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Stop Talking about Sorrow:
Nixon's Communications Strategy after Lam Son 719

A Thesis by
Dominic K. So

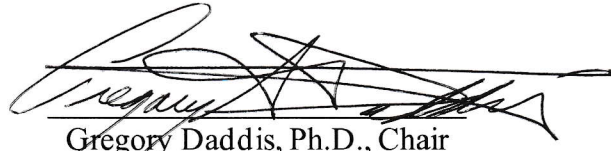
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ABSTRACT

Stop Talking about Sorrow: Nixon's Communications Strategy after Lam Son 719

by Dominic K. So

March 1971 was tough for President Richard Nixon. The American people were tired of the Vietnam War, with many still recovering from the violent anti-war protests of 1970. Congress had just passed an amendment prohibiting U.S. ground troops from operating outside of the borders of South Vietnam. Both the public and secret negotiations with Hanoi were stalled. Confidential channels with Beijing and Moscow about diplomatic initiatives had gone cold. Moreover, Lam Son 719, the joint U.S. and South Vietnamese incursion into Laos that began in February, was turning out to be a failure. The operation, Nixon's military gamble to prove the success of Vietnamization, would show the opposite—that the South Vietnamese were not ready to take over the fighting from the Americans.

Yet, on 7 April 1971, Nixon announced in a television address that “Vietnamization has succeeded,” and that he would accelerate the withdrawal of American troops “because of the achievements of the South Vietnamese operation in Laos.” Many expected Nixon to increase the rate of troop withdrawals no matter the outcome of Lam Son 719. However, instead of being punished at the polls for his lack of credibility, as some in the press were predicting, in 1972, Nixon transfixed the nation with trips to Beijing and Moscow and won re-election by 49 out of 50 states. This thesis mines archival documents from the Nixon Presidential Library, the U.S. media, and television transcripts to explain how and why Nixon re-shaped the story of Lam Son 719 and his Vietnamization policy to persuade a dispirited American people to accept withdrawal from Vietnam. This political comeback, often overshadowed by Watergate, provides unique perspectives on presidential communications.

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Introduction

“While a picture doesn’t lie, a picture may not tell all the truth.” This was President Nixon’s response to Howard K. Smith of ABC News during a television interview on 22 March 1971. Smith had asked about photos circulating in the press of South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) soldiers hanging on the skids of U.S. Army helicopters evacuating Laos.¹ By the time of this 22 March interview, that picture had come to define the joint United States-South Vietnamese incursion into Laos in early 1971, an operation named Lam Son 719. The media narrative of Lam Son 719, embodied by that image, involved an overwhelmed ARVN fleeing Laos by any means possible, including desperately clinging to helicopters transporting wounded soldiers. This story of defeat severely undercut the Nixon administration’s plan for withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam “with honor” through Vietnamization, the process of turning the war over to the South Vietnamese.² By engineering a withdrawal from Vietnam with minimal loss to American prestige, Nixon hoped to satisfy a war-weary American public and Congress, bury the specter of Vietnam in the past, and move forward with other global endeavors, such as an opening of relations with China and détente with the Soviet Union. Achieving this would require a big play. A strike at the major North Vietnamese supply route in Laos was that big play.

Henry Kissinger later wrote of Lam Son 719 that the “operation, conceived in doubt and assailed by skepticism, proceeded in confusion.” This mirrored the sentiment in U.S. media by mid-March 1971 that Lam Son was a failure. Yet, on 7 April, President Nixon delivered a television address, his only one that year regarding Vietnam, declaring, “Vietnamization has succeeded,” and that “because of the achievements of the South Vietnamese operation in Laos, I

¹ Richard Nixon, "A Conversation With the President," Interview With Howard K. Smith of the American Broadcasting Company, 22 March 1971. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/conversation-with-the-president-interview-with-howard-k-smith-the-american-broadcasting> (Hereafter referred to as “Nixon, 22 March Interview”)

² James H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 9.

am announcing an increase in the rate of American withdrawals.”³ To combat the image of ARVN hanging from skids, and the associated depiction of failure, Nixon and his team spun the story to one that better supported the administration’s goals, mainly through television appearances by the president on 22 March and 7 April.

The open secret at this time—among the administration, the press, and even the South Vietnamese—is that no matter what happened in Lam Son 719, Nixon would call it a success for Vietnamization and accelerate U.S. troop withdrawals. *Wall Street Journal* reporters wrote on 29 March that “troop withdrawals – pegged more to political pressures in the States than to military realities in Indochina – will doubtless continue, or even accelerate, as they probably would have whether the Laos operation had ended in a clearcut victory or defeat.”⁴⁵ Historian James Willbanks explains that “Nixon needed Vietnamization to be a success, or at least appear to be successful, so that he could carry through with his plan to disengage totally from the war.” In 1972, after historic trips to Beijing and Moscow, which would forever change the United States’ relationship with the world’s largest Communist powers, Nixon was re-elected by a large margin. “Nixon to China” remains a catchphrase denoting groundbreaking foreign policy success.⁶ Had Watergate not occurred, Nixon may well be regarded as one of the most successful presidents of the twentieth century. If the press and American people generally accepted Lam

³ Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), 1002. Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” 7 April 1971. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-situation-southeast-asia-0> (Hereafter referred to as “Nixon, 7 April TV Address”)

⁴ Peter R. Kann and Richard J. Levine, “Assessing Laos; The Invasion Is Seen As Inconclusive Chapter In an Inconclusive War,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 1971. Peter R. Kann, “Savannakhet, Laos: A Bad Place to Visit, But a Bad Place to Live,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 1971.

⁵ Willbanks, 174.

⁶ Examples of recent uses in media include comparisons to President Donald Trump’s meeting with North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un. Jeffery Lord, “Trump Goes to North Korea Is Nixon Goes To China,” *The Spectator*, 9 March 2018 (Accessed on 18 September 2019: <https://spectator.org/trump-to-north-korea-is-nixon-goes-to-china>). Benjamin A. Engel, “The Trump-Kim Summit Is No ‘Nixon To China’ Moment,” *The Diplomat*, 15 March 2018 (Accessed on 18 September 2019: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/the-trump-kim-summit-is-no-nixon-to-china-moment>).

Son 719 as a failure, and if the administration's spin was an open secret, why did it work? And, what does this tell us about presidential communication?

By mining archival documents from the Nixon Presidential Library, the U.S. media, and transcripts from the president's two television appearances during this period, this thesis will address how and why Nixon re-shaped the story of Lam Son 719 and, more generally, of his Vietnamization policy. Ultimately, it argues that Nixon succeeded in persuading the American people to accept withdrawal from Vietnam and focus on China and the USSR because he correctly read the pulse of the nation. Enough people would either believe his case for Vietnamization or just not care. Nixon told a largely dispirited public what they wanted to hear: that the United States was leaving Vietnam. Because of other global considerations, domestic politics, and decisions made before 1971, President Nixon planned to accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam no matter the result of Lam Son 719, and Americans accepted that. While some Americans truly believed in Vietnamization's success, most were simply tired of the war and supportive of whatever means necessary to put Vietnam in the rearview.

The most recent works on Lam Son 719—James Willbanks's *A Raid Too Far* and Robert Sander's *Invasion of Laos*—do not delve into this aspect of the campaign.⁷ *A Raid Too Far* adds to sixteen other books on the Vietnam War written by Willbanks, professor emeritus at the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College. *Invasion of Laos* is the first book for former Lam Son helicopter pilot Sander, written to memorialize historical details of a significant life experience. Both provide comprehensive analyses of the political decisions and military strategy that led to the difficulties in Lam Son 719 and both consider the operation a failure, though perhaps not “the total debacle portrayed in US media.”⁸ Nonetheless, Willbanks writes that

⁷ Robert D. Sander, *Invasion of Laos, 1971: Lam Son 719* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

⁸ Willbanks, 162-163.

Nixon's rosy assessment on television in late-March, in opposition to non-rosy media reports, was "highly questionable." Willbanks also characterizes both Nixon and Kissinger as "trying to put the best face on what [they] knew had been a near disastrous performance by some units."⁹ Sander's analysis ends with the military campaign in March.

Of the works that focus on the U.S. media during this time, U.S. Army historian William Hammond's *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media* analyzes the media's relationship with the Nixon administration and the U.S. Military Assistance Command in South Vietnam (MACV) during Lam Son 719 in most detail. James Landers's *The Weekly War* documents the coverage of the main U.S. weekly newsmagazines during this period. This American-centric historiographical debate, however, continues to lack a North and South Vietnamese perspective of the war, such as that provided by South Vietnamese Army Major-General Nguyen Duy Hinh in *Lam Son 719*, and more recently by historians Ang Cheng Guan in *Ending the Vietnam War* and Lien-Hang Nguyen in *Hanoi's War*.¹⁰

This thesis aims to answer the question of how Nixon re-fashioned the account of Lam Son 719 to suit his political ends. The first chapter will cover the events that led America into Lam Son 719, including a brief history of the North Vietnamese supply route, the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The chapter will also record Nixon's path from his election in 1968 on a promise to end the war to the start of Lam Son 719 in 1971. The second chapter will analyze U.S. press coverage of Lam Son 719 from mid-March 1971, when coverage of Lam Son 719 reached its most negative point, to 7 April 1971 when Nixon delivered his television speech. This press

⁹ Willbanks, 164.

¹⁰ William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center for Military History, 1996). James Landers, *The Weekly War* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2004). Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719: Indochina Monographs* (Washington, D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1979); Cheng Guan Ang, *Ending the Vietnam War: the Vietnamese communists' perspective* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003). Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

chapter will focus on three weekly newsmagazines—*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*—and three newspapers—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. The thesis will then shift to the Nixon communication team’s reaction. Chapter three will use archival documents and public comments from the administration to map their strategy to combat the negative press coverage and decipher how their message morphed from mid-March to 7 April in a coordinated effort to spin the public story. This chapter will focus on two key points, President Nixon’s 22 March television interview on ABC and his 7 April television address. Lastly, Chapter four will analyze the reasons why this strategy succeeded and draw perspectives on presidential communication from this short period in 1971.

Chapter 1: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and Nixon's Path to Lam Son 719

To understand Lam Son 719 and its significance in the context of the Vietnam War, one must first understand its target, the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The “Trail” was the North Vietnamese Army’s (NVA) supply route running from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through Laos. The Vietnamese name for the Trail, the “Truong Song Strategic Supply Route,” is appropriately named after the *Truong Song*, or Annamite Mountain Range, which runs north to south at the border of the Vietnams and Laos, characterizing the Trail’s rugged mountain terrain.¹¹ Over years, the Trail became a “system of roads, command centers, transshipment points, base areas, and way stations.”¹² On 19 May 1959, five years after the Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) asserted its independence from France and four years after western powers met in Geneva to create South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese Party Central Military Committee instructed supply specialist Vo Bam to organize “a special military communication line to send supplies to the revolution in the South and create conditions for its development.” By 20 August, Hanoi completed the first successful supply mission down the Trail. In 1961, the DRV moved the Trail slightly west, from the South Vietnamese city of Khe Sanh into the Laotian city of Tchepone along Route 9 in response to disruption by South Vietnamese troops. In 1964, though it meant covering greater distances, they again extended southern portions of the Trail much further west into Laos for extra security and additional connections into South Vietnam. The area around Tchepone remained a major stop, near the demilitarized zone separating North and South Vietnam. This post-1964 Trail remained the structure that U.S. and South Vietnamese military forces periodically attempted to disrupt until the fall of Saigon in 1975.

¹¹ John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), xiii. Much of the information contained in the following section on the Ho Chi Minh Trail can be found in *The Blood Road*, specifically on pages 9, 13, 15, 25-26, 77-78, 92-93, 95, 97, 110, 160, 221, and 268-269.

¹² Willbanks, 24. Robert D. Sander also provides a history of the Laotian portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in *Invasion of Laos*.

According to historian and national security analyst John Prados, the “course of the Vietnam War became a competition between Hanoi’s efforts to create and sustain an umbilical cord and American attempts to cut that cord or at least obstruct it.” From 1961, when the Trail became the target of a CIA intelligence-gathering program, the United States gradually escalated its attacks, including aerial bombing and ground combat. These increases were in conjunction with general escalations of the Vietnam War. In December 1964, President Johnson approved Operation Barrel Roll, a sustained air bombing campaign against northern portions of the Trail in reaction to the communists’ attack on the American base at Bien Hoa. The next year, the U.S. Air Force undertook multiple aerial bombing campaigns attacking the Trail.¹³

In March 1965, Johnson also approved cross-border ground attacks by the U.S. Army’s clandestine “Special Operations Group” to complement the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign. Later operations in 1967 incorporated new technologies such as mud-making chemicals (Operation Commando Lava) and artificial rainmaking (Project Compatriot). During Operation Commando Hunt in 1968, U.S. military technicians used electronic sensors to monitor movement patterns and tried to predict where the enemy would be at future points. Prados likened this cat-and-mouse struggle to a pinball game and its technicians to “pinball wizards.”¹⁴

The myriad of U.S. and South Vietnamese attacks on the Trail through the 1960s, whether by air or land, covert or overt, failed to fully disrupt the Trail. In 1968, the Communists achieved a momentum shift with the Tet Offensive. Some argued that statistics showed Tet to be an American victory. However, the Tet Offensive enabled Hanoi to establish full control and

¹³ Prados, *The Blood Road*, 19. Raids on the Trail in 1965 included: retaliation strikes for North Vietnamese attacks on the U.S. base in Pleiku, Operation Steel Tiger, and Operation Tiger Hound, all in 1965. *Ibid.*, 95, 110, 159.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 97, 268-269.

security over the Ho Chi Minh Trail in a way they never could before.¹⁵ Politically back in the United States, the Tet Offensive also contributed to President Johnson's withdrawal from the race for re-election. This paved the path for Richard Nixon to win the 1968 election with the promise of a new approach to ending the Vietnam War.

In March 1968, while on the campaign trail in New Hampshire, presidential candidate Richard Nixon first voiced his views on the Vietnam War in public. He said that the United States could end the war by "mobilizing our economic and political and diplomatic leadership." Former National Security Council (NSC) staffer Peter Rodman recalled that this "transmogrified" into a cliché that Nixon said he had a "secret plan" to end the war. Nixon wrote in his memoirs that he would never have said that he had a plan, let alone a secret plan, but that he "believed that we were not making adequate use of our vast diplomatic resources and powers" and that the solution was in Peking and Moscow rather than in Hanoi.¹⁶ Nixon's thinking behind the vagueness, which led to the "secret plan" criticisms, is questionable. Still, Nixon began his first term in office with an American public counting on him to end the war.

After Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird made his first visit to South Vietnam in March 1969, he returned with optimism about ARVN capabilities and argued that the American mission should focus on strengthening the ARVN to take over more of the wartime nation's security. This would allow for further U.S. troop withdrawals. Nixon would write later that the undertaking of Vietnamization, the term Laird coined for this policy, was "another turning point in my administration's Vietnam strategy."¹⁷ In actuality, this idea to "strengthen the Saigon

¹⁵ The U.S. abandonment of their base at Khe Sanh, located very close to the border between Laos and South Vietnam, marked a significant military win for Hanoi. Prados writes that this helped to "clear the flanks of the Trail." Ibid., 283.

¹⁶ Conrad Black, *Richard Nixon: A Life in Full* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), 516. Peter W. Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 124. Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 298.

¹⁷ Nixon, *RN*, 392.

forces and begin unilateral withdrawals of U.S. troops while negotiating” was not that different from what the Johnson Administration had been attempting for years. Nonetheless, Vietnamization provided the rationale for which Nixon was searching to withdraw U.S. troops.¹⁸

By October 1969, the American public was losing patience with the new administration’s lack of progress on the war. The anti-war movement was becoming increasingly vocal.

Newsweek’s headline for its 13 October issue illustratively read, “Nixon in Trouble.”¹⁹ The administration had been in power for over nine months and even Nixon admitted, “No progress whatever has been made except agreement on the shape of the bargaining table.” On 3 November, the president delivered a television address soon dubbed the “Silent Majority Speech.” In the speech, Nixon revealed the offers that the United States had made toward the North Vietnamese, including his secret personal letter to Ho Chi Minh, and argued that it was the North Vietnamese who were unwilling to compromise. He gave reasons why an immediate, unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops would be dangerous, and argued the merits of Vietnamization and diplomacy with other Communist powers, factors that could sway the DRV. He also called those citizens who disagreed with his plan a “vocal minority,” and ended the speech with an appeal to the “silent majority” of Americans for their support. A Gallup poll showed that Nixon’s approval rating increased from 56 to 67 percent right after the speech.²⁰ However, this political momentum would last no more than six months.

In April 1970, Nixon approved a joint U.S.-ARVN incursion into Cambodia to attack NVA sanctuaries as well as the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), “the headquarters

¹⁸ Prados, *The Blood Road*, 289. Willbanks, 10.

¹⁹ Black, 641.

²⁰ President Nixon used the “shape of the bargaining table” line in the Silent Majority Speech. Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” 3 November 1969. Online by the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/2018-08/silentmajority_transcript.pdf. David Coleman, “Nixon’s Presidential Approval Ratings,” *History in Pieces*, accessed on 20 October 2019 <https://historyinpieces.com/research/nixon-approval-ratings>.

for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam.” Nixon further explained in his 30 April television address that this operation would “protect our men who are in Vietnam and to guarantee the continued success of our withdrawal and Vietnamization programs.”²¹ The U.S. Air Force had been covertly bombing Cambodia since 1969 with little effect on stopping supply traffic, but this was the first ground offensive into Cambodia. While President Nixon announced that Cambodia was “the most successful operation of this long and very difficult war,” scholars continue to debate the military outcome of this incursion. Some consider 1970 to be the high point of Vietnamization and U.S. achievement in the Vietnam War. Others note Nixon’s convenient omission of the failed search for COSVN in later remarks and question the numbers of enemies killed and supplies captured as touted by the administration as measures of success.²² Regardless of military victory or failure, the Cambodian incursion ignited a political bomb domestically, eroding any positive sentiment Nixon gained from the Silent Majority speech.²³

Protests spread across universities in the United States and on 4 May 1970, violence between students and National Guardsmen at Kent State University in Ohio resulted in killing deaths and nine injuries. Ten days later, police killed two protestors and injured twelve during a clash at Jackson State College in Mississippi. Historian Gregory Daddis writes, “The violence

²¹ Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” 30 April 1970. Online by the University of Virginia Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-30-1970-address-nation-situation-southeast-asia> (hereafter, Nixon, 30 April TV address).

²² Lewis Sorley writes, “The raid into Cambodia probably had – at this late date in the war, and given the limitations placed on it – only ephemeral effect,” but later argues that the “war was won” in late 1970. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 213 and 217. On the more critical side, Gregory Daddis argues in 2011 that “the incursion was not in fact a success by any rational standard of judgment,” and in 2017 that “Nixon’s decision to expand the war into Cambodia appeared the embodiment of unintended (and horrific) consequences.” Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 211. Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford UP, 2017), 130. Others, such as Melvin Small and Andrew Wiest, acknowledge that the operation may have successfully delayed large-scale NVA attacks, but remain critical of claims of success. Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 81. Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 198.

²³ Willbanks, 20. Black, 668-670.

and social unrest on the nation's college campuses, in fact, underscored the interlocking nature of the war in Southeast Asia and the turbulent American home front in the late 1960s and early 1970s."²⁴ Concurrent with this backlash against the administration within academic institutions was another within Congress.

A month after the incident at Kent State, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution proposed by Kentucky Republican John Sherman Cooper and Idaho Democrat Frank Church that would cut funding for U.S. ground troops in Cambodia and Laos starting 30 June 1970.²⁵ This did not pass the House of Representatives at the time. However, Congress passed a diluted version that prohibited any U.S. ground troops outside of South Vietnam in January 1971. This restriction significantly altered how Lam Son 719 was fought. In addition, the Cooper-Church Amendment signaled the beginning of Congress taking steps to regain power from the executive branch to end the war.

While all of these events were occurring, Henry Kissinger had been holding periodic negotiations with the DRV in secret since 1969. These were convened in parallel to the public peace negotiations in Paris headed by former U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge. On 7 September 1970, as usual, Kissinger met North Vietnamese negotiator Xuan Thuy at a simple house in the Parisian suburbs. Kissinger pressed for a negotiated settlement, using the threat that the South Vietnamese were only getting stronger with time. Over the next few months, Hanoi would publicly reject entreaties from the United States, including a 7 October speech from President Nixon offering: a cease-fire, a peace conference, the negotiation of a timetable for total U.S. troop withdrawal, a political settlement for South Vietnam, and the mutual release of prisoners-of-war. Believing that nothing short of unilateral U.S. withdrawal

²⁴ Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 129.

²⁵ Black, 680.

from South Vietnam would appease the North Vietnamese, Kissinger recalled that he and Nixon pursued a strategy of “three concurrent efforts until Saigon could stand on its own feet: American troop withdrawals, the rapid strengthening of South Vietnamese forces; and the progressive weakening of the enemy.”²⁶ It is under this context that Nixon embarked upon Operation Lam Son 719.

By late 1970, Nixon wanted a big play to force the DRV to negotiate a truce, prove Vietnamization was working, and accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The Cambodian incursion drained DRV resources but not enough. Time was not on Nixon’s side. Due to the president’s April 1970 troop withdrawal promise and Congressional pressure on the military budget, MACV would lose another 60,000 troops by May 1971. Coupled with time windows dependent on monsoon seasons, this last play had to be conducted before May 1971.²⁷ With the “when” decided, it was now a question of “where.”²⁸

The exact origin of the plan to attack the NVA in Laos remains unclear. Due to the operation’s eventual failure, many of the decision-makers avoided responsibility after the fact. Nixon, Kissinger, and the South Vietnamese later blamed General Creighton Abrams, MACV’s commander. However, Abrams’ predecessor, General Westmoreland, proposed a similar plot four years earlier, which the Johnson White House abandoned. ARVN leaders had been proposing a similar attack since 1965. Abrams scholar Lewis Sorley describes Lam Son 719 as “stimulated by Washington, transmitted by McCain and Abrams, and sketched out by Thieu.”

²⁶ Kissinger detailed in his memoirs that Hanoi would undercut any progress in the secret negotiations with public statements. As an example, Kissinger’s 7 September conversation with Xuan Thuy about the terms of a negotiated settlement was undercut by Hanoi’s issuance of “Madame Binh’s Eight-Point Peace Plan” ten days later, without any prior warning to Kissinger. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 976-981, 986.

²⁷ Willbanks, 29.

²⁸ Lam Son 719 would be the first public invasion of Laos supported by the United States. However, the U.S. had been running covert operations in Laos since the Johnson Administration. By 1971, these operations were overseen by the “40 Committee,” chaired by Henry Kissinger. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VII, Vietnam, July 1970 - January 1972*, eds. David Goldman, Erin Mahan, and Edward C. Keefer (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010) (hereafter, FRUS, Volume VII), Document 172.

