

SF EdR
[0064/19/001]

March 4, 1969

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Possible Responses to Enemy Activity
in South Vietnam

Attached is a memorandum from Mel Laird summarizing his views on the nature of the North Vietnamese offensive and his appraisal on counter-actions which might be undertaken.

Mel is anxious that you have this memorandum prior to his departure for Europe.

Attachment

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DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, as amended, Sect 3.5

NLN 06-26/23 per ltr. 1/26/2010

By JMR NARA, Date 6/1/2010

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THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

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The General Situation

Our military commanders believe that the enemy has the capability, and is likely, to sustain for some time a campaign of attacks by fire and by ground assaults against allied military installations and selected civilian targets. The enemy has not yet committed many main force units to ground actions. It is possible, therefore, that intense fighting could develop during the next few weeks, particularly in I Corps near the DMZ and Danang, and in III Corps around Saigon.

Our commanders are confident that they can deal effectively with the military aspect of this campaign. At the same time, all concerned recognize that the enemy's principal aim in this campaign is almost certainly psychological -- to raise the level of US casualties, to increase the level of dissent against the war here, to demonstrate their continued military capability, and to dramatize the inability of allied forces to prevent them from striking targets of their choice. While they have succeeded in their objective of increasing US casualties, the degree of success in attaining other objectives is as yet unclear.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff believe that the field commanders are doing everything possible in South Vietnam within the limits of their resources to spoil and to counter the enemy's military activity. I concur generally in this judgment, though it is a point I shall want to discuss with General Wheeler and General Abrams during my forthcoming trip to South Vietnam.

In assessing our military activities in South Vietnam (and, perhaps, in evaluating some of the reasons for the enemy's current campaign) it is pertinent to remember that General Abrams has been operating under instructions to apply maximum possible pressure against enemy forces. The following table illustrates the high level of effort being directed against the enemy in South Vietnam.

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	<u>Jan 66</u>	<u>Jan 67</u>	<u>Jan 68</u>	<u>Jan 69</u>
<u>Strength (000)</u>				
<u>Allied Forces</u>	909.0	1216.3	1359.8	1641.4
(US Forces)	196.4	403.4	492.9	542.1
(VC/NVA Forces)	235.7	284.7	249.3	231.6
<u>Weekly Average</u>				
<u>Bn Days of Opn</u>	445	1119	1270	2136
<u>Combat Deaths</u>				
US	64	117	271	179
RVNAF	204	206	327	230
VC/NVA	598	1369	3436	2485
<u>Sorties in SVN</u>				
Attack	2743	3459	4035	3964
B-52	NA	134	152	178
<u>Consumption of</u>				
<u>Munitions (000 Tons)</u>				
Air	9.2	16.0	20.7	29.3
Ground	5.6	14.3	28.4	23.9

I do not know at this time whether there are new military initiatives which we might take in South Vietnam to cause the enemy to reduce the intensity of his attacks. That, too, is an issue I shall discuss in South Vietnam. (We shall, in this regard, continue to analyze the more recent patterns of military activity vis a vis those of 1968. We have furnished some comparative data to Dr. Kissinger's staff and will provide more as it becomes available.)

As I see the matter now, I do not believe we can prevent the enemy from initiating attacks if he believes it furthers his objectives to do so. We can make, and have made, difficult and expensive his preparing for and executing the attacks. It seems possible that a near-term reduction in the level of hostilities and casualties in Vietnam may result only from a mutual de-escalation, arrived at either in Paris or de facto on the ground. The latter is an alternative I will explore during my visit to Vietnam.

Alternatives

There are several actions which we could take in response to the increasing enemy initiated attacks in the South which, while having nominal military importance, would have a psychological impact.

We could take actions that would signal to the North Vietnamese potential preparations for military action against North Vietnam.

Such "indicator" actions could range from unmistakable signals such as moving naval gun ships or a carrier task force into the Gulf of Tonkin to ambiguous actions such as increasing the level of our manned reconnaissance effort or changing the pattern of our tanker orbits. On February 27th I asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to provide me their views on a broad range of such actions. The objective would be to elicit from the North Vietnamese a diminution of combat activity in South Vietnam, while still keeping our actual operational activity below a resumption of attacks against North Vietnamese territory.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff are concerned with the increased threat against allied forces near the DMZ. The Joint Chiefs have requested, therefore, that COMUSMACV be given authority to take such action in the southern portion of the DMZ as he deems necessary to protect our forces south of the DMZ. (MACV now has the authority to strike with air or artillery any observed enemy targets in the southern part of the DMZ, to respond to enemy fire directed against ground forces from any point in the DMZ or North Vietnam, to conduct squad size ground patrols in the DMZ with authority to reinforce to platoon size, and to conduct operations in the southern portion of the DMZ if necessary for the preservation of allied forces.) I have asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for additional information on the imminence and magnitude of the military threat and for their suggestions as to the various ways in which the threat might be met.

The intensity of fighting in northern I Corps has diminished greatly since the bombing halt and the related "understandings." I believe that is to our benefit. We do not keep separate statistics in Washington for casualties associated with operations in northern I Corps, but since November 1st, casualties in all of I Corps, which used to account for about 60% of all US combat deaths, now account for only about 38%. This differential would almost certainly be greater if we could delineate casualties along the DMZ only. I am most reluctant to re-initiate large-scale activities in and around the DMZ because I fear that doing so not only will increase the level of fighting and resulting casualties there but also will produce intense pressure to resume bombing in North Vietnam, at least in those areas immediately north of the demarcation line. Resumption of ground activity on our part up to the demarcation line might also be just the excuse the enemy is looking for to move in force across the DMZ. That could put our troops in greater jeopardy and/or force redeployment of our units.

Ambassador Bunker, General Abrams, and Admiral McCain (CINCPAC) concurred in recommending a 96-hour air and naval campaign against North Vietnam south of 19° in response to the early days of the enemy offensive. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had previously taken a position in support of a military response to enemy attacks on civilian population centers. I am impressed with a CIA judgment that Hanoi may well be attempting to provoke a US retaliation "disproportionate to the provocation," resulting in "domestic and international criticism of the US Government and pressures

for an early settlement." Additionally, CIA suggests that "North Vietnam would be likely to suspend the Paris talks. Its objective would not be to break them off permanently, but to use the suspension as an instrument of pressure for a renewal of negotiations in conditions more favorable to them." I believe we should continue to take an extremely cautious attitude toward any resumption of hostilities against the territory of North Vietnam and that any such action should be thoroughly discussed with Paris and Saigon, as well as here in Washington before it is undertaken.

Recommendations

I am leaving for Vietnam on Wednesday morning, March 5. I am hopeful that after my discussions with Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams I will be in a better position to make specific recommendations to you regarding actions to be taken in Vietnam. I will be especially interested in pursuing whether any of the suggested alternatives - or any new alternatives - might accomplish the purpose of deterring the enemy's present campaign, and more importantly, what impact they might have in terms of the Paris negotiations.

Based on some preliminary doubts of the efficacy of the various military alternatives considered to date, I believe that our efforts and our thinking should focus once again on Paris negotiations. This should take place at the highest levels. I note that neither the NSC Review Group nor the NSC, itself, has Vietnam on its agenda for the next nine weeks. I believe that staff work on the key aspects of our negotiating posture in Paris should be begun on a priority basis, and that the Review Group and the NSC should meet as soon as possible to review the appropriate papers.

Until we can instruct our negotiators in Paris of our positions on the most critical elements, specifically our position on withdrawals, it seems to me that we are not in a position to press ahead with the discussions in Paris.

