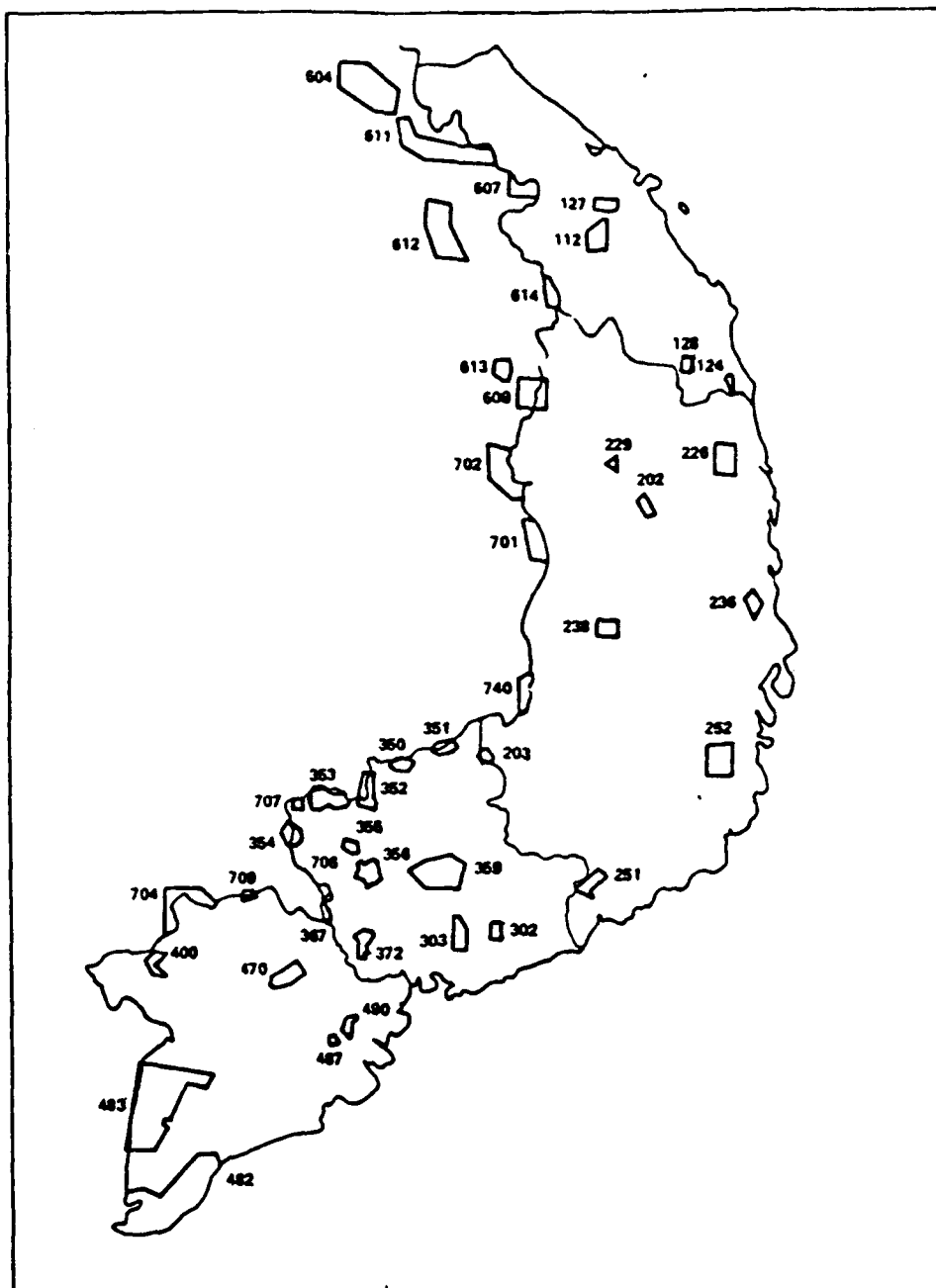
MAP 2
THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL



Source: Soutchay Vongsavanh, RLG Military Operations and Activities in the Laotian Panhandle (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1981), 6.

MAP 3

BASE CAMPS



Source: Tran Dinh Tho, The Cambodian Incursion
 (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1983),
 24.