John Prados explains, “The White House maneuvered to have Saigon take responsibility for what it wanted, both to stymie opponents and to avoid blame if things went wrong.” Post-operation finger pointing notwithstanding, it is likely that Nixon and Kissinger were the geneses. Eventually, the Pentagon devised the plan and communicated the idea to decision-makers in South Vietnam, including MACV, the U.S. Embassy, and the South Vietnamese. All the while, the White House actively tried to make it appear like a Vietnamese idea.²⁹

The resulting plan was to be conducted in four phases over three months. During Phase One—also called Dewey Canyon II to confuse the enemy by using codenames from an older operation—U.S. ground troops would secure Route 9 on the South Vietnamese side, from Khe Sanh to the Laotian border. This American-led phase would secure the area for ARVN ground troops and U.S. support troops to gather for the next phase. In Phase Two, ARVN troops, with U.S. air support, would cross into Laos, and proceed 42 kilometers up Route 9 to Tchepone, an important North Vietnamese base in Laos that had been the target of American policymakers since 1960.³⁰ The ARVN would set up firebases along the route as they progressed. During Phase Three, ARVN would maintain control of Tchepone while conducting search-and-destroy missions along Trail routes surrounding Tchepone. Phase Four would be a withdrawal back to South Vietnam through a different route, going southeast through the A Shau Valley. The operation, named Lam Son 719 after the birthplace of a fifteenth-century Vietnamese hero, would be run by the South Vietnamese with support from the Americans. The objective was to

²⁹ Sorley, *A Better War*, 234. John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 406. Other scholars such as Willbanks, Wiest, and General Bruce Palmer also support the theory that the idea originated from Nixon and Kissinger. Willbanks, 30. Wiest, 199. General Bruce Palmer, Jr. *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 106. In a 22 December 1970 meeting with Henry Kissinger, Joint Chiefs Chairman Moorer states that Gen. Abrams selected the Tchepone area “because it contains many lucrative targets.” FRUS, Volume VII, Document 93.

³⁰ Neil Sheehan, “Tchepone, in Laos Jungle, Long a Strategic Center,” *The New York Times*, 12 January 1972.

block the enemy's flow of supplies and destroy stockpiles and facilities.³¹ Unfortunately for the Americans and South Vietnamese, the operation did not go as planned.

Phase One began on 30 January 1971 and the ARVN crossed the border into Laos to begin Phase Two on 8 February. However, just a few days into the march up Route 9 towards Tchepone, the South Vietnamese became overwhelmed and the operation bogged down. Phases Three and Four would not be executed as planned. This was due to a combination of intelligence leaks, divergent goals between Nixon and Thieu, leadership failures in the upper ARVN echelons, poor weather delaying American air support, insufficient air support, as well as other factors. Encountering stiff resistance from the enemy, the column of ARVN soldiers stalled on Route 9 for weeks, giving the NVA time to regroup. By 20 February, some ARVN soldiers began retreating from their firebases in Laos.³²

Journalist Henry Kamm wrote in a 30 January 1990 *New York Times* article, "Tchepone became to many American and South Vietnamese military leaders what Moby Dick was to Captain Ahab – the object of an obsessive, destructive quest."³³ In early March 1971, the ARVN made another push and eventually "captured" Tchepone on 8 March, a Pyrrhic victory as the NVA had abandoned the city. The ARVN left almost as soon as they entered.³⁴ By mid-March, only one month after first crossing into Laos, the South Vietnamese began their retreat. While most ARVN soldiers returned to South Vietnam on foot or aboard armored vehicles, the only way to evacuate some ARVN soldiers from Laotian bases was through U.S. helicopters. As helicopters arrived to pick up the wounded, some unwounded ARVN soldiers "panicked," to use

³¹ Willbanks, 38-45; Prados, *The Blood Road*, 318.

³² Prados, *The Blood Road*, 329-332. Willbanks, 165. Willbanks and other scholars attribute the stalling of the ARVN march up Route 9 in February 1971 to Thieu ordering a halt in operations to preserve the troops leading this operation, who also served as his anti-coup force in Saigon. Willbanks, 98.

³³ Henry Kamm, "On Ho Chi Minh Trail, New Villages and Old Bombs," *The New York Times*, 30 January 1990.

³⁴ Prados, *The Blood Road*, 347.

Nixon's characterization, and were photographed desperately clinging to helicopter skids.³⁵ This enduring image, and the associated depiction of the ARVN as cowardly, dominated U.S. press coverage of Lam Son 719 from 18 March onwards.³⁶ Traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail increased again shortly after the conclusion of Operation Lam Son 719.³⁷

³⁵ Nixon, *RN*, 498.

³⁶ The first images taken of ARVN soldiers clinging to skids of U.S. evacuation helicopters occurred as early as 20 February with the evacuation of Ranger Base North. Willbanks, 98. However, this was before the short-lived bump in positive media coverage associated with the 8 March ARVN capture of Tchepone. President Nixon associates this image with the final withdrawal of ARVN troops from Laos on 18 March in his 1978 memoir and so this thesis, in analyzing administration reaction, will use the same timeline. Nixon, *RN*, 498.

³⁷ Willbanks, 162-163.

Chapter 2: Press Coverage of Lam Son 719

“Our worst enemy seems to be the press.”³⁸ President Nixon’s well-documented and tumultuous relationship with the press, as exemplified by this comment to Henry Kissinger in early March of 1971, began before Nixon became president and never improved. Journalist Jack Anderson claimed that Nixon’s animosity towards the press dated back to his days as a congressman in the 1940s. Nixon blamed his 1960 presidential election loss to Kennedy on Anderson’s revelation of a loan from businessman Howard Hughes to Nixon’s brother.³⁹ This hostility carried over to members of Nixon’s cabinet. Referring to Henry Kissinger and Secretary of State William Rogers during the late 1971 conflict between India and Pakistan, Anderson wrote that they “deliberately misled the reporters they saw...they lied because the President wanted them to lie.”⁴⁰ During Lam Son 719, this long-standing battle between the president and the media was exacerbated by policies, personalities, and a history distinct to the Nixon Administration.

On 29 January 1971, the day before beginning Phase One of the operation, MACV instituted a press embargo.⁴¹ The ban prohibited journalists from reporting on any actions in

³⁸ Nixon quoted in Hammond, 460.

³⁹ Jack Anderson, *The Anderson Papers* (New York: Random House, 1973), 15-17. Lori Cox Han also writes that Nixon “brought to the White House a long and difficult relationship with the national press corps that dated back to the earliest days of his political career.” Han notes that Anderson was on a Nixon White House list of reporters deemed unfavorable to the administration. Lori Cox Han, *Advising Nixon: The White House Memos of Patrick J. Buchanan* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 57-58. Anderson is also listed on a “Bad Guys List” that White House staff circulated on 9 March 1971. Memorandum; Joanne L. Gordon/George T. Bell; 9 March 1971. Folder Alpha Name Files (1969-1973) Charles Colson March 1971 [2 of 6]; Box 81; White House Special Files: Staff Member Office Files: H.R. Haldeman; Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California (hereafter referred to as Nixon Library).

⁴⁰ Anderson, 7-8. Anderson is not specific about the India/Pakistan conflict itself in his memoir. However, more detail about America’s role in the conflict was publicized in 2013 with the declassification of files from the time. Pankaj Mishra, “Unholy Alliances: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Bangladesh genocide,” *The New Yorker*, 23 September 2013.

⁴¹ While Lewis Sorley’s collection of MACV command meetings does not address whether this embargo was an order from the White House or Abrams’s idea, Abrams is steadfast in his belief that the embargo is necessary for operational security. On 30 January, in response to a Washington request to partially lift the embargo, Sorley quotes Abrams as saying, “The answer to this is no. The sole purpose of this is military security...and lift it a little bit – that’s more of that being a little bit pregnant...you either got to have the guts to stand and take the pummeling or,

Military Region I, the northernmost of South Vietnam's four military regions, which included all of Lam Son 719's operational areas.⁴² The only information cleared for publication was that provided by the MACV press office in a daily press statement. In a sign of MACV's hypersensitivity to press leaks, a military spokesman's 29 January statement explaining the embargo clarified that the restriction covered the statement itself. Nonetheless, the embargo did not last long. On 1 February, the *New York Times* reprinted a story from the *London Observer* that violated the embargo by reporting on MACV's background briefing and speculating about an upcoming invasion into Laos.⁴³ Rather than prevent leaks about the upcoming invasion, the policy appeared to have only further upset members of the media who felt the blackout was unjustified. MACV eventually lifted the embargo on 4 February. William Hammond speculates that it may have been the "bad blood" festering for months between MACV and the press which caused Abrams to hold the embargo for that long, despite General Abrams' statements to the contrary. MACV was also contending with an order from the president to quietly restrict reporters' access to military helicopters.⁴⁴ This hostile environment would set the tone for press coverage of Operation Lam Son 719.

In 1971, the combined circulation of United States newspapers that year reached over 62 million per day. Many articles were shared across papers, as the Associated Press and United

goddamn it, you shouldn't be in the business." Lewis Sorley, ed., *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2004), 525.

⁴² Each of these four regions was assigned a military corps with a corresponding number. ARVN's I Corps oversaw Lam Son 719.

⁴³ Hammond, 409. Willbanks, 71. Hammond, 413.

⁴⁴ Hammond notes that the MACV-press relationship had gotten so bad that reporters and military press officers had physical altercations, such as that which closed the press center in Da Nang. Hammond, 421. However, in meeting transcripts, Abrams appeared quite reasonable about his understanding of the tradeoff inherent in the embargo. He conceded in a 30 January meeting that the embargo comes at the "price" of MACV having to brief the media on details that they would not otherwise access during normal circumstances. Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 529. Admiral Moorer wrote in a 12 February diary entry, "The President wants to be sure that no American television or news correspondents ride on American helicopters. The President also wants to start discouraging the South Vietnamese from taking them on board their helicopters. We should clamp down on it slowly so that it does not become too obvious." FRUS, Volume VII, Document 127.

Press International supplied stories to 1,750 American newspapers daily. The three television stations on the air at the time—NBC, ABC, and CBS—reached 51 million viewers per night. The most popular weeklies—*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*—reached 38 million readers per week. Radio news reached 9 million listeners per day.⁴⁵ As a representation of the media landscape from mid-March to 7 April 1971, this thesis will explore in detail the three most popular weeklies—*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News*—and three highly-circulated newspapers—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*—with the aim of tracking press coverage of Lam Son 719.

Of the three weeklies, political scientist Lori Cox Han describes *Time* and *Newsweek* as “among the top targets for what the White House considered their ‘Eastern establishment,’ traditionally Democratic, bias.”⁴⁶ Throughout four issues, from 15 March to 5 April, both *Time* and *Newsweek* initially remained neutral on Lam Son 719 and highlighted the heroism of U.S. forces. By 29 March, however, both weeklies had become negative about Lam Son 719 and vocal about the administration’s soured relationship with the press. Criticism of the administration, though, permeated throughout.

With Lam Son 719 still in progress, the 15 March issue of *Time* withheld judgment on the operation and its effect on the U.S. withdrawal. In its regular section titled “The Nation,” *Time*’s journalists wrote, “perhaps, just perhaps, the U.S. may be able to pull off not only a successful withdrawal from Indochina but some form of victory as well.... The President had a valid point when he warned against too-quick judgments on Laos.” In the same issue, the weekly noted that truck movements along the Ho Chi Minh Trail had been halved thanks to Lam Son but due to

⁴⁵ The Pew Research Center calculates the weekday circulation for daily newspapers in the United States in 1971 to be 62,231,000. Michael Barthel, “Newspapers Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center* (Accessed on 18 September 2019, <https://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/newspapers>). Landers, 2.

⁴⁶ Han, 58.

questions surrounding U.S. air support, victory “remains to be seen.”⁴⁷ The 22 March issue was less optimistic about Lam Son 719, noting that traffic on the Trail had returned to normal.⁴⁸ The article also called Lam Son “dispiriting” for the ARVN.⁴⁹ *Time* acknowledged the toll the operation must have taken on the NVA in their coverage of Chinese Premier Zhou En Lai’s trip to Hanoi. In an article titled “Killing Is Our Business and Business Is Good,” *Time* correspondents wrote flattering descriptions of U.S. Army helicopter pilots while mentioning less-than-heroic actions by ARVN troops.⁵⁰

By 29 March, *Time*’s reporters were calling Lam Son 719 a retreat. A 29 March article, “Laos: The Bloody Battle to Get Out,” referred to ARVN soldiers clinging to helicopter skids in retreat and quoted a U.S. soldier referring to the ARVN with sarcasm, “Here come the victors.” The same article explained that of the 500 men in the ARVN’s 4th battalion who entered Laos, only 32 survived, of which one-third were wounded. In another offering titled “Was It Worth It?” *Time*’s authors predicted Lam Son’s failure to achieve the goals of delaying NVA

⁴⁷ “The President Defends a Policy and a Man,” *Time*, *The Nation*, 15 March 1971. “Showdown in Laos,” *Time*, 15 March 1971.

⁴⁸ The *Time* article did not specify the source of this trail traffic claim. “Shadowboxing,” *Time*, 22 March 1971. However, James Willbanks and Kissinger’s Deputy Security Advisor, Alexander Haig, also supported the notion that Ho Chi Minh Trail traffic returned to normal after a temporary lull during Lam Son. Willbanks cites electronic sensors on the trail while Haig quoted American pilots in his memoir. Willbanks, 163. Alexander Haig, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 278. While not addressing post-Lam Son trail traffic specifically, DIA and CIA analyses in late March 1971 stated that trail input remained the same as the year before, to the consternation of Kissinger and his NSC staff. Memorandum; K. Wayne Smith/Henry Kissinger 18 March 1971. Folder Intelligence on NUSM 3-18-71; Box H-080; National Security Council (NSC) Institutional (“H”) Files: Meeting Files (1969-1974): Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) Meetings; Nixon Library. Referring to trail traffic on 20 March, Kissinger wrote to Nixon that “Lam Son was never intended to stop the movement of trucks,” and argued that because the NVA were restricted to the Laotian portion of the trail for supplies, as compared to 1970 when they also had sea routes from Cambodia, and that many of those supplies were going to troops in Laos fighting in Lam Son, the ultimate flow of supplies to South Vietnam was significantly reduced. FRUS, Volume VII, Document 159.

⁴⁹ Agreeing with *Time* on ARVN morale was former ARVN general Nguyen Duy Hinh, who wrote in an analysis for the U.S. Army that the ARVN were like prey for the NVA during this period, that the withdrawal “surely did not proceed as planned in an orderly and controlled manner,” and that leaving dead and wounded behind in Laos created an unending “horrendous trauma” for soldiers’ families. Maj. General Nguyen, 113, 118, 139-140. On the other hand, Ambassador Bunker characterized the South Vietnamese mood in a cable to Henry Kissinger on 24 March as “one of pride in the accomplishments of ARVN and confidence in its ability.” Cable; Ellsworth Bunker/Henry Kissinger 24 March 1971. Folder Vietnam 11 Feb 71 to 28 Mar 71 [3 of 3]; Box 153; National Security Council (NSC) Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library.

⁵⁰ “Killing Is Our Business and Business Is Good,” *Time*, 22 March 1971.

offensives, proving Vietnamization, building ARVN morale, and building political support for Thieu and Nixon. This 29 March issue also addressed a shift in White House communications strategy to push the president's "human side."⁵¹ The narrative of a bloody ARVN retreat pervaded *Time*'s 5 April issue. A photo of an ARVN soldier hanging onto a helicopter skid appeared in an article titled "Again, the Credibility Gap?" Reporters called ARVN losses "numbing" and wrote that results for Vietnamization were "both encouraging and dismaying." The increasing animosity between the White House and the press also featured in the issue. *Time* staff supported the president of NBC's letter to all members of Congress condemning the administration's discrediting and intimidation of news organizations, as well as NBC news anchor John Chancellor's rare on-air rebuke of the administration. Responding to Nixon's allegations during his 22 March television interview of biased coverage of Lam Son 719, *Time*'s writers argued, "Almost no reporters... were permitted to cover the operation inside Laos anyhow, so the President in effect was criticizing the press for not entirely accepting the official version of the story."⁵²

Newsweek's coverage from 15 March to 7 April largely mirrored that of *Time*. Its 15 March cover story, "The Helicopter War," consisted of articles presenting U.S. pilots in a heroic light. Joseph Morgenstern profiled Sgt. Dennis Fujii, who gave up his helicopter seat to a wounded ARVN and called airstrikes from Laos. Another correspondent, who experienced a rescue first-hand, highlighted a unit nicknamed the "Comancheros." Another journalist agreed with Nixon that "the jury is still out" on Laos, but stressed that the two main issues in the president's 1972 re-election bid will be the Vietnam War and domestic economics. However, the

⁵¹"Laos: The Bloody Battle to Get Out," *Time*, 29 March 1971. "Was It Worth It?" *Time*, 29 March 1971. "Pushing the Human Side," *Time*, The Presidency, 29 March 1971.

⁵²"Again, the Credibility Gap?" *Time*, The Presidency, 5 April 1971. "Indochina: The Invasion Ends," *Time*, 5 April 1971. "TV v. the Pentagon," *Time*, 5 April 1971. "Again, the Credibility Gap?" *Time*, The Presidency, 5 April 1971.

15 March issue also included critiques of Henry Kissinger's seemingly singular control over foreign policy and of a Pentagon briefing on Lam Son 719, during which a spokesman displayed a pipe that turned out to be from a previous operation.⁵³ *Newsweek's* 22 March issue also began raising questions about Lam Son 719. In their coverage of Premier Zhou En Lai's trip to Hanoi, *Newsweek* reporters stressed the NVA's "infinite capacity for pain."⁵⁴

By 29 March, *Newsweek* also used the term "retreat." An article titled "Slugging It Out" noted that "When the fighting died down, the ARVN troops seemed to be scurrying back toward their own border...it seemed more like a plain old-fashioned retreat." The rest of the 29 March issue included pieces on the troubles awaiting Vietnam veterans upon their return home, the dilapidated state of the ARVN's choppers that may have led to the death of *Newsweek's* correspondent Francois Sully, and an opinion piece about the necessity of the draft.⁵⁵ By 5 April, correspondents wrote of "a bitter new pass" in relations between the White House and the press. In an article titled "A Bleak Week for Richard Nixon," journalists wrote that Lam Son 719's "public imagery was irrevocably set by...the reports of decimated South Vietnamese units falling raggedly back under blistering enemy fire, of panicky ARVN soldiers clinging desperately to the skids of outbound U.S. helicopters, [and] of casualties estimated officially at 25 per cent and unofficially at up to 50." By this time, the publication's staff believed that "whether or not [Lam Son 719] is ultimately considered a success, the President has little choice but to act as though it were a triumph." Addressing Nixon's statement that he had never directly contacted media members to complain, *Newsweek* editors responded that while the president may not have made

⁵³ Joseph Morgenstern, "Two Soldiers," *Newsweek*, 15 March 1971. "Just Say It Was the Comancheros," *Newsweek*, 15 March 1971. "Mr. Nixon: 'The Jury Is Still Out,'" *Newsweek*, 15 March 1971. This article on Kissinger included an illustration of Kissinger giving orders to Nixon while sitting in the president's oval office chair. "Who's Secretary of State?" *Newsweek*, 15 March 1971. "P.S. to a Briefing," *Newsweek*, 15 March 1971.

⁵⁴ "An Infinite Capacity For Pain," *Newsweek*, 22 March 1971.

⁵⁵ "Slugging It Out," *Newsweek*, 29 March 1971. "The Vietnam Vet: 'No One Gives a Damn,'" *Newsweek*, 29 March 1971. "Saigon's Choppers: A Crash Waiting To Happen," *Newsweek*, 29 March 1971. Stewart Alsop, "Do We Need An Army?" *Newsweek*, 29 March 1971.

direct contact, “the fusillades directed by Mr. Nixon’s surrogates against TV journalism last week represented the most concerted attack on media since Vice President Spiro Agnew’s celebrated Des Moines speech seventeen months ago.”⁵⁶

U.S. News, a conservative publication that the White House viewed as “favorable to the administration,” published fewer total articles about Lam Son 719 and the Vietnam War in their issues from 15 March to 7 April as compared to *Time* and *Newsweek*.⁵⁷ The articles that *U.S. News* did publish took a positive or at least neutral tone towards Lam Son and the administration, often including direct quotes from administration officials. While the topics and tone of *U.S. News*’s 15 March issue on Laos were similar to those of *Time* and *Newsweek* that week, *U.S. News*’s coverage would subsequently diverge from the other two weeklies. The author of “Struggle in Laos – Biggest Test Yet for South Vietnam,” wrote a neutral assessment of Lam Son 719: “So far the picture from Laos is mixed: not the smashing victory optimists were looking for – but not the defeat some pessimists were predicting.” *U.S. News*’s journalists also noted the infighting between Kissinger, Rogers, and Laird.⁵⁸ However, in the following weeks, *U.S. News* would remain either supportive of the administration, or silent on the war, as compared to the other two weeklies.

Unlike in *Time* and *Newsweek* where Lam Son 719 dominated coverage on 22 March and 29 March, there was almost no mention of the operation in *U.S. News* within those issues. The 22 March publication included one small reference to the Senate’s discussions about “limiting the

⁵⁶ This article also addressed the NBC president’s letters to Congress and John Chancellor’s on-air statement. “A Bleak Week for Richard Nixon,” *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971. “Assessing the Laos Situation,” *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971. “Nixon vs. the Media,” *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971.

⁵⁷ Han writes, “By mid-1970, White House staffers had compiled an extensive list of more than 200 journalists from television, radio, and print, and placed each into one of six categories: Friendly to Administration, Balanced to Favorable, Balanced, Unpredictable, Usually Negative, and Always Hostile. Those considered more favorable to the administration came from conservative publications, such as *U.S. News and World Report*, *Business Week*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.” Han, 58.

⁵⁸ “Struggle in Laos – Biggest Test Yet for South Vietnam,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 15 March 1971. *U.S. News and World Report*, Washington Whispers, 15 March 1971.

