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~~TOP SECRET SENSITIVE~~ 251230Z MAR 71 VIA CAS CHANNELS

FROM: AMBASSADOR BUNKER, SAIGON 0737
TO: THE WHITE HOUSE, EXCLUSIVELY EYES ONLY HENRY A. KISSINGER
REF: TELEPHONE CONVERSATION MARCH 24 A.M. AND SAIGON 0766
SUBJECT: LAN SON 719: PUBLIC REACTION AND POSSIBLE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES:

1. I THINK IT IS FAIR TO SAY THAT VIETNAMESE PUBLIC REACTION TO LAN SON 719 WENT THROUGH THREE PHASES, AN INITIAL EUPHORIA; FOLLOWED BY DOUBTS IN THE LATTER PART OF FEBRUARY THAT THE CAMPAIGN WAS GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN; AND FINALLY A RESURGENCE OF CONFIDENCE IN ARVN AND PRIDE IN ITS ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

2. INITIAL REACTION. THE INITIAL THRUST INTO LAOS SET OFF A WAVE OF EXCITEMENT IN SOUTH VIETNAM STIMULATED BY SEEING ARVN PENETRATE AN AREA THE ENEMY HAD CONSIDERED HIS OWN FOR SO MANY YEARS. VIRTUALLY ALL NATIONALIST ELEMENTS WERE INSPIRED BY THE IDEA THAT ARVN TROOPS WERE ATTACKING ALONG AND ACROSS THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL. LACK OF HEAVY CONTACT WITH THE NORTH VIETNAMESE IN THE INITIAL STAGES GAVE RISE TO THE BELIEF THAT LAN SON 719 MIGHT BE A RE-PLAY OF THE SWEEPS INTO CAMBODIA THE PREVIOUS SPRING.

3. A CONCOMITANT OF THIS ENTHUSIASM WAS THE SURFACING OF NEW CALLS FOR A "MARCH NORTH" TO SETTLE THE WAR ONCE AND FOR ALL. THE MOST VOCAL ADVOCATES WERE THE NORTHERN REFUGEES, BUT SOME SOUTHERNERS AND MANY PEOPLE IN MR 1 WERE ALSO SYMPATHETIC. MANY MORE VIETNAMESE, WHILE NOT FAVORING AN ACTUAL MILITARY ATTACK ON NORTH VIETNAM, NEVERTHELESS FELT THE THREAT EXERTED DESIRABLE PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE ON HANOI.

State Dept review completed

4. DOUBTS. IMPRESSIONS THAT THE CAMPAIGN WAS GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN RECEIVED A JOLT IN THE LATTER PART OF FEBRUARY WHEN REPORTS OF HEAVY ARVN CASUALTIES BEGAN TO CIRCULATE. THE EXTREMELY HEAVY LOSSES OF THE 39TH RANGER BATTALION AND OF THE AIRBORNE TROOPS STRUGGLING TO RETAIN CONTROL OF HILL 31 ADDED TO THE UNEASINESS. INADEQUATE OFFICIAL EXPLANATIONS OF WHAT WAS ACTUALLY HAPPENING IN LAOS COUPLED WITH SENSATIONAL WIRE SERVICE ACCOUNTS HELPED TO COMPOUND FEARS THAT THE OPERATION HAD RUN INTO TROUBLE. IN SOME QUARTERS, DOUBT WAS EXPRESSED WHETHER THE AMERICANS WERE PROVIDING ADEQUATE SUPPORT. VICE PRESIDENT KY WAS ESPECIALLY UNHELPFUL IN THIS RESPECT.

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5. RESURGENCE OF CONFIDENCE. WITH THE ADVANCE TO TCHEPONE IN EARLY MARCH AND NEW REPORTS THAT ARVN WAS ACQUITTING ITSELF WELL AGAINST THE WELL-ARMED AND NUMERICALLY SUPERIOR NORTH VIETNAMESE FORCES, CONFIDENCE IN ARVN RETURNED TO A HIGH LEVEL AND HAS PERSISTED. No Objection to Declassification in Full 2012/10/02 : LOC-HAK-490-3-38-3 /

WIDESPREAD PUBLIC MAY BE STATIONS OF SUPPORT. IN ARVN WERE
TWO WEEKS, ENCOURAGEMENT OF THE CAPTION AND STATEMENTS IN
SUPPORT OF THE TROOPS HAVE BEEN POURING IN FROM PROVINCIAL
COUNCILMEN AND CIVIC GROUPS. ON MARCH 13, UPPER HOUSE LEADERS
FORMALLY PRAISED THE FIGHTING SPIRIT OF THE MEN INVOLVED. A
CITIZENS CAMPAIGN, WHICH GREW OUT OF A RECENT CONFERENCE OF
PROVINCIAL COUNCIL CHAIRMEN, AND IS NAMED THE MOVEMENT FOR THE
REAR SUPPORT OF THE SOLDIERS AT THE FRONT, IS SET TO RUN FROM
MARCH 20 TO APRIL 4. DEMONSTRATIONS ARE BEING PLANNED IN EVERY
PROVINCE FOR SATURDAY IN SUPPORT OF THE ARMED FORCES.

