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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

Office of the Secretary of Defense

Chief, RDD, ESD, WHS

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Declassify: X Deny in Full: _____

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Reason: _____

MDR: 12-M-0422

March 24, 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Assessment of MENU Operations

GENERAL

Since March 18, 1969 a major interdiction program has been conducted against six (6) base camps used by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Cambodia. The strikes were intermittent from March through early August 1969. Since that time, however, there have been weekly strikes with an average intensity of about 86 sorties per week. The most intensive period was from mid-September through early October when, during a three week period, 431 sorties were flown. For the nearly one year period, from March 18, 1969 through March 9, 1970, the cumulative effort was as follows:

Total sorties flown: 3,191

Total tonnage of munitions dropped: 91,363

Base areas struck: 6

To provide a frame of reference, the B-52 effort to date against the Cambodian base areas is nearly one-fifth the tonnage dropped by U.S. forces in the Pacific theater during all of World War II.

As you would presume, I have asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for periodic assessments of the MENU operations. I made such a request on September 30, 1969, on January 27, 1970, and, again, on March 9, 1970. The Chiefs, based substantially on information received from the field, have responded privately to each of my requests. More recently, on March 20, 1970, I have asked for still another assessment, this time with emphasis on photographic evidence of results and the risks for any Cambodian troops which might be in the proximity of target areas. A response to the March 20 request is still outstanding.

SPECIFIC RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS

In each report provided to me by the Chiefs of Staff and MACV, there has been a strong affirmation about the value of the strikes.

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File 13 Vietnam Book by 2 Keen for See Day camp (Ma Land)
acc 330-74-142, WNA

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Sihanouk visited 18 Mar
Evaluation prepared
before his visit.

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In the February and March reports, for example, the Chiefs said:

- MENU strikes continue to produce outstanding results. By this, the Chiefs mean that extensive damage and destruction of facilities have resulted, with concomitant -- but unspecified -- losses to the enemy of troops and material. Conclusive evidence is sparse, but reconnaissance and enemy combat patterns seem to substantiate the claimed favorable results.
- Enemy reactions to MENU strikes indicate that NVA/VC activity levels have decreased in the immediate strike area. Supplies have been dispersed over a greater area and into more densely covered unstruck areas. Storage areas have been abandoned and reestablished, the Chiefs believe, in unstruck areas. However, MENU operations are shifted to strike supplies in new locations (within broad general base areas) and to destroy underground facilities. The use of cyclic target times and diversification of strike areas are effective counter-measures, according to the Chiefs, to enemy actions.
- MENU operations serve, according to military judgment, as an essential and logical ingredient in the overall interdiction campaign applied against the enemy. Enemy personnel and materiel, which would otherwise be available for use in South Vietnam, are denied. Significantly, the Chiefs note "the successful destruction of enemy supplies by MENU strikes ... may well be reflected in the current logistical crash program of resupply being conducted through the Laotian panhandle." Such a conclusion suggests that, despite the logistical flows through Laos, the total availability of supplies to the enemy may be less today than in prior comparable periods.
- MENU operations have pre-empted and reduced enemy operations. MACV attributes in part to the MENU strikes (a) the enemy's withdrawal from the Ben Het/Dak To area in May-June 1969, (b) the failure of an enemy assault to materialize in Phuoc Long and Binh Long Provinces in August 1969, and (c) the subsequent enemy failures against the Bu Prang and Duc Lap CIDG camps. Furthermore, MACV believes

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- . MENU strikes along the III Corps tactical zone periphery have been an essential element in reducing the enemy threat to the broad geographic area around Saigon, and, in effect, "maintaining Saigon as a no risk area."
- . MENU operations have a direct bearing, according to MACV, on the success of Vietnamization. Since the start of MENU a year ago, MACV notes the enemy's potential for major offensives has progressively deteriorated. This deterioration "has been a prime factor in creating the situation which has permitted a reduction of U.S. forces." A logical corollary to MACV's judgment would be that as long as MENU operations continue, further redeployments are reasonably safe.
- . MENU operations may have played a significant role in the recent political changes in Cambodia. While such an assessment on MACV's and the Joint Chiefs' part is speculative, it is undoubtedly true that MENU pressure against NVA/VC sanctuaries along the South Vietnam/Cambodian borders has put new pressure on the enemy. He could go no deeper into Cambodia, without creating even more intense Cambodian reaction. He was denied sanctuary in the base areas by virtue of MENU strikes. He could not move into South Vietnam without encountering friendly (US/GVN) forces. This squeeze has been gradually increasing in intensity over the past year. MACV believes "the Cambodians have been aware of these developments, probably more so than the Free World side. They have seen the VC control of the base areas deteriorate. At the same time, they have seen NVA moving in throughout all Cambodia, even to the base areas 704 and 709, opposite the South Vietnamese Delta."
- . The costs and risks of the MENU operations are, in the military judgment, sustainable. Through March 9, 1970, the direct operating costs for the strikes have been about \$125 million. The operational risks are minimal because of the location of the MENU targets. The political risks are a continuing factor which must be kept in mind. To an extent they are a function of visibility. Major efforts have been taken, as you know, to keep the operations, and the fact of such operations, secure. The number of personnel involved in MENU

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and the disclosure of MENU data are highly restricted. All message traffic is by special security channels, with limited distribution. Target coordinates are hand-carried to ground control sites just prior to strikes. Reporting of events and sightings that could be related to MENU is controlled to avoid inadvertent disclosure. Current security measures are considered adequate and effective. Nonetheless, given the massive areas of destruction and the unique patterns which aerial bombardment provide, it is not unreasonable to assume that disclosure of the strikes could come. We should think about a public affairs policy if such a disclosure were to break.

SUMMARY COMMENTS

In each evaluation provided to me, the Chiefs and MACV have concluded that MENU operations have been effective and can continue to be so with acceptable risks. From an operational standpoint, I see no alternative but to accept that judgment. Both Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams told me during my recent visit to Saigon that MENU has been one of the most telling operations in the entire war.

There are, of course, continuing political risks. We must be mindful of those as the total extent of damage and the sensitivity of the U.S. populace to war expansion grow. On balance, however, I support the Chiefs' conclusion that "the balance of risk versus value remains ... in our favor."

MELVIN R. LAIRD

Prepd: BGen Pursley/ts
24 March 1970

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