President's warmaking powers."⁵⁹ The following week's release discussed Secretary Rogers' ease with numbers and place names in Laos during a recent press conference, which supposedly showed that "Kissinger is not the only man in town who is familiar with foreign affairs." That issue also predicted, incorrectly, that "war headlines will get less prominence" as the ARVN move out of Laos in the weeks ahead. Other articles covered a survey of Americans' feelings about the Vietnam War and addressed problems facing Vietnam veterans.⁶⁰

U.S. News's 5 April issue devoted much more coverage to Laos and the war. An interview with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas Moorer, consisted mainly of administration talking points. In "Balance Sheet on Laos – Victory or Defeat," the writer argued, "Results fell far short of the 'big victory' that was hoped for, but were far from the 'defeat' Hanoi is claiming." "President Nixon is now in a position, as a result of the Laos incursion, to announce in mid-April a fresh withdrawal of American ground troops from South Vietnam," the author concluded. The article also depicted ARVN performance as "mixed but basically encouraging to Saigon," and quoted a U.S. military officer as saying, "Saigon has scored a partial success – but an expensive one." Of note is the article's photo: ARVN orderly awaiting a helicopter pickup, as opposed to hanging on helicopter skids.⁶¹

Newspaper coverage from 18 March to 7 April generally echoed that of *Time* and *Newsweek*, starting with more measured assessments before becoming more critical of the Laotian operation and the Nixon administration. On 18 March, *the New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* all devoted front-page articles to Lam Son 719

⁵⁹ "Problems of Divided Government – Nixon vs. Congress," *U.S. News and World Report*, 22 March.

⁶⁰ *U.S. News and World Report*, Washington Whispers, 29 March 1971. *U.S. News and World Report*, Newsgram, 29 March 1971. "What Americans Are Thinking," *U.S. News and World Report*, 29 March 1971. "Why Vietnam Veterans Feel Like Forgotten Men," *U.S. News and World Report*, 29 March 1971.

⁶¹ "What Next in Indo-China: Interview with Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff," *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 April 1971. "Balance Sheet on Laos – Victory or Defeat," *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 April 1971.

and all took a neutral view.⁶² Among the three publications, the *Times* took a slightly negative tone in its initial coverage and became decidedly negative around 22 March, which is seen most markedly in Saigon Bureau Chief Alvin Shuster's articles. The *Post* remained more neutral in the operation's first week, bifurcated into staunchly pro-administration and anti-administration articles the second week, before returning to a neutral position by the third week. The *Journal* devoted the least amount of coverage to Lam Son 719, though what it did write was negative.⁶³ Most of its reporting on Laos during this period consisted of one paragraph per day in its front-page "What's News" summary section. Considering the Nixon administration's lumping of the *Times* and *Post* into their "Eastern Establishment" list along with *Time* and *Newsweek*, it is surprising that the *Post* devoted considerable space to official statements while the *Journal* did not hold back on criticisms.⁶⁴

The *New York Times* generally trended negatively compared to the other two papers but became much more critical beginning on 22 March. Coverage on or before 21 March acknowledged the difficulties that the ARVN faced and the incongruity between battlefield accounts and official statements. However, *Times* authors refrained from judging the operation a failure. On 18 March, although the *Times* published a photo of an ARVN soldier hanging onto a U.S. helicopter skid and called him a "hitchhiker," the article retained its objectivity and called the situation a "pull out." In that same issue, Alvin Shuster called the fighting "bitter" and quoted a South Vietnamese "associate" of President Thieu as saying that "Nixon will be able to claim it

⁶² "Saigon's Forces Quit Fourth Base in Laos Fighting," *The New York Times*, 18 March 1971. "S. Viets Continue Pullback," *The Washington Post*, 18 March 1971. Peter R. Kann, "Paradox of War: Optimism in Vietnam Fear in Laos Point Up Ambiguities of Battle," *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 1971.

⁶³ A search for "Laos" in *The Wall Street Journal* archives on ProQuest for the period of 18 March to 7 April 1971 yielded one-third of the results as compared to the same search in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

⁶⁴ Han, 58. Vermont C. Royster, the *Journal's* editor until 1971, was a well-established conservative but also one of the first to call for an end to the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. Ann White, "Thinking Things Over: Vermont Royster's Legacy at the Wall Street Journal," *Journalism History (E.W. Scripps School of Journalism)* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 134.

was all a success and thus American boys can go home sooner.”⁶⁵ Around the same time, James Naughton quoted Vice President Agnew as calling Lam Son “an orderly retreat,” and another journalist quoted Pentagon spokesman Jerry Friedheim as saying that the operation was going “according to plan.”⁶⁶ Robert B. Semple wrote about this diverging narrative on 19 March: “Caught between the optimistic comments by the Administration, and the pessimistic but fragmentary details from the field, many observers...conceded uncertainty about the course of the Laotian operation.” By 21 March, Shuster was still asking whether Lam Son 719 was “a triumph or a trap.”⁶⁷

The next day, however, after 2,000 more ARVN troops returned from Laos, Shuster wrote that the “withdrawal...seemed to observers here to come earlier than expected, because of the relentless enemy opposition.” He called Saigon’s latest estimate of captured munitions “questionable at best.”⁶⁸ By 24 March, the bureau chief used the words “losers” and “defeated,” though qualifying the terms, while another article slammed Nixon’s “credibility gap.”⁶⁹ In an article that prompted General Abrams to write an explanatory memo to the White House, Gloria Emerson quoted an ARVN corporal as saying, “The papers and the radio in Saigon kept on saying there was a Laos victory, I have learned now, but what a joke.... We ran out like

⁶⁵ “Saigon’s Forces Quit Fourth Base in Laos Fighting,” *The New York Times*, 18 March 1971. Alvin Shuster, “U.S. Helicopters Lift 1,000 out of Laos; Fighting Is Bitter,” *The New York Times*, 18 March 1971. Alvin Shuster, “Thieu, facing election, sees political gains in Laos drive,” *The New York Times*, 18 March 1971.

⁶⁶ James M. Naughton, “Agnew Says U.S. Would Acknowledge a Laos Defeat,” *The New York Times*, 20 March 1971. “‘According to plan,’ U.S. Says,” *The New York Times*, 18 March 1971.

⁶⁷ Robert B. Semple, “U.S. Cites Gains in Laos Amid Reports of Setbacks,” *The New York Times*, 19 March 1971. Alvin Shuster, “Is the Laos Campaign a Triumph or a Trap?” *The New York Times*, 21 March 1971.

⁶⁸ Alvin Shuster, “2,000 Retreat from Laos, Pursued by Hanoi Units; U.S. Planes Bomb in North,” *The New York Times*, 22 March 1971.

⁶⁹ Alvin Shuster wrote, “The allies are coming out looking like losers, whether they are or not,” and that “the image projected of a defeated South Vietnamese Army is likely to remain.” Alvin Shuster, “The Campaign in Laos: Early Assessment Indicates That Hanoi Won at Least a Propaganda Victory,” *The New York Times*, 24 March 1971. “...Increases the Credibility Gap,” *The New York Times*, 24 March 1971.

wounded dogs.”⁷⁰ In the following days, criticism of the operation turned toward the administration. In a “letter to the editor” published on 27 March, one reader predicted that if Nixon tried to call Lam Son a success, he would lose re-election.⁷¹ On 28 March, James Reston, one of the president’s “bad guys,” wrote that Nixon’s “main problem is not with his personality or with the press, formidable as these problems are, but with his policies on the war and the economy.”⁷² That same day, Alvin Shuster saw “no doubt here that the President would have proceeded with the withdrawals no matter what happened in Laos. Politically, he would seem to have no choice.”⁷³

This criticism of the administration would also lead to criticisms of Vietnamization. On 5 April, Anthony Lewis wrote in the *Times* that the lesson of Laos was that “Vietnamization is now seen to have limited possibilities.” The next day, Don Luce contended that a negotiated political compromise was the only solution that could end the war, while an editorial argued, “Continued claims of success for the Laotian invasion and the Vietnamization program – and the contradictory policy of seeking military victory while American troops are withdrawing – will only tempt the South Vietnamese further down the path to disaster and intensify the highly emotional divisions at home.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Gloria Emerson, “Spirit of Saigon’s Army Shaken in Laos,” *The New York Times*, 28 March 1971. Memo; Kissinger/President, 4 April 1971; folder Vietnam 11 Feb 1971 – 28 Mar 1971 [1 of 3]; Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library.

⁷¹ The author wrote, “the American public will still recognize [Nixon’s] failure as well as his unfulfilled hawkish inclinations.” Edward Jayne, “Laos... ‘One More Such Victory,’” *The New York Times*, Letters to the Editor, 27 March 1971.

⁷² James Reston, “Mr. Nixon: Policy and Propaganda,” *The New York Times*, 28 March 1971. Reston, along with the *Times* and *Post*, is listed as a “media bad guy” in a 9 March 1971 White House Communications Memo. Memorandum; Joanne L. Gordon/George T. Bell; 9 March 1971. Folder Alpha Name Files (1969-1973) Charles Colson March 1971 [2 of 6]; Box 81; White House Special Files: Staff Member Office Files: H.R. Haldeman; Nixon Library.

⁷³ Alvin Shuster, “‘Only Time Will Tell’ Whether Laos Was Worth It,” *The New York Times*, 28 March 1971.

⁷⁴ Anthony Lewis, “The End of the Affair II,” *The New York Times*, 5 April 1971. Don Luce, “How to End the War – Now,” *The New York Times*, 6 April 1971. “The Consequences of Laos,” *The New York Times*, 6 April 1971.

In mid-March, similar to the *Times*' coverage, *The Washington Post* also withheld judgment of the operation. Correspondents acknowledged the difficulties in balancing anecdotal accounts from the front with official statements from Saigon and Washington. A front-page article on 18 March quoted a U.S. helicopter pilot as saying, "from where I'm flying there's only one way to describe it [the ARVN withdrawal from Laos] – retreat, and a bad one." The same article quoted a South Vietnamese spokesman who argued that the move was "tactical," and repeated Pentagon spokesman Friedheim's statement that the operation was proceeding "according to plan."⁷⁵ The following day, *Post* correspondent Peter Jay seemed unprepared to make a final assessment. "At this point, it seems likely that no real evaluation of Lam Son 719...will be possible until well after the operation is over and the troops have been withdrawn."⁷⁶

During the week from 21 to 28 March, the tone of articles in the *Post* diverged markedly into two camps: pro- and anti-administration. Leading the pro-Lam Son/administration camp was conservative columnist Joseph Alsop. On 22 March, Alsop argued that the "reasons for Saigon's decision to begin withdrawal are both obvious and sound." Two days later, when many were questioning the retreat, he still declared that "optimism is in order." On 26 March, Alsop defended Nixon and questioned the media's propagation of a "credibility gap."⁷⁷ Though not as supportive as Alsop, Jack Foisie still called the situation an "orderly withdrawal" in a 24 March

⁷⁵ "S. Viets Continue Pullback," *The Washington Post*, 18 March 1971.

⁷⁶ Peter A. Jay, "Results of Laos Operation Murky Even at the Front," *The Washington Post*, 19 March 1971.

⁷⁷ Joseph Alsop, "Rout Talk Is Nonsense," *The Washington Post*, 22 March 1971. Joseph Alsop, "The Payoff in Laos," *The Washington Post*, 24 March 1971. Joseph Alsop, "On Credibility Gaps," *The Washington Post*, 26 March 1971.

article, while the day before, Chalmers Roberts and Peter Jay both gave the official version of events by quoting directly from Nixon's ABC television interview and ARVN briefers.⁷⁸

In direct contrast to Alsop, another Nixon "bad guy," Joseph Kraft, led the *Post's* anti-Lam Son/administration camp. "It is more than ever doubtful," he wrote on 21 March, "that the South Vietnamese can defend themselves without substantial American help."⁷⁹ Two days later, Kraft criticized Nixon's escalation of the war while claiming to accelerate withdrawals. "With the goal of getting out proclaimed, there is no credible logic for expanding military activities.... The President can no longer take the country in tow on Vietnam simply by saying Forward March."⁸⁰ Peter Osnos, Peter Jay, and Chalmers Roberts each wrote pieces at the month's end criticizing the ARVN's retreat from Laos and describing the Nixon administration's difficulties.⁸¹

However, from 29 March to 7 April, the *Post's* coverage returned to the neutral center. Most articles about Lam Son 719 tended to analyze the administration's next steps with the perspective of political realities. On 29 March, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak believed it was "impossible to offset highly emotionalized accounts of the fighting that dominate the media with immediate evidence of military success."⁸² On 1 April, David Broder offered his pragmatic take: "If South Vietnam can get through this year with its territory relatively secure, and if Mr. Thieu can be re-elected in a relatively honest election, then the stage would be set for Mr. Nixon

⁷⁸ Jack Foisie, "Viet Tanks Fight Way Out of Laos," *The Washington Post*, 24 March 1971. Chalmers M. Roberts, "War Role Ending – Nixon," *The Washington Post*, 23 March 1971. Peter A. Jay, "Military Says Laos Drive Met All Goals," *The Washington Post*, 22 March 1971.

⁷⁹ Joseph Kraft, "The Returns from Laos," *The Washington Post*, 21 March 1971.

⁸⁰ Joseph Kraft, "Nixon's Waning Support," *The Washington Post*, 23 March 1971.

⁸¹ Osnos quoted an American major as saying, "It ended badly and that may turn out to be what matters most." Peter Osnos, "S. Viet Pullout Is Costly," *The Washington Post*, 26 March 1971. Jay wrote, "There was no concealing the fact that [the ARVN] were badly outnumbered and in rapid retreat." Peter A. Jay, "It's Hard to Rid Lam Son of Stigma," *The Washington Post*, 28 March 1971. Chalmers M. Roberts, "Nixon on the Defensive," *The Washington Post*, 28 March 1971.

⁸² Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Laos: The Last Hurrah," *The Washington Post*, 29 March 1971.

to adopt George Aiken's long-standing advice to 'declare victory and get out.'"⁸³ On 5 April, Marquis Childs claimed that the "objectives of the Laos operation were 75 to 80 per cent achieved." Childs also provided some insight into the administration's plan for the 7 April address, writing that the president's advisors "know the country is being torn apart not only by the war but by all the dire events of the decade of the '60s."⁸⁴

Although the *Wall Street Journal* had the least coverage of Lam Son 719 among the three papers, the articles it did publish from 18 March to 7 April were negative about the operation and remained so throughout the period. Peter Kann struck a measured tone for his front-page story on 18 March. "Despite the ARVN retreats of recent days, military officials in Vietnam believe they already have seriously disrupted the North Vietnamese army supply line and thus the enemy's future plans." Writers of the *Journal's* "What's News" section on 19 March labeled the operation a "retreat" and the issue's "Washington Wire" section predicted the "results in Laos will be less than Washington wanted, though officials will claim successes." On 24 March, Robert Keatley questioned the White House's official statements and assumptions but wrote that the White House "seems honestly to believe" in Vietnamization and value of Lam Son 719.⁸⁵

On 26 March, John Pierson attributed Nixon's public optimism to either a lie to "disguise real uneasiness," or the White House being "isolated from reality." Three days later, Peter Kann and Richard Levine questioned the administration's motives. "Troop withdrawals – pegged more to political pressures in the States than to military realities in Indochina – will doubtless

⁸³ David S. Broder, "Mr. Nixon and Vietnamization," *The Washington Post*, 1 April 1971.

⁸⁴ Marquis Childs, "Nixon Must Sell Success in Laos," *The Washington Post*, 5 April 1971.

⁸⁵ Peter R. Kann, "Paradox of War: Optimism in Vietnam Fear in Laos Point Up Ambiguities of Battle," *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 1971. *The Wall Street Journal*, What's News, 19 March 1971. *The Wall Street Journal*, Washington Wire, 19 March 1971. Robert Keatley, "Administration Sees Time Bought by Drive in Laos as Vital to Nixon Policy Success," *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 March 1971.

continue, or even accelerate, as they probably would have whether the Laos operation had ended in a clearcut victory or defeat.”⁸⁶

During this period, the *Journal* devoted significant space to covering political challenges to Nixon’s policies, such as calls by Democratic Senators Mike Mansfield and Ted Kennedy to end the war, as well as Republican Congressman Pete McCloskey’s demands for transparency during his trip to Vietnam.⁸⁷ Other articles discussed the shift in domestic political sentiment with the failure of Laos. Norman Miller quoted a Democratic congressman on 31 March, who argued that “people are just too angry about the war for there to be a political risk in opposing the President.” Quoting another congressman, Miller continued, “There’s an increasing demand to get out of Vietnam regardless of the consequences.”⁸⁸ The *Journal*’s 7 April “What’s News” summary, published the morning of Nixon’s television address, read, “There has been a swelling of sentiment in Congress to name a date for total withdrawal, and polls have shown Nixon’s popularity slipping.”⁸⁹

While a few publications, such as *U.S. News* and *The Chicago Tribune*, were more supportive of the administration’s claims of success in Lam Son 719, most other print and television media mirrored the negativity represented in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.⁹⁰ Even with restrictions imposed, journalists

⁸⁶ John Pierson, “Nixon on the Spot: Times May Be Gloomy But No Air of Gloom Pervades White House,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 March 1971. Peter R. Kann and Richard J. Levine, “Assessing Laos; The Invasion Is Seen As Inconclusive Chapter In an Inconclusive War,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 1971. Giving insight into American media attitudes towards the region, in this same issue, Kann wrote a condescending “travelogue” of Laos, which included the following line: “For truly dedicated dog-lovers, packs of mange-ridden mongrels [bayed] their passions into the fetid evening air.” Peter R. Kann, “Savannakhet, Laos: A Bad Place to Visit, But a Bad Place to Live,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 1971.

⁸⁷ *The Wall Street Journal*, What’s News, 22 March 1971. *The Wall Street Journal*, What’s News, 26 March 1971. *The Wall Street Journal*, What’s News, 29 March 1971. *The Wall Street Journal*, What’s News, 6 April 1971.

⁸⁸ 31 March Norman C. Miller “Nixon’s Vietnam Policy is Rapidly Losing Support of Democratic Members in House,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 March 1971.

⁸⁹ *The Wall Street Journal*, What’s News, 7 April 1971.

⁹⁰ An example of the *Chicago Tribune*’s reporting is a 4 April article by Aldo Beckman. During a time when other papers were heavily criticizing the operation, Beckman stated, “The fact that the Communists’ intense defense of the

found their way around them, such as Japanese photographer Akihiko Okamura on assignment with *Life*, who snuck into Laos for two weeks with ARVN troops. The resulting images and reporting, because of their scarcity, garnered attention and exacerbated the negative coverage.⁹¹

Television coverage often was more negative than print media. The high-profile spat between NBC and the White House in early April 1971, culminating in NBC President Julian Goodman's letter to all members of Congress condemning the administration's intimidation of news organizations and NBC news anchor John Chancellor's unprecedented on-air criticism of the administration, epitomized this fractured relationship. The acrimony extended to other networks as well, such as when Vice President Agnew, on behalf of the administration, attacked CBS for their documentary "The Selling of the Pentagon," which exposed the Pentagon's public affairs budget and activities.⁹² For an administration that already distrusted the media, the press's negativity towards the Laos operation appeared to be spoiling a success for Vietnamization and required a proactive response.

Ho Chi Minh Trail caused them to expend many of the supplies that were heading for South Vietnam and Cambodia has convinced administration analysts that the Laos drive was about 70 per cent successful, and left the United States significantly better off militarily." Aldo Beckman, "Nixon Weighs Reports on Laos Incursion," *The Chicago Tribune*, 4 April 1971.

⁹¹ Akihiko Okamura, "The War In Laos," *Life*, 12 March 1971.

⁹² Weeklies covering the NBC/White House antagonism in April 1971 included *Time* and *Newsweek*. "TV v. the Pentagon," *Time*, 5 April 1971. "A Bleak Week for Richard Nixon," *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971. Hammond states, "There remained, nevertheless, a strong undercurrent of questioning, especially on television." Hammond, 478. Hammond points out that the poorly-received documentary "would probably have disappeared forever from public consciousness but for the Nixon administration's sensitivity to the criticism that continued to accompany the [Laos] incursion. For in the days that followed the seizure of Tchepone, the operation in Laos began to disintegrate, leading the White House staff to cast about for some means both to discredit its critics in the press and to save face.... 'The Selling of the Pentagon' seemed tailor-made to the purpose." Hammond, 463.

Chapter 3: The White House Response to Negativity towards Lam Son 719

While the White House dealt with other competing international and domestic issues between 18 March and 7 April, Lam Son 719 remained at the forefront.⁹³ Also, President Nixon took the systematic tracking of and response to media to an unprecedented level. Political scientist Lori Cox Han notes how the Nixon administration was the first to open a White House Communications Office, separate from the Press Office, to deal with long-term strategies. It was also the first administration to produce daily news summaries. “For better or worse,” Han points out, “Nixon’s advisors changed the way that the White House attempted to manage the image of the president as well as manage the press.”⁹⁴ In one such news summary from 18 March, White House staff flagged an unflattering article from syndicated columnist and prominent member of the White House “Bad Guys List” James Reston in the *Detroit Free Press*. The president underlined a quote on the summary, “Nixon invaded Laos without a single word to the American people” and wrote a note to Henry Kissinger that Reston “should be nailed for this. Didn’t he object to ‘rhetoric’ of Cambodia?”⁹⁵ Nixon closely tracked domestic media down to individual journalists, and directed staff to take specific, targeted action in response.

By mid-March, the White House communications team became well aware of the increasingly negative press coverage of Lam Son 719. NSC staff described media reports as “gloomy and loud” and emotions at the White House as “widespread nervousness.”⁹⁶ The administration had already begun promoting positive assessments of the situation in Laos among

⁹³ A section on Laos appeared at the top of all but one Presidential Daily Briefing from the NSC from 18 March until 6 April. President’s Daily Briefs 18 March 1971 to 6 April 1971; folders [01] President’s Daily Brief, March 15-31, 1971 [1 of 2] and [02] President’s Daily Briefs, Apr. 1, 1971-Apr. 16, 1971 [2 of 2]; Box 32; NSC Files: President’s Daily Briefs; Nixon Library.

⁹⁴ Han, 57.

⁹⁵ Digest of Recent News Comment, March 18, 1971 page 2; folder Annotated News Summaries, March 1971 (2 of 2); Box 30; White House Special Files: President’s Office Files: Annotated News Summaries, 1969-1973; Nixon Library.

⁹⁶ Cable; Dick Kennedy/Alexander Haig; 17 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library.

Cabinet officials and Members of Congress.⁹⁷ The increasingly antagonistic relationship between the administration and the press, which peaked during Lam Son, had escalated to the point where Nixon, Kissinger, and other staff were blaming the press for an anti-administration, even anti-American, bias. During a 17 March telephone conversation, President Nixon fumed over “these smart son-of-a-bitching reporters. I really think some of them are trying to serve Hanoi now.” Kissinger agreed. “I believe they have a vested interest in our losing.”⁹⁸ During another phone call with Kissinger two days later, Nixon retained his anger. “The press is panting so that they can make it [Lam Son 719] into a defeat.”⁹⁹ For the administration, negative coverage of Lam Son was yet another example of the liberal press’s anti-Nixon bias, to which they had to respond with strength.¹⁰⁰

With negative reports streaming in, Nixon and Kissinger sent Deputy National Security Advisor Alexander Haig to South Vietnam from 14 to 21 March to get a first-hand read of the situation. Publicly, Kissinger wrote to Ambassador Bunker that the reason for the trip was “to provide a general assessment of the situation in Southeast Asia and to obtain [Bunker’s] views on a number of long range issues.” Privately, Nixon was considering firing Abrams, possibly

⁹⁷ Vice President Agnew continued his attacks on CBS while Henry Kissinger and Admiral Moorer briefed Members of Congress. By 29 March, the White House communications staff tallied 32 anti-press and pro-Lam Son speeches in Congress. Hammond, 479-481.