7. A FURTHER MATTER FOR SATISFACTION HAS BEEN THE FACT THAT
THE FIGHTING HAS TAKEN PLACE OUTSIDE OF VIETNAM. THERE IS PRIDE
IN THE FACT THAT ARVN HAS BEEN ABLE TO CONDUCT TWO CAMPAIGNS
OUTSIDE THE BORDERS OF VIETNAM SIMULTANEOUSLY. PEOPLE WERE
ENCOURAGED TO SEE THE INITIATIVE WITH THE ARVN AND THERE WAS
A FEELING THAT THIS INDICATED A SHIFT IN THE BALANCE OF POWER.
THAT THE DRIVE INTO LAOS MAY HAVE FORESTALLED NORTH VIETNAMESE
ATTACKS INTO THE NOW PEACEFUL COASTAL PLAIN WAS ESPECIALLY
APPRECIATED IN CENTRAL VIET-NAM.

8. CRITICISM. THERE HAS BEEN VERY LITTLE PUBLIC DISAPPROVAL OF
LAM SON 719, EVEN FROM OPPOSING POLITICIANS, MOST OF WHOM HAVE
PRAISED THE OPERATION OR HAVE REMAINED SILENT. THE NUMBER OF
CASUALTIES SUFFERED BY ARVN, HOWEVER, REMAINS A SENSITIVE ISSUE.
THE MAJOR OVERT CRITIC OF THE OPERATION HAS BEEN VICE PRESIDENT
KY. HE FIRST EXPRESSED FEARS OF A POSSIBLE "BOGGING DOWN" THE
DAY THE OPERATION BEGAN AND THEN PREMATURELY ISSUED A CALL FOR
TERMINATION OF THE OPERATION TO REST THE TROOPS.

9. THERE HAS BEEN MUCH CRITICISM OF THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION
AND GENERAL GVN AND ARVN PRESS POLICY ON THE OPERATION FROM
BOTH GOVERNMENT SUPPORTERS AND OPPOSITIONISTS. IT WAS FELT
THAT BOTH THE MINISTRY AND THE BRIEFERS FAILED TO PROVIDE TIMELY
AND AUTHORITATIVE INFORMATION TO PUT DOWN SPOT RUMORS AND PUT
MATTERS IN PERSPECTIVE.

10. THERE IS A CONSIDERABLE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN THE VIETNAMESE
INTERPRETATION OF THE OPERATION'S RESULTS AND THE VIEW PRESENTED
IN THE FOREIGN PRESS. MUCH OF THE LATTER PRESENTS THE WITH-
DRAWAL PHASE AS A DEFEAT FOR ARVN. THE VIEW OF THE VIETNAMESE
PRESS, PROADMINISTRATION AND OPPOSITIONIST, IS THAT LAM SON 719
WAS A VERY HEAVILY FOUGHT ENGAGEMENT IN WHICH SOME THINGS WENT
WRONG, BUT THAT BASIC OBJECTIVES WERE ACHIEVED AND THAT THE ARVN
FOUGHT ADMIRABLY.

11. POLITICAL EFFECT. IT IS TOO EARLY TO EVALUATE THE POLITICAL
IMPACT OF THE OPERATION WITH ASSURANCE. MANY POLITICAL FIGURES
HAVE COMMENTED THAT SUCCESS IN LAM SON 719 WOULD GREATLY
ENHANCE THIEU'S POSITION. THERE HAVE BEEN SOME REPORTS THAT IT
HAS ALREADY RESULTED IN MORE POSITIVE SUPPORT FOR THE GOVERNMENT.
THIEU HIMSELF HAS REFLECTED THIS FEELING IN RECENT TALKS I HAVE
HAD WITH HIM. I THINK IT IS FAIR TO SAY THAT LAM SON 719 HAS
BEEN A POLITICAL PLUS IN THE CONFIDENCE IT HAS CREATED IN THE
ABILITY OF ARVN AND IN PRIDE IN ITS ACCOMPLISHMENTS. THERE
HAS BEEN SATISFACTION IN THE FACT THAT THE FIGHTING HAS TAKEN
PLACE OUTSIDE THE BORDERS OF SOUTH VIETNAM AND THAT WHILE ARVN
HAS HAD HEAVY LOSSES IT HAS INFLECTED FAR HEAVIER CASUALTIES
ON THE ENEMY.