TABLE 1

NORTH VIETNAMESE ARMY INFILTRATION AND STRENGTH FIGURES

MONTH	INFIL INTO SVN	STRENGTH IN SVN	STRENGTH IN LAOS
JAN 67	6,700		
MAR 67	10,600		
MAY 67	3,900		
JUL 67	8,800	66,855	21,325
SEP 67	8,700	72,080	21,575
NOV 67	6,500	72,852	21,275
JAN 68	24,000	98,550	21,325
MAR 68	33,000	95,890	21,275
MAY 68	30,000	95,890	21,275
JUL 68	23,000	94,215	23,275
SEP 68	11,000	81,615	40,350
NOV 68	10,000	82,122	49,050
JAN 69	6,500	81,950	49,050
MAR 69	14,000	82,755	54,745
MAY 69	20,000	84,887	54,145
JUL 69	7,000	84,887	54,145
SEP 69	2,000	84,887	54,145
NOV 69	450	84,843	63,895
JAN 70	3,610	85,065	73,325
MAR 70	4,676	86,385	73,385
MAY 70	13,343	89,335	75,415
JUL 70		88,540	74,560

Source: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, Office of Assistant Chief of Staff - J-2, North Vietnam Personnel Infiltration Into The Republic Of Vietnam. (Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam: 16 December 1970), 59-60.

TABLE 2
VC AND NVA LOGISTICS DATA - 1969

	<u>CLASS I</u>	<u>CLASS II&IV</u>	<u>CLASS V</u>
TOTAL REQUIREMENTS	87,151.50 (92%)	1,516.80 (2%)	5,619.30 (6%)
AMOUNT FROM SOUTH VIETNAM	64,215.30 (68%)	1,101.30 (1%)	567.00 (<1%)
AMOUNT FROM/THROUGH DMZ	1,549.80 (2%)	30.90 (<1%)	294.00 (<1%)
AMOUNT FROM/THROUGH LAOS	11,022.00 (12%)	144.90 (<1%)	2149.50 (2%)
AMOUNT FROM/THROUGH CAMBODIA	10,355.40 (11%)	239.10 (<1%)	2598.90 (3%)
 TOTAL YEARLY REQUIREMENT ALL CLASSES			94,287.60 (100%)
 TOTAL YEARLY REQ. PROCURED WITHIN SOUTH VIETNAM			65,883.60 (70%)
 TOTAL YEARLY REQ. FROM/THROUGH THE DMZ			1,874.70 (2%)
 TOTAL YEARLY REQ. FROM/THROUGH LAOS			13,316.40 (14%)
 TOTAL YEARLY REQ. FROM/THROUGH CAMBODIA			13,173.40 (14%)

* ALL FIGURES IN SHORT TONS
DISCREPANCIES MAY BE DUE TO ROUNDING
PERCENTAGES SHOWN AS PERCENTAGE OF 94,287.60 (TOTAL
YEARLY REQUIREMENT IN ALL CLASSES)
CLASS I = FOOD
CLASS II & IV = PERSONAL ITEMS AND CONSTRUCTION MATERIAL
CLASS V = AMMUNITION

Source: Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam, VC/NVA Logistics Study. (Combined Intelligence Center: 14 March 1972), 28.

APPENDIX C

CHRONOLOGY

MAY 1959 - Group 559, North Vietnamese Army, organized to develop and operate the trail networks in Laos.

JUL 1962 - Geneva Accords on Laos.

DEC 1964 - Operation BARRELL ROLL begun.

1964 - First North Vietnamese Army regular units identified in South Vietnam.

MAR 1965 - Operation ROLLING THUNDER begun.

MAR 1965 - First U.S. combat units deployed to SVN.

APR 1965 - Operation STEEL TIGER begun.

SEP 1965 - Operation SHINING BRASS approved.

DEC 1965 - Operation TIGER HOUND begun.

SEP 1966 - DCPG established.

APR 1968 - DCPG mission expanded to include tactical operations throughout SVN.

NOV 1968 - Operation ROLLING THUNDER ended.

NOV 1968 - Operation COMMANDO HUNT begun.

MAR 1970 - Change in Cambodian government.

APR 1970 - Cambodian Incursion by U.S. and ARVN forces.

DEC 1970 - Cooper-Church Amendment. Congress prohibits U.S. forces or advisors in Laos.

JAN 1971 - Operation DEWEY CANYON II/LAM SON 719 begins.

APR 1971 - Operation DEWEY CANYON II/LAM SON 719 ends.

MAR 1972 - Operation COMMANDO HUNT ends.

MAY 1972 - Operation LINEBACKER I begun.

OCT 1972 - Operation LINEBACKER I ends.

DEC 1972 - Operation LINEBACKER II.

JAN 1973 - Paris Peace Accords on Vietnam. Cease Fire established.

FEB 1973 - Peace accords on Laos.

AUG 1975 - Laos falls.

NOTE - This information was compiled from a number of sources contained in the bibliography. A book which lists most of this information in one place is: The Vietnam War Almanac, by Harry G. Summers, Jr..

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