⁹⁸ Telephone Conversation Transcript (hereafter, Telcon); Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 7:43pm, 17 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 13-18, March 1971 (2 of 2): Box 9; Henry A. Kissinger Telcons (hereafter, Kissinger Telcons); Nixon Library.

⁹⁹ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 8:35pm, 19 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (1 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹⁰⁰ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 10:50am, 20 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. On this phone call, Nixon said to Kissinger regarding negative television coverage, “We will just knock it right out of the box. First Abrams will hit it, then Bunker, and then I will hit it.” Addressing this perceived press bias, Nixon wrote in his 1978 memoirs, “The war changed Lyndon Johnson’s press from highly positive to overwhelmingly negative and poisoned my own relations with the press throughout my Presidency.” Nixon, *RN*, 254. Alexander Haig also mentioned this bias to military colleagues during his trip to South Vietnam in mid-March. Hammond, 472.

even replacing him with Haig.¹⁰¹ In his memoirs, Haig recalls two main conclusions based on his trip: “First, the South Vietnamese troops, though in some cases poorly led by their higher-ranking officers, had fought bravely and performed well. Second, U.S. fire support and close air support had been inadequate.... This resulted in casualty rates among South Vietnamese troops that no American commander would have countenanced.” Kissinger later described Haig’s trip as putting “an end to all illusions” that the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces could still turn Lam Son into a success.¹⁰²

Upon arriving in Saigon, Haig met with Bunker and Abrams. His conversations with the ambassador and MACV commander included a maximum troop withdrawal number, guarding against leaks, and a possible meeting between Nixon and Thieu in July. Haig described Bunker as “enthusiastic and confident.”¹⁰³ After returning from a day-trip to Cambodia, Haig visited I Corps, the one was responsible for Lam Son 719 of the ARVN’s four corps. This visit to the front convinced Haig that the best the United States could hope for by this point in the operation was an orderly withdrawal to avoid a complete failure. He reported that “ARVN enthusiasm for [the] continuation of Lam Son 719 is completely lacking” and apologized to Kissinger that he

¹⁰¹ Cable; Kissinger/Bunker, 12 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library. Nixon aide H.R. Haldeman wrote in his diary on 23 March that Nixon and Kissinger felt “that they were misled by Abrams on the original evaluation of what might be accomplished [in Lam Son 719], and that Abrams went ahead with his plan even though it was clear that it wasn’t working.... They concluded that they should pull Abrams out, but then the P [President] made the point that this is the end of the military operations anyway, so what difference does it make.” H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1994), 259. Haig writes in his memoirs that Nixon initially told him to relieve Abrams on this trip. Haig, 275. Willbanks notes that Lewis Sorley disputed this, citing a Kissinger interview in 1989 to the contrary. Willbanks, 175.

¹⁰² Haig, 276. Kissinger, 1008.

¹⁰³ Cable Drafts; Haig/Kissinger, both are undated but the Bunker and Abrams meetings occurred on the morning and afternoon of 16 March 1971, respectively: folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library. Kissinger subsequently forwarded both with highlights to the president the same day. Memos; Kissinger/Nixon; 16 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library.

could not give a “more encouraging report.”¹⁰⁴ Haig’s meeting with President Thieu the next day appeared less pessimistic “I do not feel we need to be in the least defensive about Lam Son 719,” Haig reported back home. “It has achieved most of what we had hoped for and those involved here all are confident that it was well worth the price of admission – albeit a high one.” Thieu explained that his modifications to the original plan were due to the unexpected strength of the NVA and the ARVN’s heavy losses, and bemoaned “the great amount of pessimistic and distorted reporting which he attributed primarily to foreign reporters in South Vietnam.” Haig also sensed that local ARVN commanders would withdraw early, even if Thieu directed otherwise.¹⁰⁵

Though frustrating, the negative press reports should not have been surprising to the White House. In his 12 February diary entry, which described Nixon’s order to restrict media access to American and South Vietnamese helicopters, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Moorer, explained the president’s fear of American households being exposed to “gory pictures” if “reporters and news men [are allowed to run] loose in the battle zone.”¹⁰⁶ As these efforts, along with MACV’s press embargo, failed to dampen the media’s backlash, Nixon spent most of the three weeks from 18 March to 7 April dealing with the aftermath.

While acknowledging that instances of panicking ARVN did occur, Nixon tried to shift focus to the ARVN units who withdrew orderly. On a 17 March phone call, Admiral Moorer

¹⁰⁴ Cable Draft; Haig/Kissinger, undated but visit occurred on 18 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library.

¹⁰⁵ Cable Draft: Haig/Kissinger, undated but meeting happened on afternoon of 19 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library. Memorandum of Conversation; Thieu/Bunker/Abrams/Haig, 19 March 1971 5:30pm; folder Vietnam 11 Feb 1971 – 28 Mar 1971 [1 of 3]; Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library. While Thieu appears to be criticizing MACV intelligence with his suggestion of “unexpected strength of the NVA,” U.S. Army post-operation evaluations blamed the ARVN I Corps commanders for not changing tactics quickly in the face of “strong enemy reaction, political directions, and slowness in execution by some [ARVN] units.” United States Department of Defense, Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC), MACV 1971 Command History Volume 2, E-37. Accessed through <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a955421.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ FRUS, Volume VII, Document 127.

assured the president that media reports of ARVN “fleeing” a firebase in Laos were inaccurate, to which Nixon responded, “This is just a typical newspaper story.”¹⁰⁷ Two days later, Nixon and Kissinger said that the majority of ARVN soldiers conducted themselves honorably, though both appeared to be more hopeful than factual.

“Nixon: It seems to me they [ARVN] are doing very well.
Kissinger: They are doing it in a very professional way.
Nixon: No panicing [*sic*] or running.
Kissinger: The other side is suffering very heavy losses too.”¹⁰⁸

The argument that panicking soldiers represented only a minority of ARVN troops translated into part of the messaging strategy for a television interview on 22 March with ABC network’s Howard K. Smith.

The 22 March Interview

A week before the Smith interview, Nixon received a letter from Private First Class Clyde Baker, a soldier stationed in South Vietnam who was supporting Lam Son 719. Using the analogy of a “cowboy backing out of a saloon with guns blazing,” Baker viewed the decision to embark upon Lam Son 719 as an honorable way to withdraw from the Vietnam War. He contrasted this with “walking out and getting shot in the back.” This letter from a junior soldier not only made it to the president’s desk but also apparently made a big enough impression for Nixon to write, “Excellent ltr! H [Haldeman] – can’t we get one like this out to a columnist?”¹⁰⁹ Themes from Baker’s letter, such as the good-guy, gunslinger mentality and the linking of Lam Son 719 to the greater effort to withdraw from Vietnam, eventually would extend into talking points for Nixon’s interview.

¹⁰⁷ FRUS, Volume VII, Document 152.

¹⁰⁸ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 8:35pm, 19 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (1 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹⁰⁹ Letter to the President; PFC Clyde N. Baker; folder President’s Office Files: President’s Handwriting; March 16-31, 1971 [1 of 4]; Box 9; White House Special Files: President’s Office Files: President’s Handwriting; Nixon Library.

In a 20 March telephone call with Kissinger, Nixon said that he would focus “on the philosophy side” of the argument on Laos and instructed Kissinger not to “talk about victory or defeat,” but to focus on Lam Son’s contribution to Vietnamization.¹¹⁰ Calling Kissinger on the morning of the interview, Nixon latched onto a statistic from General Abrams that “4 of 22 [ARVN divisions] were below par,” which he considered a “good average.” Nixon then reminded Kissinger that he “will be careful not to use victory or success so it won’t look like whistling in the dark.”¹¹¹

The most consistent theme of Nixon’s 22 March interview was media bias. In a typical example, Nixon said, “It is probably true, that I have less, as somebody has said, supporters in the press than any president.” In addition to periodically returning to this theme, Nixon accomplished four main objectives in addressing Lam Son 719 during the interview. First, he avoided assessing the operation as either a victory or defeat by redefining success in terms of the greater Vietnam War. As Nixon reasoned, “We cannot judge it even after it is concluded.” Second, Nixon addressed the coverage of fleeing ARVN soldiers by attributing these actions to a small minority. “While a picture doesn’t lie, a picture may not tell all the truth.... They have shown only those men in the four ARVN battalions of 22 that were in trouble.” Third, Nixon took a long-term philosophical justification for the war. Addressing why he could not simply withdraw U.S. troops, he explained that if “the Communists took over South Vietnam...peace...would suffer a blow from which it might not recover.” Lastly, Nixon lowered expectations for the future. While the United States would try to end America’s involvement in

¹¹⁰ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 10:30am, 20 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (1 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹¹¹ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 3:35pm, 22 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

Vietnam in a way that ensures South Vietnam's survival, he also cautioned, "We can't guarantee their survival." This was a telling admission and a significant shift from previous statements.¹¹²

According to both the administration and media, the President did well. The day after the interview, U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker told Kissinger that he heard that the interview was "very good—excellent," and that the South Vietnamese people "are strongly supporting the action in Laos." Nixon media consultants Mark Goode and Bill Carruthers wrote to Haldeman the same day that "the discussion itself went very well," though they were not pleased with camera angles and lighting. H.R. Haldeman wrote in his diary the night of the interview that it "went extremely well on TV; staff reaction was very good." The president's words immediately became the updated talking points for Lam Son 719 throughout the various public affairs offices of the Departments of State and Defense.¹¹³

Military historian William Hammond found that the "news media accepted Nixon's claim that the final results of the incursion would become apparent only months in the future, making it a theme in the weeks that followed. They nevertheless questioned a number of the president's other assertions."¹¹⁴ Some of those questions came from *The Washington Post's* Chalmers Roberts and *The New York Times's* Robert Semple and Tom Wicker. The authors' areas of doubt included Nixon's troop withdrawal timeline, his suggestion of unfair media coverage, and his claims that an objective of Lam Son 719 was to save American lives.¹¹⁵ Each of the weeklies

¹¹² Nixon, 22 March Interview.

¹¹³ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Ellsworth Bunker; 7:10pm, 23 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Memorandum; Mark Goode/H.R. Haldeman; 23 March 1971; folder H.R. Haldeman: Alpha Name Files (1969-1973): Dwight Chapin March 1971 [1 of 2]: Box 81; White House Special Files: Staff Member Office Files: H.R. Haldeman; Nixon Library. Haldeman, 259. Memorandum; Jerry Friedham/Deputy Secretary of Defense; 23 March 1971; folder WSAG Intelligence on NVN Supply 3-16-1971; Box H-80; NSC Institutional ("H") Files: Meeting Files (1969-1974): WSAG Meetings; Nixon Library.

¹¹⁴ Hammond, 481.

¹¹⁵ Chalmers M. Roberts, "War Role Ending –Nixon: Promises Clue In April to 'End of Tunnel,'" *The Washington Post*, 23 March 1971. Robert B. Semple Jr., "Nixon Suggests Press Distorts Reality," *The New York Times*, 23 March 1971. Tom Wicker, "Kick Them Off The Skids," *The New York Times*, 23 March 1971.

also mentioned Nixon's 22 March interview, though they focused more on the interview's role in White House communication, and less on its content about Laos. *Time* portrayed the interview as part of a public relations "effort to show the President's personal side." *Newsweek* left open the possibility that time would prove Lam Son to have been "worthwhile," but criticized Nixon's on-air claims that he has never contacted media to affect coverage. *U.S. News and World Report*, continuing its favorable coverage of the administration, chose to print seven paragraphs from the official White House transcript of the interview without further editorializing.¹¹⁶ In perhaps the most telling sign that the interview was a win for Nixon, interviewer Howard K. Smith said in 1997 that he regretted not asking tougher questions and standing firmer against the president back in 1971.¹¹⁷

The White House believed that the Smith interview successfully reframed the debate over Lam Son 719 enough to quell the media's negative reports. During the following week, the Nixon team began to shift their message. On 24 March, Nixon told Kissinger, in preparation for Kissinger's breakfast meeting with conservative journalist Stewart Alsop the next day, "You can be more off beat than I was. I never used success or victory but now we can say [Lam Son 719] was a success." Nixon then explained his parameters for calling the operation a success: "in terms of their losses against ours and cut supplies and in terms of guarantee of American withdrawal and reducing threat and strengthening SVN [South Vietnamese] morale and

¹¹⁶ "Pushing the Human Side," *Time*, The Presidency, 29 March 1971. "A Bleak Week for Richard Nixon," *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971. "Nixon vs. the Media," *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971. "President's Own Appraisal of the Laos Operation," *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 April 1971.

¹¹⁷ Howard K. Smith, Interview With George Herman, 24 October 1997. Online by the Television Academy Foundation. <https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/howard-k-smith>. As an example, Smith said that he asked Nixon three times what the legal basis was for the United States to remain in Vietnam after Congress repealed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution only to be given vague answers each time. He found out later that Nixon called aide Chuck Colson at home that evening to ask for the correct answer, which the White House subsequently provided to ABC in writing.

Vietnamization.”¹¹⁸ Through this seemingly casual brainstorming over the phone, Nixon outlined multiple strands of argument in favor of Lam Son, which would form the basis of the White House’s preparations over the next few weeks. These included: the operation’s support of a U.S. withdrawal, numbers of enemy killed, captured and wounded, numbers of enemy supplies captured or destroyed, reducing the North Vietnamese threat, strengthening of South Vietnamese morale, and Vietnamization.

During the ABC interview, Nixon claimed that one benefit of Lam Son was that “the risk to American lives is substantially reduced, and that is why the support of that operation was worthwhile, in my opinion.” It seems likely that the president bet that the American public, while sympathetic to the South Vietnamese cause, cared more about their own fathers and sons. This was met with disapproval from the press. In a 23 March *New York Times* article, journalist Tom Wicker quoted an American pilot as saying that in at least one instance, to fly his helicopter, he had to kick clinging ARVN soldiers off of the skids. Wicker used this metaphor of pushing aside the South Vietnamese “so the American bird can fly” as an “epitaph of the Laotian invasion” and a criticism of President Nixon’s argument to save American lives.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, the administration pushed the point—the operation was saving American lives because it allowed for U.S. troop withdrawals.

Beginning a few months after taking office in 1969, President Nixon systematically drew down the number of U.S. combat troops in Vietnam. Before the Nixon administration, the number of authorized U.S. troops in Vietnam steadily increased for eight consecutive years, rising most dramatically from under 50,000 at the beginning of 1965 to a peak of nearly 550,000 in April 1969. Through four separate announcements over 1969 and 1970, Nixon progressively

¹¹⁸ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 4:35pm, 24 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (2 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹¹⁹ Nixon, 22 March Interview. Tom Wicker, “Kick Them Off The Skids,” *The New York Times*, 23 March 1971.

reduced troop numbers, reaching a promised cap of 284,000 by 1 May 1971.¹²⁰ Similarly, combat deaths of U.S. troops in Vietnam, which increased before Nixon took office, declined from an average of 279 per week on 20 January 1969 to 46 per week by early 1971.¹²¹ A primary part of Nixon's messaging after Lam Son was that the administration would continue this trend toward the American military's ultimate departure from Vietnam.

In a clear nod to the administration's focus on troop numbers, White House and State Department staff referred to the president's 7 April address as a "Troop Withdrawal Statement" in memos.¹²² No matter the outcome of Lam Son 719, President Nixon planned to use the incursion as an opportunity to announce another acceleration of troop withdrawals. That would be "proof" to the American people of success both in Laos and in Vietnamization. However, determining this final number would require the balancing of competing demands. On the one hand, the White House had an American public and a Congress insisting on the complete removal of U.S. troops as soon as possible. On the other, the South Vietnamese and U.S. military needed as many troops as possible to remain for as long as possible to ensure the security of South Vietnam.

¹²⁰ On 3 November 1969 (the "Silent Majority" speech), President Nixon announced the withdrawal of 20% of troops (approximately 100,000) by 15 December 1969. On 15 December 1969, he announced another reduction in 115,500 troops by 15 April 1970. On 20 April 1970, another 150,000 troops would return home in the next twelve months. On 3 June 1970, Nixon clarified that he would withdraw another 50,000 troops by 15 October 1970. "President Richard Nixon's 14 Addresses to the Nation on Vietnam," Online by the Richard Nixon Foundation. <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2017/09/president-richard-nixons-14-addresses-nation-vietnam>. "Authorized Troop Level in South Vietnam," undated; folder President's April, 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

¹²¹ This number represents the average per week over the previous twelve months. "U.S. Combat Deaths in Southeast Asia," undated; folder President's April, 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

¹²² Memo; Clark MacGregor/Henry Kissinger; 1 April 1971; folder President's April, 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library. A State Department Memo labeled the speech a "Vietnam Troop Reduction Announcement." Memo; Theodore L. Eliot/Henry Kissinger; 1 April 1971; folder President's April, 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

One purpose of Alexander Haig's March 1971 trip to Vietnam and Cambodia was to discuss troop numbers in detail on the ground.¹²³ After his discussions with General Abrams on 16 March, Haig questioned whether the White House and MACV plan, which had 60,000 U.S. troops remaining by 1 September 1972, would be sufficient. Although he felt 60,000 might be too low, Haig believed that maintaining a troop level between 60,000 and 90,000 in South Vietnam by 1 September 1972 was an "acceptable risk" given how far ARVN capabilities had progressed. On Haig's recommendation, Kissinger passed this range to the president. This translated to a reduction of approximately 224,000 to 194,000 troops from 1 May 1971 to 1 September 1972. Haig also pointed out that the United States "must be prepared to compensate with additional financial assistance" for the negative impact American base closures and reduced personnel would have on the South Vietnamese economy. In Ambassador Bunker's words, the United States would be "trading millions for billions." After his meeting with Haig, Abrams sent a memo to the Secretary of Defense with a recommendation to make four separate smaller announcements about withdrawal rates instead of one large announcement to "best preserve flexibility" and not provide the enemy with the "encouragement" that a large announcement might. Still, Abrams' memo suggested removing 224,000 total troops by 1 September 1972. This represented an average of 14,000 troops per month but Abrams assumed that only one-third of these troops would be withdrawn in 1971.¹²⁴

¹²³ Discussion of troop withdrawals with Abrams is on the top of a list entitled "Items To Be Covered During Trip to Southeast Asia," which Haig sent to Kissinger the day before his departure. Memo; Alexander Haig/Henry Kissinger; 13 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library.

¹²⁴ Cable Draft; Haig/Kissinger, undated but the Abrams meeting occurred on the afternoon of 16 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library. The cable draft containing Abrams's recommendation of four separate announcements was also housed in the same folder, and was also undated. Haig also discussed troop withdrawals with Ambassador Bunker in a meeting on the same day. Bunker recommended that President Nixon announce a withdrawal of 30,000 troops for the short period from 1 May to 1 July 1971, with the thought that Presidents Nixon and Thieu meet in July. At that meeting, Thieu could announce that "he will no longer require U.S. ground forces" for security, but only "air and technical, logistics and intelligence support." Cable Draft; Haig/Kissinger, undated but the Bunker meeting occurred on the

By late March of 1971, the average withdrawal rate was 12,500 troops per month. If this “run rate” continued, the U.S. troop level in South Vietnam would fall to 221,500 by 1 October 1971, and 87,500 total troops would depart between 1 May and 1 December 1971. Many in the press understood remarks from Nixon’s 22 March television interview to mean that he would, at a minimum, hold the run rate and would announce an end-date for the American presence in Vietnam during his April address.¹²⁵ However, Nixon and Kissinger believed that they needed to announce not only a maintenance of the run rate but an acceleration just to hold American public opinion at bay. On the opposing side, President Thieu and the U.S. military imposed a ceiling on the number of personnel that could be sent home. The administration had promised Thieu, through Ambassador Bunker, that at least 200,000 U.S. troops would remain in South Vietnam through Thieu’s re-election bid on 7 October 1971. While this number was achievable under the run rate, a request from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to lower withdrawals to 8,000 per month for the rest of 1971 was not.¹²⁶

By 29 March, Nixon and Kissinger decided to increase the withdrawal rate to just over 14,000 troops per month to total 100,000 troops to be removed from South Vietnam between 1 May and 1 December 1971. This would preserve the troop level at just over 200,000 for Thieu’s re-election, and bring the total troop level down to 184,000 by 1 December. The president and Kissinger reasoned that the key to producing maximum positive reception from the public was to

morning of 16 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library.

¹²⁵ Chalmers Roberts quoted Nixon as saying “I know when we’re going to get out. We have a plan.” Chalmers M. Roberts, “War Role Ending –Nixon: Promises Clue In April to ‘End of Tunnel,’” *The Washington Post*, 23 March 1971. Secretary Laird and Henry Kissinger had a very heated phone conversation on 23 March during which Laird referred to this article as an example of the public’s expectation for the 7 April announcement. Kissinger refuted that this was the president’s intention. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Melvin Laird; 9:16am, 23 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹²⁶ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; Afternoon, 29 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. In speaking about the Joint Chiefs’ request to lower withdrawals to “75,000 by the end of the year,” (averaging just over 9,000 per month) Nixon said, “The Joint Chiefs, Abrams and all the rest are going to have to start growing up now.” On a 3 April call with Kissinger, Laird mentioned an even lower rate of 8,000 per month. FRUS, Volume VII, Document 174.

keep the number a secret. In his dispatches back from South Vietnam, Alexander Haig already was reminding the president and Kissinger to be careful about leaks regarding withdrawal numbers. “Its premature surfacing,” he warned, “could have a disastrous effect on Thieu’s election chances and whole stability of [South Vietnam].” Haig thought that leaks could also deny Nixon a “major campaign coup” back at home.¹²⁷

The president worried about leaks regarding the withdrawal rate seriously enough to send a memo to Secretary of State William Rogers, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, and CIA Director Richard Helms. The presidential directive warned their agencies that “there should be no speculation either on or off the record on the size of the increment or the length of time it covers.” This appeared to have been directed at Secretary Laird, who Nixon and Kissinger suspected of leaking to the press that the president would announce an increase to the withdrawal rate. During a heated phone call with Kissinger on 23 March, Laird also pushed for the president to announce a deadline for final withdrawal. Further illustrating Laird’s frayed relationship with the president and National Security Advisor, during a conversation in which Kissinger likened Laird to “a little boy with his hand in the cookie jar,” Nixon and Kissinger discussed feeding misinformation to Laird and asking him to pass that false information to the press. Even though Nixon already decided that he would announce an increase in the total withdrawal number to 100,000 troops, he planned for Kissinger to tell Laird that the president intended to maintain the

¹²⁷ It appears that Nixon and Kissinger kept this number even from most of the Cabinet as Kissinger told Secretary of State Rogers as late as 6 April to act surprised when the president announced the 100,000 number to Cabinet members on noon the next day. Telcon; Secretary Rogers/Dr. Kissinger; 6 April 1971 9:35am; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (1 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. H.R. Haldeman, one of the few knowledgeable about the withdrawal number prior to 7 April, wrote in his notes from 3 April regarding this number that “this is the least P [President Nixon] can do and also the most Thieu can stand.” Handwritten Note; H.R. Haldeman; 3 April 1971; folder Personal Files (1969-1973) H Notes Jan-March ’71 [Feb 15, 1971 to March 31, 1971] Part II [4 of 5]; Box 37; White House Special Files: Staff Member Office Files: H.R. Haldeman; Nixon Library. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; Afternoon, 29 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Cable Draft; Haig/Kissinger, undated but the Abrams meeting occurred on the afternoon of 16 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library.

lower run rate number of 87,500, ask Laird to pass this to the press, and inform Laird at the latest possible opportunity that the president “changed his mind.”¹²⁸ This strategy of secrecy did not appear to prevent all leaks. On 2 April, NSC staffer Jon Howe excerpted an ABC TV news segment that quoted “White House sources” as predicting an acceleration of the withdrawal rate to 16,000, and even up to 20,000 per month, well above the run rate and even above the rate Nixon already planned to announce.¹²⁹

Other administration allies pushed for the president to announce a final deadline, believing that the focus on the withdrawal rate was futile in efforts to satisfy the public’s demand to end the war. NSC staffer W.R. Smyser, a former State Department diplomat, wrote to Kissinger that after a survey of members of Congress and Washington insiders, he believed that even a “substantial increase” in the withdrawal rate would neither help the president buy time nor would it increase domestic support. If Nixon was not yet prepared to announce a time limit, Smyser recommended that he explain why setting a deadline would harm U.S. interests. Echoing Smyser’s push for a total troop withdrawal, Senator John Sherman Cooper, co-author of the Cooper-Church Amendment, told Kissinger that the president “will have to say that they [U.S. troops] are going to come out. It keeps tension in the country up. That’s one of the problems.” Former congressman and White House congressional advisor Clark MacGregor reported that

¹²⁸ Memo; Nixon/Secretary of State/Secretary of Defense/CIA director; 18 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Melvin Laird; 9:16am, 23 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; Afternoon, 29 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. On a 3 April call, Laird asked Kissinger to tell the president that he could increase the withdrawal rate from 12,500 to 15,000 per month “if he feels he really has to,” to which Kissinger, with the knowledge that Nixon would indeed increase the rate, responded, “Well, I don’t think that that’s his mood. But I’ll tell him that.” FRUS, Volume VII, Document 174. Robert Brigham chronicles the animosity between Kissinger and other cabinet officials. Referring to the planning stages of Lam Son 719 in December of 1970, Brigham writes, “Throughout his tenure as national security advisor, Kissinger would repeatedly propose policies that he knew Laird and Rogers would reject, so as to win favor with the president.” Robert K. Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), 139.

¹²⁹ Memo; Jon Howe/Alexander Haig; 2 April 1971; folder President’s April 7, 1971 Speech (Memo’s + Misc.) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

even “hawkish” congressmen were pushing for a promise of no new deployments to Vietnam in conjunction with an acceleration in withdrawals. MacGregor hoped that Nixon’s 7 April statement would be “different in degree and kind,” not simply stating a troop number and date as the president had done in previous statements.¹³⁰

Within this debate about troop withdrawals, administration officials also mulled eliminating the draft, a 1968 campaign promise and still a goal for Nixon. The Gates Commission, the president’s 15-member panel tasked with studying its possibility, concluded in 1970 that an all-volunteer army was feasible. After meeting with General Abrams in Saigon, Alexander Haig recommended to Kissinger that the army should study whether an all-volunteer force could sustain 50,000 to 60,000 troops by 1 September 1971. Haig reported, “Chances appear good from here but General Abrams has declined to commit himself on this item.”¹³¹ To the consternation of many, including conservative journalist William Buckley, Nixon would make no mention of ending the draft on 7 April. That night, after first assuring Henry Kissinger of his positive review of the television address, Buckley asked why the president did not end the draft. Kissinger responded, “The numbers are still too high. That is our plan. This is the first thing we will do when we are at the number that permits it.” Kissinger later continued, “On the

¹³⁰ Memo; W.R. Smyser/Kissinger; 3 April 1971; folder President’s April 7, 1971 Speech (Memo’s + Misc.) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library. Telcon; John Sherman Cooper/Henry Kissinger; 6 April 1971 4:03pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (1 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; Clark MacGregor/Henry Kissinger; 1 April 1971 11:50am; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (1 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. MacGregor’s assistant, William Timmons, wrote that this message came from “twenty hawkish congressmen – Democrats and Republicans.” Memo; William E. Timmons/President; 1 April 1971; folder Vietnam 29 Mar 71 – 8 Apr 71 (Folder 2 of 2); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library.

¹³¹ In June 1968, Nixon called the draft system “obsolete” and argued that “we should abolish the draft system and substitute a volunteer armed forces.” Relman Morin, “What Nixon, Rockefeller Have Said on the Issues,” *The Free Lance-Star*, 2 August 1968. Andrew Glass, “U.S. military draft ends, Jan. 27, 1973” *Politico*, 27 January 2012. Online at <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/01/us-military-draft-ends-jan-27-1973-072085> Cable Draft; Haig/Kissinger, undated but the Abrams meeting occurred on the afternoon of 16 March 1971; folder Haig SEA Trip March 14-21, 1971 [1 of 2]; Box 1013; NSC Files: Alexander M. Haig Special File; Nixon Library.

draft business, you can be assured we will get to it. I have seen the Army and am convinced that a major change is needed.”¹³² However, the draft would remain until 27 January 1973.

During this period between the president’s 22 March interview and 7 April speech, along with debating the troop withdrawal number, Nixon’s team also researched Lam Son battle statistics and propaganda. The administration used enemy casualties and destroyed supplies as another data point to quantify Lam Son’s contribution to the overall war. The collection of these statistics first began, as is usual after any military operation, with intelligence estimates. As early as late February, Kissinger sent the president examples of disruptions to enemy supplies that were gathered from intercepted North Vietnamese messages. Kissinger continued to press for assessments of such statistics through his chairmanship of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), a committee formed in 1969 to deal with crises. By 1971, the WSAG consisted of officials from the National Security Council, State and Defense Departments, the CIA, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the White House. From late-March through the first week of April, conversations about these counts centered on complementary reports from the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), in which the CIA focused more on supplies destroyed and captured while the DIA focused on human casualties.¹³³

¹³² Telcon; William Buckley/Henry Kissinger; 7 April 1971 9:50pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (1 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹³³ Memo; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; memo is undated, however, the dates of intercepted messages range from 14 to 19 February; folder 11 Feb 1971 - 28 Mar 1971 (Folder 3 of 3); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library. Matthew Jones, “Between the Bear and the Dragon: Nixon, Kissinger and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Era of Détente,” *The English Historical Review* 123, No. 504 (October 2008): 1272–1283. A mid-March WSAG meeting memo pointed out two “foundation issues” for assessing Lam Son: enemy logistics and force diversion, or in other words, the number of supplies and enemy fighters. Memo; Kissinger/Nixon; undated but likely mid-March (next document in box is dated 18 March); folder Intelligence on NVSM 3-18-71; Box H-80; NSC Institutional (“H”) Files Meeting Files (1969-1974), WSAG Meetings; Nixon Library. Examples of the administration’s focus on the CIA and DIA reports include a memo between NSC staff at the White House and a memo recording an NSC meeting at the president’s home in San Clemente, California, where President Nixon and several senior staff traveled. Memo; Loeffke/Kennedy; 26 March 1971; folder Assessing Evacuation Lam Son operation 3-23-71; Box H-80; NSC Institutional (“H”) Files Meeting Files (1969-1974), WSAG Meetings; Nixon Library. Memo; NSC staff; 1 April 1971; folder Vietnam 29 Mar 71 – 8 Apr 71 (Folder 2 of 2); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library.

These intelligence numbers then became tools for political messaging. Nixon instructed Kissinger on 20 March to “get it down to short terms so people can understand it...terms like traffic to south cut more than half. Also the idea of guns and rounds of ammo. Millions of pounds of rice is good. Get it in words and see if you or Ken [speechwriter Khachigian] can get it into colorful language.”¹³⁴ Although the president avoided getting into details of enemy casualties and supplies during his 22 March ABC interview, these numbers remained the administration’s main talking points about Lam Son once they decided to justify the operation as a victory. Up to a week before his 7 April address, Nixon considered including these numbers in the speech before ultimately deciding otherwise.

The administration also grappled with the issue of countering North Vietnamese propaganda during this period. Writing to Bunker and Abrams on 27 March, Secretary of State Rogers blamed the “world press” and a “well orchestrated communist claque” for repeating Hanoi’s claims of victory in Lam Son 719. As a result, the White House expected “a significant psychological problem” and wanted to ensure that Thieu would take steps to counter this communist propaganda.¹³⁵ After meeting with Thieu on 2 April to pass this message from the administration, Bunker reported back that “much was already underway.” Thieu’s efforts included television and radio propaganda, public rallies in provincial capitals, parades, press conferences, troop visits, and monetary and other rewards for troops and their families. President

¹³⁴ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 20 March 1971 10:30am; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (2 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹³⁵ Cable; Secretary of State/American Embassy Saigon; 27 March 1971; folder Vietnam 11 Feb 71 – 28 Mar 71 (Folder 3 of 3); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library. Notably, this White House expectation of the danger of negative morale in South Vietnam was contrary to dispatches from Bunker and Abrams in the preceding days, in which both claimed high morale in South Vietnam and among ARVN except for pessimism from Vice President Ky. Cables; Ambassador Bunker/The White House; 24 and 25 March 1971; folder Vietnam 11 Feb 71 – 28 Mar 71 (Folder 3 of 3); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library. These cables from Bunker and Abrams are also summarized in and attached to a memo from Kissinger to the president. Memo; Kissinger/Nixon; undated; folder Vietnam 11 Feb 71 – 28 Mar 71 (Folder 3 of 3); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library.

Nixon also gave suggestions. In a discussion with Kissinger about a failed operation in which 24 American servicemen were killed in comparison to 12 North Vietnamese, Nixon suggested publicly distributing information about political divisions within North Vietnam, which the White House received through communications intelligence, and an overall assessment of Hanoi's heavy losses.¹³⁶

The administration counteracted prominent Americans on the propaganda front as well. Throughout March, Kissinger wrestled over his response to a request from Harold Willens, a wealthy California peace activist who founded a group called Business Executives Move for Vietnam Peace. Willens was planning a personal trip to South Vietnam and asked for the American embassy's assistance with introductions. Because of their wealth and political connections, members of groups like Willens's represented a portion of the domestic anti-war movement that the White House could not dismiss easily. Willens once described how the administration often characterized anti-war protestors "as either soft on Communism or soft-headed, period," a charge that was difficult to lodge onto successful, well-established executives.¹³⁷ Kissinger described him as "obviously not a friend of the administration nor a friend of the Vietnamese Government." After first refusing to offer assistance, Kissinger later decided that a better strategy was to shape "what kind of picture" Willens would receive from his trip by asking Ambassador Bunker to assign embassy personnel to help with his eventual April 1971 visit.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Cable; American Embassy Saigon/Secretary of State; 3 Apr 1971; folder Vietnam 11 Feb 71 – 28 Mar 71 (Folder 3 of 3); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library. Telcon; Kissinger/Nixon; 29 March 1971; Chron File, 25-31 March 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. During this call, President Nixon also suggested limiting reporters' access to junior military officers, whose views he believed contributed to negative coverage.

¹³⁷ Ellie Kahn, "Harold Willens, the Life of a Peace Activist," *Jewish Journal*, 16 February 2015.

¹³⁸ Draft cable; Henry Kissinger/Ambassador Bunker; undated; folder Vietnam 11 Feb 71 – 28 Mar 71 (Folder 3 of 3); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library. Kissinger checked "disapprove" on a 24 February action memorandum detailing Willens's initial request along with an FBI background check. Memo; John H.

Amid these discussions over troop withdrawal numbers, Lam Son numbers, and countering propaganda, Nixon's speechwriting team, spearheaded by future conservative stalwart and three-time presidential hopeful Pat Buchanan, along with input from all corners of the administration, began crafting the address for 7 April. Progressive drafts of this speech, in conjunction with memoranda and telephone transcripts from various administration officials during this time, show that while certain details were added and dropped during the normal editing process, main themes remained. Consistent items of focus included big-picture language about the American character, efforts to differentiate this speech from past addresses, and arguments for the reduction of American involvement in Vietnam. The team also avoided certain topics, some from the beginning and some over the process of writing. These topics included details to justify Lam Son 719, negotiations with the North Vietnamese, and the My Lai massacre.

In the week following the president's ABC interview, the administration and its surrogates spoke out aggressively about Laos to offset negative media assessments. They hammered the same talking points: that more supplies were destroyed than in the Cambodian operation, that Hanoi was set back many months and kept from undertaking any major offensives, and that the U.S. and South Vietnamese had achieved their goals.¹³⁹ Believing that this strategy of repeating talking points was making little headway in changing public opinion, some in Nixon's team advocated for focusing on the "big picture" in the 7 April speech.

Holdridge/Dr. Kissinger; 24 February 1971; folder Vietnam 11 Feb 71 – 28 Mar 71 (Folder 3 of 3); Box 153; NSC Files: Vietnam Country Files; Nixon Library.

¹³⁹ Examples of this can be seen in Kissinger's conversations with Governor Ronald Reagan, evangelist Billy Graham, and entertainer Bob Hope on 29 and 30 March, as well as Admiral Moorer's interview in the 5 April edition of *U.S. News*. Telcon; Bob Hope/Kissinger; 29 March 1971 2:37pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; Governor Reagan/Kissinger; 29 March 1971 3:05pm; Ibid. Telcon; Billy Graham/Kissinger; 30 March 1971 9:23am; Ibid. "What Next in Indo-China: Interview with Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff," *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 April 1971.

On 27 March, Winston Lord, Kissinger's special assistant and future ambassador to China, wrote to the national security advisor, "I don't think a discussion of Laos should dominate the speech; the major focus should be on the big picture of how far we have come and where we are going." Two days later, Pat Buchanan sent the president a memo in which communications staff assistant Ken Khachigian proposed making the bulk of the speech "a thoughtful, brief lecture on the American character." Khachigian continued, "This is the time for the President to wear the hat of moral authority, of America's calm voice in the face of heated overstatement." On the cover letter, Buchanan argued that the "nation has heard, again and again and again, the arguments of what we are doing, and have done and why...the president can communicate to the people far more on his mind than simply the outcome of Laos – and the future of troop withdrawals." Buchanan later reiterated his worry of "unnecessarily repeat[ed] word formulations and arguments the country has heard too many times." Henry Kissinger disagreed. Kissinger felt that the "basic arguments" that the administration had been constantly repeating about Vietnam, including the statistics justifying Lam Son 719, were still important. The battle lines were drawn, with Lord, Buchanan, and Khachigian, making up the "big picture" camp and pressing for a move away from the details.¹⁴⁰ The final speech ultimately represented the "big picture" camp. Nixon justified Lam Son 719 through general terms and referred only to "achievements," rather than "success," in Laos. In another indicator of the administration's focus

¹⁴⁰ Memo; Winston Lord/Kissinger; 27 March 1971; folder President's April 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc.) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library. Memo; Patrick J. Buchanan/President Nixon; 29 March 1971; folder Wednesday, April 7, 1971, Troop Withdrawal Statement 18; Box 65; President's Personal File: President's Speech File; Nixon Library. While Kissinger was initially against forgoing the detailed arguments, he was not one to shy away from hyperbolic language. One of the last things President Nixon would have seen before going on-air on 7 April was a handwritten note from Kissinger stating: "no matter what the result – free peoples everywhere will be forever in your debt. Your serenity during crisis, your steadfastness under pressure have been all that has prevented the triumph of mass hysteria." Kissinger as quoted in *From: the President*, ed. Bruce Oudes (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 237.

on the domestic audience, Nixon ensured that American troop counts were the only numbers mentioned in the entire address.

Nixon's congressional expert, Clark MacGregor, suggested to Kissinger that the speech be "different in kind and degree" from previous statements because "America needs a lift!" Though speaking about Congress, MacGregor's description of a "deepening mood of depression" could have described the rest of American society.¹⁴¹ Ambassador to the United Nations John Scalli also argued that the speech needed more than withdrawal numbers, warning that "critics will step up the attack" otherwise. Using the president's 7 October 1970 speech, his last television address on Vietnam, and their background materials as a point of comparison, Nixon's writing team generated new themes to differentiate this speech from past ones.¹⁴²

One important theme remained the reduction of American involvement in Vietnam as proof of the success of Lam Son and Vietnamization. Near the top of a document titled "Main Points in President's Speech," Nixon aides wrote, "It is a complete distortion to call Lam Son a defeat; the best proof of its overall success is the fact that the withdrawal rate has actually been increased."¹⁴³ Nixon stated on 22 March that Lam Son was worthwhile because it saved American lives, with one calculable manifestation being troop withdrawals. Akin to arguing whether a chicken or egg comes first, Nixon's speechwriters now argued that it was the acceleration of withdrawals which proved Lam Son's success. This shift from "success is justified by the numbers" to "increased withdrawals means success" happened between 30 March and 1 April. A 30 March speech draft devoted five pages to Laos, put it near the top of the speech, and listed damaged enemy supplies in painstaking detail. On 1 April, speechwriter

¹⁴¹ Memo; Clark MacGregor/Kissinger; 1 April 1971; folder President's April 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc.) Vietnam: Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

¹⁴² President's April 7 Speech Background Information; undated; folder President's April 7, 1971 Speech Background Info Vietnam: Box 125; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

William Safire sent a new draft in which he “makes less of the laborious defense of the Laos operation” and urged that “the story of how many troops coming out by when be put up in the lead. Holding it for the end is a cheap device and we have never done it yet.”¹⁴⁴ In the final speech, Nixon stated at the outset, “I have decided to increase the rate of American troop withdrawals for the period from May 1 to December 1.” As he did with a map in his television address about Cambodia almost one year prior, Nixon would use a visual aid, this time a graph, to bring home the point to viewers.¹⁴⁵

The writing team initially prepared two graphs, one showing the “Authorized Troop Level in South Vietnam” and another showing “U.S. Combat Deaths in Southeast Asia,” although Nixon used only the troop level chart. The team placed the graph on an easel to the president’s right and the camera occasionally panned and zoomed to it throughout the speech. The graph charted U.S. troop numbers in Vietnam from the early 1960s, through the day of the address, and continued until 1 December 1971. The display showed the troop number increase from under 50,000 in early 1965 to reach its peak of 549,500 around Nixon’s inauguration. This line then traced the troop number’s steady decline to 284,000 by 7 April 1971, and its predicted further decline by the promised 100,000 troops to reach 184,000 by 1 December 1971. This visual aid dramatically illustrated the decline in troop levels since Nixon took office.¹⁴⁶

As a reminder of the perils of this American-centric view of measuring the war’s success by the number of American lives saved, Secretary Laird cautioned the president on 6 April that

¹⁴⁴ This 30 March draft devoted space to specific Lam Son numbers: “Over 100 tanks, or one-third the total force in their army; Vast stores of ammunition, much more than was captured in Cambodia last year; Some 7,000 individual and crew-served weapons, most of which were captured from fighting units; Almost 5,000 trucks and vehicles throughout southern Laos.” Speech Draft; “President’s Speech on Indochina;” 30 March 1971; folder Wednesday, April 7, 1971, Troop Withdrawal Statement 18; Box 65; President’s Speech File; Nixon Library. Memorandum; William Safire/H.R. Haldeman; 1 April 1971; folder Wednesday, April 7, 1971, Troop Withdrawal Statement 18; Box 65; President’s Personal File: President’s Speech File; Nixon Library.

¹⁴⁵ Nixon, 7 April TV Address.

¹⁴⁶ President’s April 7 Speech Background Information; undated; folder President’s April 7, 1971 Speech Background Info Vietnam: Box 125; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library. Nixon, 7 April TV Address.

while American involvement decreases, danger to the ARVN would increase as they take over more of the combat. Laird implored, "I believe it is important to keep these factors in mind as the enemy is in the Spring campaign cycle, normally his most active period of the year."¹⁴⁷ As late as two days before the speech, Kissinger recommended that President Nixon add lines that detailed the decrease to South Vietnamese casualties as well as the reduction of U.S. bombing. Senator George McGovern, Nixon's eventual opponent in the 1972 election, was among those arguing that Vietnamization was simply "substituting Asian for American casualties," a group that Kissinger referred to as "Doves."¹⁴⁸ This resulted in Nixon's addition of a sentence: "South Vietnamese casualties have also dropped significantly in the past two years." However, its meaning was diminished by being sandwiched between detail about the fivefold drop in American casualties over two years and a return to the focus on saving American lives: "One American dying in combat is one too many. But our goal is no American fighting man dying anyplace in the world. Every decision I have made in the past and every decision I make in the future will have the purpose of achieving that goal."¹⁴⁹

Another topic that the speechwriting team had intended to tackle in the 7 April address was peace negotiations. Six months earlier, the president spoke publicly about negotiations with Hanoi for the first time during a 7 October 1970 television address. Up until this 1970 address, Nixon had hoped that secrecy would lead to progress in either the public talks led by Henry Cabot Lodge or private ones led by Henry Kissinger. However, by late 1970, negotiations had stalled. To break the impasse, Nixon used the 1970 address to outline the American position publicly: a cease-fire, an international peace conference, negotiation of a timetable for complete

¹⁴⁷ Memorandum; Secretary of Defense Laird/President; 6 April 1971; folder President's April 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc.) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

¹⁴⁸ FRUS, Volume VII, Document 174.

¹⁴⁹ Nixon, 7 April TV Address.

withdrawal, a political settlement for South Vietnam, and an immediate release of prisoners-of-war. As Henry Kissinger wrote of the administration's goals at the time, "All senior officials came to favor anything that might get the negotiations off dead center and our critics off the front pages." Kissinger recalled that while this was initially well-received, with even the administration's detractors in Congress and the press praising the speech as reasonable, Hanoi rejected it shortly afterward, freezing negotiations again.¹⁵⁰ Even with this checkered track record, in 1971, Nixon's writing team again considered keeping the topic of negotiations at the forefront of the address. The public clamoring for an announced end to the war was just too loud to ignore. However, Nixon would change course at the last minute.

A 28 March speech draft devoted an entire paragraph to the "hope for a negotiated settlement" within the first minute of the speech. Nixon removed this paragraph but kept another paragraph on negotiations later in the speech. The night before the address, Nixon also removed this commentary after consultation with Kissinger. At the same time, he removed another paragraph offering to negotiate with Hanoi on a fixed timetable for mutual withdrawal and reworded a passage about prisoners-of-war.¹⁵¹ In the final televised version, Nixon would devote just two paragraphs to the topics of negotiations and withdrawal timetables, located near the middle of the speech. In his paragraph addressing negotiations, he cited the same five points from October 1970. In the paragraph addressing his decision not to publish a timetable, Nixon explained that doing so would only make it more difficult to free prisoners-of-war, remove the

¹⁵⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 980-981. Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation About a New Initiative for Peace in Southeast Asia," 7 October 1970. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-about-new-initiative-for-peace-southeast-asia>

¹⁵¹ Speech Draft; 28 March 1971; folder President's April 7, 1971 Speech Background Info Vietnam: Box 125; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library. Speech Draft; 6 April 1971; Ibid. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/the president; 6 Apr 1971 5:50pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

incentive for a settlement, and give the enemy information to launch attacks against the American military.

Eleventh-hour edits to speech drafts show the sensitivity and importance that the administration placed on messaging and also the difficulty of these choices. Another of Nixon's last-minute removals was any reference to the My Lai massacre. Amid Nixon's speech preparation, the trial of William Calley, the only officer convicted for the killing of unarmed civilians at the South Vietnamese village of My Lai, commanded front-page coverage. Calley was convicted on 29 March, sentenced on 31 March, and received a downgrade of his sentence from the president on 1 April. A 30 March draft of the 7 April address devoted two paragraphs to the Calley trial, and three subsequent paragraphs to supporting the troops. One paragraph directly addressing Calley remained in a 4 April draft, but was removed two days later, with its meaning imbedded into two phrases: "atrocities charges in individual cases" and "isolated acts of cruelty." This 6 April draft also argued that these isolated acts were the exception to "the tens of thousands of individual American soldiers who...have tried to help the people of South Vietnam." This phrasing remained in the final draft. Pat Buchanan wrote that the "point about troops is made – and no one will be ignorant of what we are referring to."¹⁵² The president ultimately decided against mentioning any negative aspects of the Vietnam War. Even during his final preparations mere hours before delivering the address, Nixon continued editing to keep things upbeat, telling Kissinger that "people don't want to hear about sorrow so much."¹⁵³

¹⁵² Speech Draft; 30 March 1971. folder Wednesday, April 7, 1971, Troop Withdrawal Statement 18; Box 65; President's Personal File: President's Speech File; Nixon Library. Memorandum; Patrick J. Buchanan/President Nixon; 4 April 1971 folder Wednesday, April 7, 1971, Troop Withdrawal Statement 18; Box 65; President's Personal File: President's Speech File; Nixon Library. Speech Draft; 6 April 1971; folder Wednesday, April 7, 1971, Troop Withdrawal Statement 18; Box 65; President's Personal File: President's Speech File; Nixon Library.

¹⁵³ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/the president; 7 April 4:10pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

The 7 April TV Address

The result of all of this research, strategizing, and writing between 22 March and 7 April was a well-received address that stopped short of calling Lam Son a success and refrained from setting a final deadline for American departure from Vietnam. Nixon's punchline, previewed at the top of the speech and specified in detail six minutes later, was that "between May 1 and December 1 of this year, 100,000 more American troops will be brought home from South Vietnam." This was after Nixon reminded viewers, using his visual aid, that U.S. troop numbers had consistently declined since he took office. He then declared Cambodia a "success," touted great "achievements" in Laos, and linked this accelerated troop withdrawal as proof of the success of Vietnamization.

By choosing not to include any numbers in the speech outside of U.S. troop counts, Nixon's writers deliberately refocused the goal of the war to be about saving American lives. This built upon the groundwork the president began on 22 March and is further illustrated through some seemingly throwaway comments. After announcing the 100,000-troop withdrawal Nixon stated, "The Government of South Vietnam fully supports the decision I have just announced." Rather than elaborate on how the United States would ensure the viability of South Vietnam without American troops, Nixon immediately pivoted, saying, "Now, let's look toward the future." In other references to South Vietnam's future, Nixon used phrases such as "leave in a way that gives the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance to survive," and "leave Vietnam in a way that offers a brave people a realistic hope of freedom," a significant downgrade from the original goal of "preserving a non-Communist South Vietnam." The president placed U.S.

withdrawal as his primary goal, a stable South Vietnam as his second, and crafted the narrative to accommodate these priorities.¹⁵⁴

It would turn out to be another last-minute addition that garnered the president his most positive headlines the next day. Nixon decided to conclude his speech with an emotional anecdote, which he wrote in secret on a yellow legal pad and kept out of the advance transcript for the media.¹⁵⁵ Rick Perlstein calls it a “sentimental climax, a masterpiece,” which he narrates vividly in *Nixonland*:

“‘We had an award ceremony in the East Room of the White House just a few weeks ago. And at that ceremony I remember one of the recipients, Mrs. Karl Taylor, from Pennsylvania. Her husband was a Marine sergeant, Sergeant Karl Taylor...After I presented her the Medal, I shook hands with their two children, Karl, Jr.—he was 8 years old—and Kevin, who was 4. As I was about to move to the next recipient, Kevin suddenly stood at attention and saluted.’

Pause.

‘I found it rather difficult to get my thoughts together.’

[Nixon’s] voice deepened.

‘My fellow Americans, I want to end this war in a way that is worthy of the sacrifice of Karl Taylor.’

[Nixon] was speaking very slowly.

‘And I think he would want me to end it in a way that would increase the chances that Kevin and Karl, and all those children like them here and around the world, could grow up in a world where none of them would have to die in war; that would increase the chance for America to have what it has not had in this century—a full generation of peace.’¹⁵⁶

President Nixon added the Taylor Family anecdote less than one day before the speech. H.R.

Haldeman was still tracking down details for Mrs. Taylor, Karl, Jr., and Kevin on 6 April as he

wrote in his notes that day, “from mil aide – the 5 yr old that saluted was he the brother? –

details.”¹⁵⁷ Because the addition was so rushed, no one from the White House staff had time to

¹⁵⁴ “The President’s Vietnam Pledge,” *The New York Times*, 8 April 1971. Nixon, 7 April TV Address.

¹⁵⁵ Haldeman, 268.

¹⁵⁶ Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 558-559.

¹⁵⁷ Speech Draft; 6 April 1971; folder Wednesday, April 7, 1971, Troop Withdrawal Statement 18; Box 65; President’s Personal File: President’s Speech File; Nixon Library. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Mrs. Karl Taylor; 11:28pm; 7 April 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons;

contact Mrs. Taylor beforehand. Nixon said to Kissinger after the speech, “I hope the mother stands up and – I haven’t checked that with her but she will do the right thing, she was a Marine’s wife.”¹⁵⁸ Kissinger then called Mrs. Taylor an hour later, at 11:28pm, to convey that the president “asked me to call you and apologize for using your name but he felt he wanted to do this to make his point and he hoped that you weren’t hurt.” Mrs. Taylor responded, “I was rather shocked but very proud.”¹⁵⁹

The next day, *The New York Times* published an article with the headline, “Salute Returned to a Boy by Nixon.” The article quoted Mrs. Taylor, declaring that her late husband “believed in what he was doing and he thought he had to do it for the sake of his children.” Other articles featuring the family, such as that by the Associated Press, included a photo of four-year-old Kevin Taylor saluting in his pajamas from his living room. H.R. Haldeman remarked to the president after presenting him the *Times* article, “If we’d staged it we couldn’t have thought it up better.” Haldeman also wrote in his diary on the day after the address that Nixon “was very pleased with the way he worked the emotional part into the speech, and thinks that’s what really made it, and of course, he’s absolutely right.”¹⁶⁰

After delivering the speech, Nixon initially said that he did not want to take any calls that evening. However, he could not help but revert to his habit of post-game analysis and spoke on the phone at least nine times before the night’s end. Members of the president’s inner circle

Nixon Library. Handwritten Note; 6 April 1971; H.R. Haldeman; folder H Notes April-June '71 [April 1, 1971 to May 19, 1971] Part I [1 of 7]; Box 37; White House Special Files: Staff Member Office Files: H.R. Haldeman; Nixon Library.

¹⁵⁸ Telcon; The president/Kissinger; 7 April 1971 10:20pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹⁵⁹ Telcon; Kissinger/Mrs. Carl Taylor; 7 April 1971 11:28pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

¹⁶⁰ James M. Naughton, “Salute Returned to a Boy by Nixon,” *The New York Times*, 8 April 1971. The White House Press Secretary released an article from Associated Press journalist Gary Mihoce. Newspaper Clipping; White House Press Secretary; 8 April 1971; folder Wednesday, April 7, 1971, Troop Withdrawal Statement; Box 65; President’s Personal File: President’s Speech File, 1969-74; Nixon Library. Gary Mihoce, “A Small Boy’s Salute,” *The Evening Star*, 8 April 1971. Perlstein, 560. Haldeman, 269.

quickly praised the address. Henry Kissinger told Nixon that it was “the best speech you delivered since you have been in office,” reported that television news commentators John Chancellor and Dan Rather gave favorable reviews, and conveyed how “moved – overwhelmed” staffers Alexander Haig and Winston Lord were. Ambassador Bunker cabled from Saigon that the speech “has inspired us all with a renewed sense of dedication and determination.” Reverend Billy Graham believed that the president diffused his critics and told him that his “sincerity and manner of presentation was just excellent.”¹⁶¹

It appeared that the speech also received a positive reception from the American people. The Opinion Research Corporation, a market research company founded in 1938 by Claude Robinson and George Gallup, announced that the percentage of those polled who said they approved “of the way President Nixon is handling the Vietnam situation” increased from 41% in early March 1971 to 48% by mid-April 1971.¹⁶² David Derge, the president of another market research firm hired by the administration, Behavioral Research Associates, reported that of those who had seen, heard, or read about President Nixon’s public appearances since 1 March 1971, “the favorable reactions to these appearances outnumber the unfavorable reactions two to one.”

¹⁶¹ Haldeman wrote in his diary on 7 April, “[The president] was up late tonight and on the phone to me even after I got home, three or four times, in the usual follow-up kind of activity. Even though he said he wouldn’t take any calls, he did take a number of them and made several himself.” Haldeman, 269. In addition to speaking to Haldeman “three or four times,” Nixon spoke to Kissinger at least five times, at 9:30pm, 10:20pm, 10:33pm, 11:02pm, and 11:10pm, and to Billy Graham at least once. Telcons; The president/Nixon; 7 April 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; The president/Kissinger; 7 April 1971 9:30pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Cable; Ambassador Bunker/The White House; 8 April 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Tape of a 7 April 1971 9:52pm telephone conversation between President Nixon and Billy Graham in *The Nixon Tapes*, eds. Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 54.

¹⁶² Press Release; Opinion Research Corporation; 17 April 1971; folder Polls Chron – March-April 1971 [I of II]; Box 334; White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: H.R. Haldeman: Gordon Strachan: Political Polls, Rules & Studies; Nixon Library.

However, Derge pointed out that he did not know whether the favorable group “was already largely in agreement with the president on most matters.”¹⁶³

Print media, however, was not yet sold by Nixon’s latest arguments. Most journalists for the main American weekly magazines felt that President Nixon had not said anything new. *Time*’s authors wrote that when “Richard Nixon appeared on television to discuss his embattled Viet Nam policy, he changed virtually nothing.” They also called the 7 April address a “foxhole speech, digging tenaciously in defense of his existing position.” *Newsweek*’s writers also lamented that this was “more of the same” from the administration and criticized Nixon’s refusal “to set a date for completion.” Consistent with their more supportive stance towards the administration, coverage in *U.S. News and World Report* remained neutral, basically reiterating the president’s statements from 7 April.¹⁶⁴

Correspondents from daily newspapers echoed similar criticisms the following day. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* printed the full text of the speech. Max Frankel of *The Times* called Nixon’s address a “vigorous defense of his objectives and tactics” and objected to Nixon’s plea to “listeners to take his word over those of television and newspaper reporters and analysts.” Frankel also deduced from Nixon’s change in tone that the president “had powerful personal as well as official reasons for wishing to end the war.” *Times* editors wrote that Nixon “did not change his policy, just the way he defended it.” Even in James Naughton’s article profiling the Taylor family, with which the president and H.R. Haldeman were so pleased, the piece did not pass judgment on either the administration’s policy nor the success of Nixon’s communication strategy. Naughton simply quoted Mrs. Taylor’s positive words without

¹⁶³ Memo; David R. Derge/H.R. Haldeman; 12 May 1971; folder Polls Chron – July-August 1971; Box 335; White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: H.R. Haldeman: Gordon Strachan: Political Polls, Rules & Studies; Nixon Library.

¹⁶⁴ “The Nation: The President Digs In on Viet Nam,” *Time*, 19 April 1971. “Vietnam: More of the Same,” *Newsweek*, 19 April 1971. “As Nixon Speeds Vietnam Pullout” and “Nixon: ‘It Is Important How We End This War,’” *U.S. News and World Report*, 19 April 1971.

including his assessment.¹⁶⁵ Chalmers Roberts of *The Washington Post* pointed out Nixon's refusal to set a deadline. Roberts also quoted four senators and a member of Congress, including Democratic Senator and Nixon's eventual 1972 opponent George McGovern, the Cooper-Church Amendment's more moderate Democratic Senator Frank Church, and Republican Representative and future vice president Gerald Ford, all of whom reacted "along predictable lines." In another *Post* article that day, Don Oberdorfer criticized Nixon for three failures: to set an end date, to end the draft, and to change the U.S. role in Vietnam from ground combat to air support. He questioned how Nixon would fulfill his promise to end the war as well.¹⁶⁶ Finally, *The Wall Street Journal's* editors wrote that the increase in the withdrawal rate to 14,300 per month was "certain to leave critics dissatisfied." Robert Keatley described the speech as "generally hard-line" and wrote that the president "drew praise from his supporters but failed to move his critics." Keatley also interpreted Nixon's language about being "held accountable by the American people" to mean that he would either withdraw all Americans from Vietnam before the 1972 election or is prepared to "face the consequences at the polls."¹⁶⁷

In a foreshadowing of the new direction to which American foreign policy would shift, all three dailies also featured front-page coverage about China inviting the United States ping pong team to visit Beijing alongside their coverage of the president's speech. As Takashi Oka wrote in *The New York Times*, "Some analysts of Chinese affairs here view the invitation as Peking's [Beijing's] first concrete response to a series of American moves aimed at improving

¹⁶⁵ Max Frankel, "Nixon Promises Vietnam Pullout of 100,000 More G.I.'s by December," *The New York Times*, 8 April 1971. "The President's Vietnam Pledge," *The New York Times*, 8 April 1971. James M. Naughton, "Salute Returned to a Boy by Nixon," *The New York Times*, 8 April 1971. In addition to these articles, the *Times* published the transcript of the speech as well as a chart showing troops withdrawals since Nixon took office. "Nixon Earlier Ordered Withdrawal of 260,000," *The New York Times*, 8 April 1971.

¹⁶⁶ Chalmers M. Roberts, "President Refuses to Fix a Deadline: 100,000 Troops Cut Set for '71," *The Washington Post*, 8 April 1971. Don Oberdorfer, "End of the Tunnel Remains Blurred," *The Washington Post*, 8 April 1971.

¹⁶⁷ "What's News: Business and Finance World-Wide," *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 April 1971. Robert Keatley, "No Final Date Set: Nixon Boosts Vietnam Pullout Pace; 100,000 More GIs Due Back Dec. 1," *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 April 1971.

relations with China.” The *Post*’s Terence Smith quoted a State Department official as saying that the invitation is “clearly consistent with the hopes expressed by the President and Secretary of State that there could be greater contact between the American and Chinese peoples.”¹⁶⁸

While it appears that Nixon first heard of the Chinese table tennis invitation along with the public, he would have seen the move as a result of his work over the last year towards a normalization of relations with the People’s Republic. The United States and China had maintained an ambassadorial-level bilateral line of communication since 1 August 1955. These talks aimed to “discuss the repatriation of nationals and other issues of mutual concern.” With the Communist takeover of China in 1949, the start of the Korean War in 1950, and the U.S. refusal to recognize the new Chinese government, U.S. citizens in China and Chinese citizens in the U.S. faced difficulties returning home. First started in Geneva in 1955, and later moved to Warsaw in 1958, the last of these intermittent talks, later dubbed the “Warsaw Meetings,” occurred on 20 February 1970. The Chinese canceled the next meeting scheduled for 20 May due to their objection to the U.S. and South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia, effectively ending these formal talks.¹⁶⁹ Skeptical of the State Department’s ability to contain leaks, Nixon and Kissinger established secret contacts to China through multiple channels on their own, including in Paris and Romania. However, the most fruitful ended up being Pakistani President Yahya Khan.

This direct but slow channel, relying on hand-carried, unsigned sheets of paper between the U.S. president and national security advisor to Chairman Mao and Premier Zhou En Lai,

¹⁶⁸ Takashi Oka, “15 Invited by Peking: American Team Will Visit Red China,” *The New York Times*, 8 April 1971. “U.S. Team Invited to Peking,” *The Washington Post*, 8 April 1971. Terence Smith, “Washington Pleased,” *The Washington Post*, 8 April 1971. “What’s News: Business and Finance World-Wide,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 April 1971.

¹⁶⁹ “U.S.-China Ambassadorial Talks, 1955–1970,” Milestones: 1953-1960, Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, last modified 8 April 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/china-talks>. Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007), 171.

became active in late 1970. By the time China extended its invitation to the American ping-pong team on 6 April 1971, at least three messages had been transmitted through the Pakistani channel between the U.S. and Chinese leaders. In October 1970, Nixon and Kissinger asked the Chinese to normalize relations. A month later, Mao and Zhou responded that they would accept a special envoy to Beijing to discuss the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Taiwan. In December, the Americans countered that the meeting in Beijing “would not be limited only to the Taiwan question but would encompass other steps designed to improve relations and reduce tensions.” As a nod to Taiwan, Nixon added that “the policy of the United States Government is to reduce its military presence in the region of East Asia and the Pacific as tensions in this region diminish.” Both sides also took steps to signal an easing of tensions from late 1970 to early 1971, such as Mao hosting exiled American journalist Edgar Snow in Beijing and Nixon ending the restriction on Americans traveling to China.¹⁷⁰

China’s move was not unexpected. While awaiting a response to their December message, Nixon and Kissinger tracked positive signs from the Chinese side. Days after Nixon lifted the travel restrictions, Kissinger reported that “the Chinese really blasted Russia,” when Chinese newspapers criticized the USSR for being overly militaristic and expansionist on the hundredth anniversary of the Paris Commune, the two-month-long takeover of Paris by a socialist government in 1871, which was revered by communist leaders.¹⁷¹ Days after the ping pong invitation was announced, Nixon admitted to Kissinger, Haldeman, and former journalist and administration media consultant John Scali that he “did not know the Ping-Pong team was going to happen like that.” However, Kissinger expressed his “feeling that something was going

¹⁷⁰ MacMillan, 173-176. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972*, eds. Steven E. Phillips and Edward C. Keefer (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006) (hereafter, FRUS, Volume XVII), Document 99.

¹⁷¹ Tape of a 19 March 1971 11:45am Oval Office meeting between President Nixon and Kissinger in Brinkley and Nichter, 51.

to happen,” and for months, Nixon had expected “some thaw.”¹⁷² Besides, Kissinger did not doubt that the Chinese, who he considered “very subtle,” chose the invitation’s timing with great consideration. Nixon, just before a farewell call with the outgoing Taiwanese Ambassador and soon-to-be Foreign Minister Zhou Shu Kai, wondered aloud to Kissinger whether it was deliberate on the part of the Chinese that the ping pong team made front-page news on the same day of this meeting. “No question,” replied the national security advisor.¹⁷³

The timing was fortuitous for both sides. Although the release of the *Pentagon Papers* in June 1971 would renew the debate about the origins of America’s involvement in Vietnam, the public’s attention on the current war would wane with Nixon’s 7 April TV address. For the remainder of 1971, much of the public’s focus was redirected towards the warming of relations with China, beginning with Nixon’s July 1971 announcement of his trip to Beijing and culminating with Nixon’s historic visit, the first by a U.S. president, in February 1972. Nixon’s 7 April television address and the ping pong invitation would set in motion a string of developments that allowed Nixon, by 1972, to achieve his goal of putting Vietnam in the rearview so that he could concentrate on other global ambitions.

¹⁷² Tape of a 13 April 1971 11:19am Oval Office meeting between President Nixon, Bob Haldeman, Henry Kissinger, and John Scali in Brinkley and Nichter, 59-60.

¹⁷³ Tape of a 12 April 1971 11:28am Oval Office meeting between President Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Ambassador Zhou Shu Kai in Brinkley and Nichter, 58.

Chapter 4: Why Did Nixon's Plan Work?

In the period leading up to the president's 7 April speech, Nixon needed to combat any argument that America was abandoning South Vietnam. Senator George McGovern, Nixon's future 1972 opponent, and an outspoken congressional "dove," characterized the United States withdrawal as simply "substituting Asian for American casualties." Two days before the speech, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger discussed ways to address this charge. Expressing his frustration with liberal politicians who opposed his policies, Nixon asserted, "I've determined to just see it [withdrawal] through and the hell with them.... If it fails, it fails." After Kissinger reassured the president by calling this a "heroic posture," Nixon explained further, "Believe it or not, there is no other course for this country." Richard Nixon planned to accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam no matter the result of Lam Son 719 and crafted his narrative to the American people to suit this end.¹⁷⁴

The danger of South Vietnam falling to the communists was always a possibility. However, the prevention of this risk became less of a priority to the administration as they increasingly focused on saving American lives. President Nixon showed this by downplaying the language he used to describe his goals for South Vietnam. Phrases such as "we cannot guarantee their survival" from 22 March and "reasonable chance to survive" and "realistic hope of freedom" from 7 April reflected the demotion of South Vietnam in the president's priorities. This was not lost on the South Vietnamese either. The author of a *Newsweek* article from 5 April quoted a Saigon resident as remarking, "Vietnamization... means only that the color of the bodies is now different."¹⁷⁵ As early as 11 March, a week before news of an ARVN retreat from Laos began to hit the U.S. press, Nixon said privately, "I don't give a goddamn if they leave

¹⁷⁴ This telephone conversation took place on 5 April 1971 at 9:15pm. FRUS, Volume VII, Document 174.

¹⁷⁵ "Assessing the Laos Invasion," *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971.

tomorrow.” Moreover, though they maintained a façade of indecision for public relations, Nixon and Kissinger set the withdrawal number at 100,000 American troops at least a week prior to the 7 April announcement. The only factor restraining Nixon from authorizing a higher number was the threat of Thieu losing his October 1971 election, a loss of face that would be too great for the United States to bear.¹⁷⁶ If military victory over Hanoi and saving South Vietnam became increasingly unrealistic goals, then why did Nixon undertake Lam Son 719?

Into the operation’s initial phase, Nixon, Kissinger, and other decision-makers maintained optimism that Lam Son 719 could prove to be the strategic blow to the Ho Chi Minh Trail that forced Hanoi to a negotiated peace. On 22 February, when Phase Two of the operation was already diverging from the plan and some ARVN soldiers had retreated from firebases inside Laos, Admiral Moorer still told the president, “we had trouble with the one battalion,” but “we just have to stay with this thing. I think it is going to come out all right.”¹⁷⁷ Even if the onset was rooted in idealism, reality set in by mid-March after the operation’s major setbacks. By that time, with clear victory no longer a possibility, the operation’s purpose shifted. On 16 March, after declaring to Kissinger that Laos was “the right thing to do,” the president explained that the purpose of both the Cambodian and Laotian incursions was “getting to another point. Now we’ve reached the other point.... Now, every decision is now made not in terms of, well, what’s the effect going to be on Saigon. The decision has got to be made on what’s the effect on us.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Nixon, 22 March Interview. Nixon, 7 April TV Address. “Richard Nixon, H. R. ‘Bob’ Haldeman, and Henry A. Kissinger on 11 March 1971,” Conversation 466-012 (*PRDE* Excerpt A), *Presidential Recordings Digital Edition* [Fatal Politics, ed. Ken Hughes] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–), accessed on 20 October 2019, <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4006732> (hereafter, 11 March 1971 White House Tape, UVA).

¹⁷⁷ FRUS, Volume VII, Document 134. On 14 February 1971, Henry Kissinger forwarded to President Nixon an assessment from General Abrams. In the report, Abrams noted that “the operation has gone well despite the delays caused by weather and bad road conditions,” and that he believed “the operation will move west at the earliest possible time and is satisfied with the way it is going.” FRUS, Volume VII, Document 129.

¹⁷⁸ Tape of a 16 March 1971 9:30am Oval Office meeting between Nixon and Kissinger in Brinkley and Nichter, 42.

As Nixon went on to discuss the status of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) with the Soviet Union, one can infer that the “other point” to which the president referred meant America’s other global ambitions such as SALT and China. Nixon also gave insight into Lam Son’s purpose five days earlier. “We’ve tried everything. We’ve done everything the military wanted. We have—we’ve done everything to our own satisfaction in order to bring the war to a successful conclusion.” The president was blunter when addressing ARVN capabilities without U.S. ground support. “It’s good for them to learn how strong they are and how weak. But I’m not going to allow their weakness and their fear of the North Vietnamese to-to-to delay us.”¹⁷⁹ Even if the president believed that one purpose of Lam Son 719 was to show that the United States exhausted all options in Vietnam before withdrawing, how would he explain this to the American people, especially to those that lost loved ones in this war?

As word trickled in about ARVN retreating hastily from Laos, Kissinger assured the president, “About PR, we don’t have to worry much. In fact, we can make it very positive.”¹⁸⁰ The writing team that worked on Nixon’s public remarks on 22 March and 7 April, as well as the administration’s allies who hit the airwaves in support of the president’s policies, embraced this mentality of accentuating the positive. Pentagon spokesman Jerry Friedheim wrote to the Deputy Secretary of Defense on 23 March that whether or not Lam Son 719 was a tactical military success, the minds of most Americans would be on U.S. withdrawals and “our determination to shift our strategic attention to other more important world goals.”¹⁸¹ This was essential as things looked quite dismal for the administration in late March to early April.

¹⁷⁹ 11 March 1971 White House Tape, UVA.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Memorandum: “Subject: The Posture and Plan of U.S. Public Comment on Lam Son 719 for the Next Few Months”; Jerry Friedham/Deputy Secretary of Defense; 23 March 1971; as quoted in Hammond, 484-485.

In the weeks leading up to the 7 April 1971 speech, all of the news coverage of Vietnam focused on either the failure of Lam Son 719 or the Calley trial. In addition to negativity in the media embodied by headlines such as *Newsweek*'s "A Bleak Week for Richard Nixon," the administration also faced an unhappy public.¹⁸² A Gallup poll taken on 5 April showed that "public confidence in the way President Nixon is handling his job," fell below 50% for the first time in his administration.¹⁸³ Joseph Alsop wrote in the 8 April issue of *The Washington Post* that several White House staff members "came close to panic in the post-Laos political atmosphere."¹⁸⁴ It would have been hard to imagine from this low point that only eight months later, the president would begin his most consequential year in office.

For Richard Nixon, 1972 was a banner year. It began with historic trips to Beijing and Moscow in February and May and concluded with an unprecedented November landslide election victory. The contrast to 1971 could not have been starker. While initial newspaper coverage of Nixon's Beijing visit criticized the president for acceding to Chinese demands, especially concerning Taiwan, this did not dull the American public's awe in seeing images of the president walking the Great Wall. Henry Kissinger later wrote, "For once a White House public relations strategy succeeded, and performed a diplomatic function as well. Pictures overrode the printed word." Perhaps even more helpful to the administration was how news from China began to overshadow Vietnam. "As the American public gained hope from the China visit," Kissinger maintained, "Vietnam became less an obsession and more a challenge to be mastered. The Administration that had revolutionized international relations could not so easily

¹⁸² "A Bleak Week for Richard Nixon," *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971.

¹⁸³ Morning News Summary; 1 April 1971; folder HAK's Morning News Summary April 1, 1971 [April 1, 1971 - May 31, 1971] [1 of 1]; Box 348; NSC Files: Subject Files; Nixon Library. "Presidential Approval Ratings -- Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends," Gallup, accessed on 20 October 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>. Coleman, "Nixon's Presidential Approval Ratings," *History in Pieces*.

¹⁸⁴ Morning News Summary; 8 April 1971; folder HAK's Morning News Summary April 1, 1971 [April 1, 1971 - May 31, 1971] [1 of 1]; Box 348; NSC Files: Subject Files; Nixon Library.

be accused of neglecting the deepest concern of the American people.”¹⁸⁵ With Watergate’s shadow looming over much of President Nixon’s second term, it is often overlooked that Nixon’s 1972 election over McGovern was a historic victory. Nixon won 49 of the 50 states, representing 96.7 percent of electoral votes, and nearly 61 percent of the popular vote, the largest popular vote margin since 1936.¹⁸⁶ Due to factors both within and outside of his control, the president was able to overcome the public negativity toward Lam Son, the Vietnam War, and the credibility gap in early 1971 to create opportunities for the successes he achieved in 1972.

Among the actions within Nixon’s control was his public messaging in 1971 in the wake of Lam Son 719. In contrast to the Cambodian incursion of 1970—which resulted in massive, violent demonstrations all across the country—public backlash to Lam Son 719 was muted. This was due, in part, to the administration’s change in communication strategy from 1970 to 1971. The president’s public messaging for Lam Son differed from that for Cambodia in both frequency and content. Riding the positive momentum from his “silent majority” speech in late 1969, on 20 April 1970, Nixon announced an additional withdrawal of 150,000 American troops from South Vietnam. However, ten days later, he went on the air again to announce the invasion of Cambodia.

This second announcement sparked uprisings around the United States, such as at Kent State and other institutions by Americans opposed to a perceived escalation in the Vietnam War. On 3 June 1970, Nixon gave a television address in which he declared Cambodia the “most successful operation of this long and very difficult war.” In contrast, the president made no announcements before the start of Lam Son 719. Instead he left messaging to the South Vietnamese and Department of Defense briefers. Nixon’s first words about the Laotian operation

¹⁸⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1092, 1094.

¹⁸⁶ “President Nixon’s 14 Addresses to the Nation on Vietnam,” Richard Nixon Foundation, accessed on 20 October, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2017/09/president-richard-nixons-14-addresses-nation-vietnam/>.

were in the form of a television interview on 22 March 1971. And although Nixon's post-operation television address on 7 April 1971 had echoes of his post-Cambodia address from 3 June 1970, the two speeches widely varied in content.¹⁸⁷

In his 3 June 1970 speech, the president first called the Cambodian operation a success. He then reiterated the reasons for escalating the war. This was followed by a painstakingly detailed list of captured arms and supplies: "10 million rounds of ammunition," "over 15,000 rifles and machine guns and other weapons," over 2,000 "heavy mortars and rocket launchers and recoilless rifles," "90,000 rounds of ammunition," and "more than 11 millions pounds of rice." To illustrate the point, Nixon also showed a few minutes of a grainy Department of Defense video of American soldiers walking among captured enemy weapons and rice while the president provided the voice-over. Nixon then explained that the Cambodian operation "insured the continuance and success of our troop withdrawal program," and that this operation would help to withdraw 50,000 of the 150,000 soldiers as promised two months earlier. It was this very level of detail and plethora of numbers against which Winston Lord, Pat Buchanan, and other "big picture" camp advisors argued in 1971, ultimately resulting in a far different address on 7 April.¹⁸⁸

The change in the form and content of messaging from 1970 to 1971 was a strategic decision by the administration. However, fortuitous factors outside of Nixon's control also contributed to his ability to shift attention away from Lam Son 719 and the Vietnam War. One factor was the Cooper-Church Amendment. While the administration viewed the amendment, which forbade the use of ground troops outside of South Vietnam, as a hindrance to their military

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. Nixon, 30 April TV Address. Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the Cambodian Sanctuary Operation," 3 June 1970. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2530> (hereafter, Nixon, 3 June TV Address).

¹⁸⁸ Nixon, 3 June TV Address.

capabilities in Laos, this restriction had the unintended consequence of reducing public backlash to the operation by limiting the number of American casualties. The average number of American combat deaths in Vietnam and related operations, which totaled over 100 per week in June 1970, dropped to 46 per week by April 1971. Nixon's team even created a chart titled "U.S. Combat Deaths in Southeast Asia" copying the format of the troop withdrawal chart he used on television. This second chart showed a steady decline in combat deaths since Nixon took office. The president ultimately decided against using it for the address.¹⁸⁹ The increased danger faced by ARVN troops, now lacking the support of American ground troops in Laos, was one impetus for George McGovern's claim that the administration was merely substituting Asian bodies for American ones.¹⁹⁰

Another factor from which the administration benefited was the decline of the anti-war movement. The implementation of a draft lottery system on 1 December 1969, which gave potential draftees much more clarity on their risk of being called up, "eased the psychological strain" for many young American men before Nixon ended the draft completely in December 1972. As foreign policy expert Adam Garfinkle argues in *Telltale Hearts*, the anti-war campaign was not as crucial a factor in bringing about the end of the Vietnam War as many Americans had thought. Writing about the 1970 demonstrations in the wake of Cambodia, Garfinkle argues that they "were a sort of spontaneous conditioned reflex to an extraordinarily crisp and clear escalation of the war in Southeast Asia and on campus. With a single exception, there was not much in the way of large, nationally organized public protest thereafter, and it was not because

¹⁸⁹ This number represents a weekly average of the previous twelve-month. Chart; "U.S. Combat Deaths in Southeast Asia," undated; folder President's April, 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

¹⁹⁰ Henry Kissinger suggested to President Nixon on 5 April that he should add lines into the address about reduced South Vietnamese casualties and reduced U.S. bombing to address the Congressional Doves. FRUS, Volume VII, Document 174. Nixon ultimately added the line that "South Vietnamese casualties have also dropped significantly in the past 2 years." Nixon, 7 April TV Address.

of students' fear of getting shot." This "single exception" included rallies in late April 1971 in Washington, DC. Various protest groups held events over multiple days, including Vietnam Veterans Against the War led by their national spokesman and future Secretary of State John Kerry. However, Garfinkle labels these April 1971 occurrences as otherwise "uneventful" and attributes the ultimate decline of the movement to a combination of balkanization, administration tactics, a poor economy, and the evolution of campus subcultures.¹⁹¹ Political scientist John Mueller pushes even further, arguing that the protest movement was counterproductive. "Opposition to the war in Vietnam came to be associated with rioting, disruption, and bomb throwing, and war protesters, as a group, enjoyed negative popularity ratings to an almost unparalleled degree."¹⁹² This decline in the anti-war movement reflected a general lethargy pervading the American public towards the Vietnam War.¹⁹³

For as much as the Nixon administration focused on his messaging in the wake of the negative media portrayals of Lam Son 719 in mid-March 1971, only 14% of the audience watched the president's 22 March interview with ABC's Howard K. Smith. As these were the days of only three television channels, the other 86% of viewers either watched a movie on NBC

¹⁹¹ "History and Records: The Vietnam Lotteries," United States Selective Service System, accessed 25 October 2019, <https://www.sss.gov/About/History-And-Records/lotter1>. Adam Garfinkle, *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 190, 189, 198.

¹⁹² John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), 164.

¹⁹³ Scholars continue to debate the effect of the anti-war movement on ending American involvement in the Vietnam War and when the movement ebbed. Terry Anderson writes, "The antiwar movement alone did not end U.S. participation in Vietnam, nor did it lead to victory for the enemy." Anderson then argues that "LBJ would not have quit the presidency, and Nixon would not have withdrawn from Vietnam, if there was no anti-war movement." Anderson also quotes Melvin Small who pointed out two specific instances in which the movement affected presidential decisions, once with Johnson in 1967 and once with Nixon in 1969. Terry H. Anderson, "Vietnam is Here: The Antiwar Movement" in *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 262-263. In his 2002 book, Melvin Small argues that the Washington protests in April and May of 1971, which Garfinkle considered "uneventful," constituted "one of the most instructive protest periods in American history." Even though the 24 April Washington protest drew the largest crowds in history, Small blamed the lack of media coverage on the networks' mentality that "if you've seen one demonstration, you've seen them all." Small also contends that the protest movement restrained Nixon from escalating the war from 1969 to 1971. Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds* (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2002), 139-143, 162. For additional context on the debate about the anti-war movement, please see Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 141-144.

or a comedy special on CBS. Addressing this low viewership statistic, authors in *Time* described Americans' apathy toward the war at this point in 1971. "Long habit has ingrained a sort of sullen skepticism about the war, an incredulity that is often oddly mixed with boredom."¹⁹⁴ On 12 May 1971, David Derge, the president of polling firm Behavioral Research Associates, conveyed to H.R. Haldeman that "those who have seen, heard, or read about President Nixon's appearances since March 1 vary from slightly more than half to three-fourths, which is lower than it should be." While a lower-than-desired number of Americans paid attention to the president's message, it was not for a lack of awareness of Lam Son 719. Derge wrote in another memo to Haldeman on 25 March 1971 that "knowledge of the Laos incursion was high (78%)."¹⁹⁵ The indifference towards the war reflected in these low viewership numbers would be consistent with Mueller's empirical study of Gallup polls from both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. Mueller concluded that the longer a war dragged on, the less likely that Americans were concerned about casualties. Mueller defined this relationship of time and disinterest by a logarithm, writing, "While they did weary of the wars, they generally seem to have become hardened to the wars' costs: they are sensitive to relatively small losses in the early stages, but only to large losses in later stages."¹⁹⁶

As evidenced by their detailed polling, the Nixon administration was highly sensitive to public opinion, which would factor into policy decisions. Political scientists Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro compared polling data with actual troop levels in Vietnam from October 1969 to December 1971 and discovered that "an additional 1% of people saying withdrawal was 'too

¹⁹⁴ "Again, the Credibility Gap?" *Time*, 5 April 1971.

¹⁹⁵ Memo; David R. Derge/H.R. Haldeman; 12 May 1971; folder Polls Chron – July-August 1971; Box 335; White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: H.R. Haldeman: Gordon Strachan: Political Polls, Rules & Studies; Nixon Library. Memo; David R. Derge/H.R. Haldeman; 25 March 1971; folder Polls Chron – March-April 1971 [I of II]; Box 334; White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: H.R. Haldeman: Gordon Strachan: Political Polls, Rules & Studies; Nixon Library.

¹⁹⁶ Mueller, 60-62.

slow' tended to be followed one month later by withdrawal of about 488 extra men for the month." The pair concluded, "Changes in public opinion apparently had a distinct impact on policy, in this as in many other cases based on similar time series data."¹⁹⁷ Given his attention to public opinion, the president would have considered the public's reaction before embarking on his strategy of calling Lam Son a triumph for Vietnamization and accelerating troop withdrawals. He would have then calculated that an adequate proportion of the public would either believe him or not care enough to inhibit that strategy's progress.

In response to Hanoi's "Easter Offensive," an invasion of South Vietnam launched on 30 March 1972, Nixon authorized Operation Linebacker, the first sustained bombing campaign of North Vietnam since 1968, which began on 9 May and lasted for six months. Shortly after Nixon's public address on 8 May 1972 announcing the beginning of Linebacker, he said to aides, "The American people support the airstrikes. We polled the goddamn thing. They don't give a shit about negotiations. They don't care. You realize that? They don't care."¹⁹⁸ Whether or not the American people truly cared about the bombing, Americans' level of concern over Nixon's Vietnam policy did not prevent him from becoming re-elected by an unprecedented majority in November 1972. Adam Garfinkle sums up the value of Nixon's strategy: "Clearly, most people did not care as much about how many Asians died in Southeast Asia as they did about the level of U.S. ground combat participation and how many Americans died. Ending the draft and punching the wind out of the antiwar movement on the one hand, and escalating the air war on

¹⁹⁷ Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 238.

¹⁹⁸ A tape of Nixon speaking at the White House recorded shortly after his 8 May 1972 address about bombing North Vietnam is played during part three of CNN's 2019 documentary, *Tricky Dick*. "Storm Clouds," *Tricky Dick*. Directed by Mary Robertson. Aired 24 March 2019. Atlanta, GA: CNN.

the other, was a clever and effective White House tactic.”¹⁹⁹ Also effective, and certainly helpful to his re-election bid, were Nixon’s successes with China and the USSR.

Nixon and Kissinger’s communications through their secret channels to Beijing and Moscow kept the incursion from derailing any diplomatic efforts with the two communist powers. A growing rift between China and the Soviet Union also helped the United States in these separate efforts.²⁰⁰ Nixon announced in a news conference on 17 February that Lam Son was “not directed against Communist China,” and that he did not believe that Beijing had “any reason to interpret this as a threat against them or any reason therefore to react.” This was in response to a message received two weeks earlier from Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Qiao Guan Hua through Norway that the Chinese understood the American foreign policy of leaving Vietnam and pivoting to China. In *China and the Vietnam Wars*, Qiang Zhai writes that “the limited U.S. involvement in the Laotian invasion had indicated to the Chinese that Nixon did not intend to reverse his policy of disengagement from Vietnam.” At the same time, China’s continued support to North Vietnam, as exemplified by Zhou En Lai’s visit to Hanoi from 5 to 8 March 1971, was tempered by Zhou’s reticence to lead a Communist “worldwide People’s Front” along with the Soviet Union and North Vietnam, as well as Beijing’s gentler criticism of Lam Son 719 as compared to Cambodia the year before.²⁰¹ Winston Lord later described the president’s thinking during this time. “He thought if he opened China... the drama and the

¹⁹⁹ Garfinkle, 190.

²⁰⁰ Nixon and Kissinger followed this rift closely, discussing incidents of Sino-Soviet tension occurring on the radio and in print during the period of Lam Son 719 on 18 and 19 March 1971. Brinkley and Nichter, 47, 51.

²⁰¹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 706-707. Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 194. In their analysis of Vietnamese and Chinese sources, both Lien-Hang Nguyen and Cheng Guan Ang write that Zhou’s rejection of First Secretary Le Duan’s request for Beijing to lead an international Communist front was a sign of both Beijing’s distrust of the Soviets as well as their prioritization of establishing relations with the United States. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 205. Ang, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 69.

importance of dealing with the giant would put in perspective the rather messy exit from Vietnam.”²⁰²

Nixon similarly kept Moscow at bay from overreacting to Operation Lam Son 719. While the Laotian incursion was progressing, he and Kissinger continued pushing Soviet leaders through their secret channel on the topics of West Berlin and SALT. Kissinger later described the monopoly that his National Security Council held over negotiations with China and the USSR by complaining that “it was tough on the nerves of the NSC staff, who had the sole responsibility of backstopping three major negotiations [20 May SALT agreement, Berlin negotiations, and the opening to China] simultaneously in the midst of the Laos operation.”²⁰³ Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to six Cold War American presidents including Nixon, recalled that in early 1971, the Politburo decided that it was in Russia’s “long-term interest to demonstrate the possibility of a further development of Soviet-American relations in spite of their inherent fluctuations,” and to become more “actively involved with Nixon.”²⁰⁴

A combination of these factors both within and outside of Nixon’s control allowed him to climb out of the dire failures of March 1971 to achieve the successes of 1972. A key to this transition was Nixon’s accurate reading of the pulse of the nation beginning with the tone of his 7 April 1971 television address. He gambled, correctly, that enough people would either believe his case for Vietnamization or just not care. Had Watergate not dominated much of Nixon’s second term both in practice and in historical memory, 1972 would have formed the plot of a major political comeback story. Nonetheless, Nixon’s path from the operational failure of Lam

²⁰² “Exhibit: The Opening of China: How It All Happened,” Richard Nixon Foundation, accessed 28 October 2019, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/exhibit/the-opening-of-china>.

²⁰³ According to Kissinger, the reason that the NSC had this sole responsibility “of which the regular bureaucracy was ignorant” was Nixon’s suspicions of the bureaucracy and the distrust of Nixon “by a government staffed by the opposition for a decade.” Kissinger, *White House Years*, 822.

²⁰⁴ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 209.

Son 719 in mid-March 1971 to his public declaration of the success of Vietnamization on 7 April 1971 can provide some perspectives about presidential communications.

Firstly, the president correctly read his audience in 1971, which he failed to do in 1970. The emotional state of the American people shifted greatly between 1970 and 1971. Nixon's recollection of the days in early May 1970 following the deaths at Kent State included a conversation with Kissinger, in which he recalled his national security advisor stating, "I still think you made the right decision.... But in view of what has happened I fear I may have failed to advise you adequately of the domestic dangers." Nixon acknowledged this failure to read his public and anticipate the violent aftermath that resulted. Nixon wrote that he "assumed full responsibility" and told Kissinger, "Don't waste time rehashing things we can't do anything about."²⁰⁵

Henry Kissinger realized in hindsight that the anti-war movement, which had been dormant since the "silent majority" speech in November 1969, was ready to pounce by the president's 30 April 1970 speech announcing the Cambodian operation. Kissinger also concluded that although the violence was likely unavoidable as "dialogue in our democracy had broken down," he believed that the media's unfair criticism, which stirred up university students around the United States, combined with the "excessive" rhetoric in Nixon's speeches on Cambodia, did little to help the situation. The president "played into the hands of his critics by presenting an essentially defensive operation, limited in both time and space, as an earthshaking, conscience-testing event, lending color to their claim that he had exceeded presidential authority by 'expanding' the war," Kissinger wrote. Although he always maintained that the Cambodian operation was necessary from a military perspective, he felt that they quickly lost control of the

²⁰⁵ Nixon, *RN*, 457.

debate; what should have been a reasonable discussion on tactics descended into an irrational battle about morals.²⁰⁶

In contrast, Nixon's speech on 7 April 1971 after the Laotian operation resulted in marches on Washington by a declining anti-war movement, but nowhere near the level of violence seen the year before. Nixon remarked to Kissinger on 30 March 1971, "On the Laotian thing – that's going to peter out. They'll emote about that for a week or so then have the troop announcement and then they'll emote about that. Then eyes will go to the Congress, about what they'll do about it. It isn't the public sentiment we're talking about."²⁰⁷ Incidentally, instead of calling this 1971 speech, which avoided a detailed discussion of military tactics and pivoted to a moral argument for the U.S. to stay in Vietnam, "excessive," Kissinger wrote that Nixon's line about leaving in a way that gave South Vietnam "a reasonable chance to survive as a free people" was "valid and central."²⁰⁸ While the differences in public reaction from 1970 to 1971 resulted from many factors outside of Nixon's control—including the Congressional restriction on ground troops, a weakening anti-war movement, and increasing public indifference towards the war—the way that the administration read this public sentiment and tailored its messaging was crucial to their ability to accomplish policy goals.

The second perspective in presidential communication to be gained from this period is the way the administration leveraged allies. As Nixon explained to Kissinger, "The main thing is to mobilize all of our friends."²⁰⁹ The president's strengthening of U.S. bilateral relations with the USSR and China helped to ensure that those countries would refrain from opposing the Laos

²⁰⁶ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 510, 505, 515.

²⁰⁷ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/The President; 30 March 1971 9:35am; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

²⁰⁸ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1014.

²⁰⁹ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/The President; 30 March 1971 9:35am; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

incursion in 1971.²¹⁰ At home, the Nixon team relied on surrogates both inside and outside of the government. These allies would help push their narrative to the public by spreading the administration's latest Lam Son 719 talking points. President Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Joint Chiefs Chairman Thomas Moorer held multiple briefings for Republican members of Congress on Laos between 18 March and 7 April 1971. Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott and his fellow Congressional Republicans promised Nixon's congressional liaisons that they would "call into the wires" after the 7 April speech.²¹¹ Kissinger maintained close contact with California Governor Ronald Reagan, who visited the president in San Clemente a week before the television address. Emphasizing the importance of maintaining these relationships, Nixon told Kissinger, "You gotta have a Reagan out there hitting the ball."²¹²

Nixon's team also relied on assistance from friends outside of the government, including members of the media and public figures. In the three weeks between mid-March to early-April 1971, Kissinger had phone calls with Chuck Bailey of *The Minneapolis Tribune*, Henry Hubbard of *Newsweek*, Marty Schramm of *Newsday*, liberal columnist Tom Braden, and conservative columnist William Buckley. All of these calls displayed the personal intimacy of Kissinger's relationships with these media figures. In a more complicated interaction, on Nixon's instruction, Kissinger passed a publicly available report from General Abrams, which he portrayed to be an

²¹⁰ Nixon and Kissinger also discuss their alliance with former head of the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam and well-known counter-insurgency expert, Sir Robert Thompson. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/the president; 20 March 1971 2:30pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (1 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

²¹¹ Memo; Clark MacGregor/The President's File; 26 March 1971; folder Memoranda for the President; Box 81; White House Special Files: President's Office Files: President's Meeting File 1969-1974; Nixon Library. Memo; William Timmons/The President; 18 March 1971; folder CO 80 Laos 1/1/71-; Box 48; White House Central Files: Subject Files: CO (Countries); Nixon Library. Memorandum of Conversation; Congressional Briefing on the End of Laotian Operation; 24 March 1971; folder MemCon – Kissinger, Messrs MacGregor, Cook, et al [re: Congressional Briefing on Laos] March 25, 1971; Box 1025; NSC Files: Presidential/HAK MemCons; Nixon Library. Memo; Clark MacGregor and William Timmons/H.R. Haldeman; 6 April 1971; folder President's April 7, 1971 Speech (Memo's + Misc.) Vietnam; Box 124; NSC Files: Vietnam Subject Files; Nixon Library.

²¹² Telcon; President/Henry Kissinger; 29 March 1971 later afternoon; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

inside scoop, to NBC News anchor John Chancellor and *Miami Herald* reporter David Kraslow at a lunch on 22 March.²¹³ Other Nixon officials played a similar role, such as Ambassador to the United Nations George H.W. Bush, who asked Kissinger for the latest Lam Son talking points to respond to the editors of *Newsweek* after a lunch in New York.²¹⁴

The administration's circles extended into the fields of entertainment and religion and the team was unafraid to use these connections to push policy also. In the days surrounding the 7 April speech, Henry Kissinger spoke with entertainer Bob Hope and both Nixon and Kissinger had calls with televangelist and Christian leader Billy Graham. In Kissinger's calls with both of these public personalities, he pointed out specifics about Lam Son 719 such as destroying more supplies than in Cambodia in 1970, setting the NVA back many months, keeping Hanoi from major offensives in 1971, and achieving their political goals. He even told Hope that "the 150 tanks that [the NVA] had near Tchepone would have come to First Corps this year," and that the American and ARVN forces "destroyed 100,000 tons of supplies."²¹⁵ While this is certainly a deeper level of military detail than most comedians like Hope would need to know, Kissinger perhaps expected Hope to assist the administration in messaging beyond surface-level support.

²¹³ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Chuck Bailey; early afternoon; 27 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Henry Hubbard; 20 March 1971 2:05pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Marty Schramm; 7 April 1971 8:45pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Tom Braden; 6 April 1971 7:31pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (1 of 2): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; William Buckley/Henry Kissinger; 7 April 1971 9:50pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (1 of 2): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; President/Henry Kissinger; 22 March 1971 3:35PM; folder Conversations – Chron File, 19-24, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

²¹⁴ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Amb. Bush; 2 April 1971 morning; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (1 of 2): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

²¹⁵ Telcon; Henry Kissinger/Bob Hope; 2:37pm; 29 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Telcon; Kissinger/Billy Graham; 9:23am; 30 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 25-31, March 1971 (2 of 3): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library. Tape of a 7 April 1971 9:52pm telephone conversation between President Nixon and Billy Graham in Brinkley and Nichter, 54.

The third perspective one gleans from this period is Nixon's focus on discrediting his detractors. Journalist James Reston explained Nixon's success in this area. "Tricky tactics became common for a very simple reason: they worked. The voters didn't like Communists and they weren't very hot on reporters either, so Nixon bashed both."²¹⁶ The hostile relationship between the press and the Nixon administration began even before Nixon took office, and this period from March to April 1971 was no different. In his 22 March television interview, Nixon pointed to "philosophical difference" and different "vantage points" as the reason why he had fewer supporters in the press than any president in the twentieth century. Although he used the interview to highlight occasions where the media was incorrect, the president carefully pointed out that he was not there to "bait the press," that he was not claiming that press inaccuracies were "deliberate or distorted," nor was he complaining.²¹⁷ Though vocal in his disdain for the press in private, Nixon was careful in his public words, often delegating the public press bashing to other administration members, especially Vice President Spiro Agnew.²¹⁸ In a letter to all members of Congress in late March 1971, NBC president Julian Goodman complained of White House attempts to "interfere with the free flow of information" with "groundless attacks on television journalism for partisan purposes."²¹⁹ In an unusual on-air editorial the same week, NBC Anchorman John Chancellor declared, "Various people in the administration, including the president and vice president, have been making nasty cracks about the TV coverage of the

²¹⁶ James Reston, *Deadline: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991), 408. On this same page, Reston also questions the rationality of Nixon's view of a hostile press, writing, "Nixon insisted that the eastern press was invariably hostile to him. This was odd, for almost every head of the Washington newspaper bureaus of his time was a conservative. During the honeymoon period, when an aide observed that the press was supporting him 90 percent of the time, he remarked, 'But, oh, that other ten percent!'"

²¹⁷ Nixon, 22 March Interview.

²¹⁸ Agnew was particularly critical in public during this period of a CBS documentary "The Selling of the Pentagon," and a *Newsweek* article about his lowered profile. "A Bleak Week for Richard Nixon," *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971.

²¹⁹ Matt Schudel, "Julian Goodman, NBC president who battled White House and apologized for 'Heidi Bowl,' dies at 90," *The Washington Post*, 4 July 2012.

campaign in southern Laos.... We haven't been able to tell the whole story because we haven't been allowed to."²²⁰

Another target for disparagement were communists, both foreign and domestic. Journalist and presidential researcher Ken Hughes calls Nixon "America's foremost anti-Communist politician of the Cold War." James Reston writes that Nixon was so successful in his crusade against communism that "it became standard Republican strategy for a generation." Nixon would even combine these criticisms by labeling unfriendly journalists as communists.²²¹ However, not every attempt at denigration worked. During a visit to the Pentagon on 1 May 1970, the morning after his address announcing the Cambodian operation, Nixon was recorded using the word "bums" to describe campus protestors. He wrote later in his memoirs, "I was referring to the arsonists at Berkeley and Yale and the Stanford firebombers and others like them.... Within a few days, it was the widespread impression that I had referred to all student protesters as 'bums.'" Kissinger threw a little more blame on his boss, writing that "the president's statements, oscillating between the maudlin and the strident, did not help in a volatile situation where everything was capable of misinterpretation. His 1 May off-the-cuff reference to 'bums...blowing up campuses,' a gibe overheard by reporters during a visit to the Pentagon, was a needless challenge, although it was intended to refer only to a tiny group of students who had firebombed a building and burned the life's research of a Stanford professor."²²²

²²⁰ "TV v. the Pentagon," *Time*, 5 April 1971.

²²¹ Ken Hughes, "Richard Nixon: Foreign Affairs," University of Virginia: Miller Center, accessed 11 November 2019, <https://millercenter.org/president/nixon/foreign-affairs>. Reston, *Deadline*, 408. In one example, Nixon described some reporters as "trying to serve Hanoi." Telcon; Henry Kissinger/President Nixon; 7:43pm, 17 March 1971; folder Conversations – Chron File, 13-18, March 1971 (2 of 2): Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

²²² Nixon, *RN*, 456. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 511.

Conclusion

While a picture “doesn’t lie,” the story that it tells depends upon the perspective of the camera’s lens. Its narrative can vary widely depending on how near or far the photographer zooms. An assessment of a historical event similarly depends upon the parameters of both time and geography. As President Nixon said to Howard K. Smith about assessing Lam Son 719, “We can only see it in perspective because its goals were long range.” Any evaluation of the success or failure of the Nixon administration’s communication strategy after Lam Son 719 would also depend on one’s limits of time and space. If Nixon’s goal was to withdraw U.S. troops and leave behind a stable and sustainable South Vietnam, history would show that by April 1975, with Communist forces toppling Saigon months after Nixon’s resignation from office, the American effort had come up short. However, if his goal was to prevent a domestic backlash after Lam Son 719 resembling the level of violence and upheaval that occurred after Cambodia, the president had succeeded. Even expanding Nixon’s goal to include gaining “enough political capital to achieve diplomatic successes with China and the USSR and win re-election in 1972,” the administration prevailed. It was this success that provides the greatest viewpoints in the administration’s political messaging from 18 March to 7 April 1971.²²³

In hindsight, Operation Lam Son 719 was, at best, unable to achieve all of its goals. At worst, it exemplified the failure of Vietnamization, precipitated the destruction of South Vietnam, and showcased America’s defeat on the global stage. President Nixon continued to maintain as late as 1990 that Lam Son 719, in conjunction with the operation in Cambodia to cut “the flow of troops and arms from North Vietnam into South Vietnam,” had “enabled us to wind

²²³ Expanding the perspective even further, Nixon argues in 1990 that “by holding off the North Vietnamese until the mid-1970s,” America’s involvement in the Vietnam War gave the region’s developing countries time to grow into non-communist, economic successes, pointing to Singaporean president Lee Kwan Yew’s words to Sir Robert Thompson as affirmation. Richard Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 340.

down our involvement in war.”²²⁴ Ultimately, Nixon remained loyal, at least in public, to his assessment in 1978 that Lam Son was a “military success but a psychological defeat.”²²⁵ Melvin Laird and Creighton Abrams remained similarly optimistic. In the only authorized biography of Laird published in 2008, author Dale Van Atta writes that the former Secretary of Defense believed “that the operation diverted the North for a period of time to reconstruct that portion of the supply route.”²²⁶ General Abrams, who described Lam Son as the “largest battle of the war to date,” considered the operation a “death blow” to Hanoi in August 1971.²²⁷

Others were more critical of the operation. Henry Kissinger wrote that Lam Son “fell far short of our expectations,” and that the operation “clearly did not realize all our hopes; nor did it fail completely.”²²⁸ Alexander Haig recalled, “It was clear to all, and especially to Nixon, that the operation had gone wrong.”²²⁹ In its official post-operation assessment written around March 1972, MACV criticized ARVN “command and control,” blamed “strict security measures and the close-hold nature of the plan” for the less-than-ideal execution from both the American and

²²⁴ Nixon, *In the Arena*, 341. Nixon argues in this 1990 memoir that Vietnamization “had made the South Vietnamese armed forces an effective fighting force,” pointing to the 1972 Easter Offensive as an example of the ARVN’s ability to hold the North Vietnamese at bay. Nixon, *In the Arena*, 343. This 1990 memoir was Nixon’s last book in which he addressed the Vietnam War directly. In *Beyond Peace*, which Nixon completed shortly before his passing in 1994, he points out the economic success of Vietnam in contrast to North Korea and Cuba, and recommends that the United States should keep the bilateral political relationship with Vietnam in a “deep freeze as long as Hanoi continues to treat as second-class citizens the millions of South Vietnamese who were our allies in the war,” but that we should strengthen our economic relationship to draw Vietnam “further into the global economy.” Richard Nixon, *Beyond Peace* (New York: Random House, 1994), 136-137.

²²⁵ Nixon, *RN*, 498-499.

²²⁶ Dale Van Atta, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 350-351.

²²⁷ Abrams as quoted in Sorley, *A Better War*, 270.

²²⁸ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1009-1010. In his 2003 memoir, Kissinger repeats much of what he wrote in 1979, including the “conceived in ambivalence and assailed by skepticism” line. In 2003, he casts more blame on General Abrams, writing that Abrams “was being given tasks beyond human capability and perhaps endurance.” Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 199.

²²⁹ Haig, *Inner Circles*, 274.

South Vietnamese militaries, and concluded that “Lam Son 719 did not lessen the North Vietnamese intent to continue aggressive operations in South Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia.”²³⁰

In their memoirs published in 1978 and 1979, both Nixon and Kissinger pointed to the absence of a North Vietnamese attack for the remainder of 1971 and the South Vietnamese ability to repel Hanoi’s Easter Offensive in 1972, however marginally, as evidence of the success of Lam Son 719. “Thanks to Lam Son,” Nixon wrote, “there was no Communist offensive in 1971 despite the largest influx of materiel in the history of the war.” Kissinger echoed a similar argument. “The combination of South Vietnamese ground forces and American air power,” he recalled, “enabled us just barely to blunt the North Vietnamese offensive in 1972. Without the attrition caused by the incursions into Laos and Cambodia, this would have been impossible. The campaigns of 1970 and 1971, in my view, saved us in 1972.”²³¹ MACV also took this view, writing in its assessment that “Lam Son 719 might even have forestalled any major offensive until the spring of 1972.”²³²

A common theme throughout these recollections is the negativity caused by press coverage. Nixon, Kissinger, and Haig all saw the media’s reporting as selective, especially when it came to the treatment of the ARVN retreat. All three pointed to the image of ARVN soldiers clinging to helicopter skids as the most notable example of the media’s distortion having lasting consequences. “It took only a few televised films,” Nixon wrote, “of ARVN soldiers clinging to the skids of our evacuation helicopters to reinforce the widespread misconception of the ARVN

²³⁰ DTIC MACV 1971 Command History Volume 2, E-37, E-45.

²³¹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1009.

²³² DTIC MACV 1971 Command History Volume 2, E-45. Claims that Lam Son 719 prevented communist attacks in 1971 have since been undercut to some degree by research in Vietnamese archives showing that the North Vietnamese had no plans to attack in 1971 and that Hanoi’s hand may have been weaker than the Nixon administration thought, with fissures expanding in the relationship between the North Vietnamese, Chinese and Soviets, partly due to Nixon’s opening to China. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 206, 228.

forces as incompetent and cowardly.”²³³ Kissinger recalled that the ARVN “extracted themselves in a tolerable fashion,” called the images of retreating ARVN “unedifying and untypical,” and claimed that there was no way for the White House to give a balanced assessment as “those pictures destroyed any such prospect, and Washington was so badly informed and the operation deviated so much from the original plan that an alternative set of facts was not available in time.”²³⁴ Even in 1992, Haig sided with his bosses, writing that “On the whole, it was an orderly withdrawal, but television footage showed panicky ARVN soldiers clinging to the skids of American helicopters as the machines lifted out of the battle zone.”²³⁵

It turns out that a picture, while it does not lie, is also worth a thousand words. The image of ARVN soldiers on helicopter skids came to define Operation Lam Son 719 for decades. Yet, President Nixon would not allow this psychological and public relations failure to become a political one. By campaigning, and winning, in 1968 on a promise to “end the war and win peace in the Pacific” by helping South Vietnam “fight the war and not fight it for them,” Nixon locked his administration on the path of withdrawal from the first day of his presidency.²³⁶ By March 1971, one month into Lam Son 719, Nixon had to consider his strategy for re-election in 1972, possibly against Senator Ted Kennedy.²³⁷ Nixon also contended with a domestic anti-war movement enflamed by the campus violence of 1970 and a Congress increasingly less supportive by the day. He had plans for historic diplomatic breakthroughs with China and the Soviet Union. The way to achieve success in those areas was to exit Vietnam as soon as possible, no matter the result of Lam Son 719. Fortunately, the American public agreed.

²³³ Nixon, *RN*, 498-499.

²³⁴ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1009.

²³⁵ Haig, *Inner Circles*, 277.

²³⁶ Willbanks, 4.

²³⁷ Nixon, and the country, would not learn that a weaker Senator George McGovern would win the Democratic nomination until 1972. Jack Anderson, “Don’t count out Ted Kennedy,” *The Free Lance-Star*, 4 June 1971.

Weeks before Nixon's 7 April address, many in the media predicted that the president would announce an acceleration in troop withdrawals regardless of the ARVN's performance in Lam Son.²³⁸ It was simply a balancing of competing interests, namely President Thieu's reelection bid in October 1971, which compelled the president to decide on the figure of 100,000 troops by 1 December 1971. However, while Nixon may have accepted privately that Lam Son 719 was a lost cause, saying things like "if it fails, it fails" to Kissinger, he had to maintain optimism in public with lines like "leave in a way that gives the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance to survive" in his address.²³⁹ Yet, some of those journalists who correctly predicted that the president would pull out more troops from South Vietnam despite bad news from Laos were incorrect in their second prediction—that the American people would object enough for Nixon to lose re-election.²⁴⁰ At least some credit for preventing the second prediction from coming to fruition goes to the administration's public messaging.

The path from failure on 18 March to announcing success on 7 April was not a natural one, but one carved deliberately by Nixon, his White House team, and their surrogates inside and outside of government. With the president's television appearances on 22 March and 7 April, the

²³⁸ On 18 March, *The New York Times*'s Alvin Shuster quoted a South Vietnamese "associate" of President Thieu as saying that "Nixon will be able to claim it was all a success and thus American boys can go home sooner." Alvin Shuster, "Thieu, facing election, sees political gains in Laos drive," *The New York Times*, 18 March 1971. On 19 March, *Wall Street Journal* editors wrote that "results in Laos will be less than Washington wanted, though officials will claim successes." *The Wall Street Journal*, What's News, 19 March 1971. Further examples of journalists predicting Nixon's acceleration of withdrawals regardless of Lam Son 719 results can be found in: Alvin Shuster, "'Only Time Will Tell' Whether Laos Was Worth It," *The New York Times*, 28 March 1971. Peter R. Kann and Richard J. Levine, "Assessing Laos; The Invasion Is Seen As Inconclusive Chapter In an Inconclusive War," *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 1971. David S. Broder, "Mr. Nixon and Vietnamization," *The Washington Post*, 1 April 1971. "Assessing the Laos Situation," *Newsweek*, 5 April 1971. "Balance Sheet on Laos – Victory or Defeat," *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 April 1971.

²³⁹ FRUS, Volume VII, Document 174.

²⁴⁰ Joseph Kraft predicted on 23 March that "Laos marks a sea change in public opinion on the war," continuing later, "The President can no longer take the country in tow on Vietnam simply by saying Forward March." Joseph Kraft, "Nixon's Waning Support," *The Washington Post*, 23 March 1971. One *New York Times* reader predicted on 27 March that if Nixon tried to call Lam Son a success, he would lose re-election, writing, "the American public will still recognize [Nixon's] failure as well as his unfulfilled hawkish inclinations." Edward Jayne, "Laos... 'One More Such Victory,'" *The New York Times*, Letters to the Editor, 27 March 1971.

administration redirected the narrative by redefining success from military victory to fulfilling a moral duty and by extending the boundaries of the debate from the borders of Laos to freedom around the world. Unlike Cambodia the year before, this strategy worked in 1971 because Nixon correctly read the public opinion landscape and told a war-weary American people what they wanted to hear.

James Reston wrote in his 1991 memoirs about his reluctance to write about the Vietnam War once more. “From first to last, I felt that war involved so many lies, cost so many lives, divided so many friends, and raised so many questions about the judgment of our officials that I hated to think about raking through the rubble one last time.”²⁴¹ The war left a legacy upon American, Vietnamese, and Southeast Asian societies that can be felt to this day. The way that Americans now question the morality of foreign policy decisions, America’s role in the world, and the credibility of news is, in large part, because of Vietnam. However, by looking at this period of the war from 18 March to 7 April 1971, another legacy emerges—one of presidential communications.

This legacy upon American society is perhaps just as indelible. President Nixon’s actions after Lam Son 719 showed that failure could be spun into success. Just because the media repeated its refrain that Lam Son 719 was a failure for Vietnamization, the Nixon White House overcame that obstacle through deliberate and effective messaging to the American people and strategic outreach to China and the Soviet Union, all with assistance from increasing public indifference to the war. Before his 7 April speech, President Nixon told Henry Kissinger,

²⁴¹ Reston, *Deadline*, 313.

“People don’t want to hear about sorrow so much.”²⁴² So Nixon stopped talking about sorrow. And then, so did the American people.

²⁴² Telcon; Henry Kissinger/the president; 7 April 4:10pm; folder Conversations – Chron File, 1-7 April 1971 (2 of 2); Box 9; Kissinger Telcons; Nixon Library.

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