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The Honorable Paul Nitze

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This is the estimative paper which you requested in your memorandum to me of 21 February. Difficult as it was to compose, we hope it will be helpful to you.

Herewith are three copies. Please let us know if you want distribution to other individuals in the Government. You have the only copies outside this Agency.

(Signed) Richard Helms
Richard Helms

Attachments - 3
"The Outlook in Vietnam"

27 February 1968

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Executive Registry

108-968

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

26 February 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Outlook in Vietnam

1. This Memorandum does not seek to explore all aspects of the situation in Vietnam, or its probable development over a long term. It is addressed only to the specific question put to us, i.e., whether developments in Vietnam are apt to involve a continuation of combat into the indefinite future at a level comparable or higher than current levels, or whether it is more probable that either the VC or the GVN will be unable to sustain such a level beyond a few months.

2. The current phase of combat will have a critical bearing on the further course of the war and may even prove to be decisive. We cannot be sure how long this phase will last, but it seems likely that by early summer the immediate results and the longer term implications will be fairly clear to Hanoi, Saigon, and Washington. At present, the key questions concern:

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(1) the capabilities of the Communist forces to sustain their current challenge, and whether they can continue the fighting thereafter, and (2) the capabilities of the South Vietnamese political and military establishment to cope with the tasks imposed by the present Communist offensive.

Communist Plans and Prospects

3. Hanoi's aims in the present offensive phase are: to register significant military successes against US and especially ARVN forces, and to inflict such heavy losses, physical destruction and disorganization on the GVN as to produce a total situation favorable to a negotiated settlement on Communist terms. The Communists are not likely to have a rigid timetable, but they probably hope to achieve decisive results during the course of the summer. The high importance which Hanoi now attaches to forcing the issue is evident from the risks and costs of the enterprise.

4. The toll on Communist forces has been considerable, even if reported casualties are greatly inflated by inclusion of low level recruits and impressed civilians. To some extent these losses have been offset by measures already taken. Heavy

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infiltration of both new units and replacements from the North is continuing. A strenuous, last minute recruitment effort was made prior to the Tet attacks. A significant part of the guerrilla and Main forces could still be committed. And, at present, the Communists enjoy fuller access to the rural areas, where they are recruiting heavily. They will probably be able to recoup their recent losses, though at some sacrifice in quality.

5. In any case, the Communists probably will maintain their offensive for the next several months and be prepared to accept the high losses this entails. They cannot accept such losses indefinitely, however, and they probably will not be capable soon again of launching repeated mass attacks of the magnitude and widespread scale of 30-31 January. But they are almost certainly capable of sustaining a high level of combat, including major battles with US forces, assaults on selected cities, and rocket and mortar attacks on urban areas and military installations.

6. It is possible that the Communists regard the present campaign as so critical to the outcome of the war that they will commit their full resources to a maximum effort in the near term. On balance, however, we think it likely that even if their present

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push falls short they will wish to be able to sustain a protracted struggle. Hence they will probably not exercise their capabilities in such a profligate manner as to deny themselves the possibility of continuing the struggle should the present phase fail to produce a decisive result.

GVN/ARVN Prospects

7. The will and capability of the GVN and its armed forces remain the keys to the eventual outcome.

8. In the main, the ARVN has acquitted itself fairly well since 30 January, though the record is uneven. Morale has held up on the whole, and we know of no unit defections. However, the ARVN is showing signs of fatigue and in many areas it has now lapsed into a static defensive posture. Security in the countryside has been sharply reduced. A long and costly effort would have to be undertaken to regain the pre-Tet position. It is highly unlikely that the ARVN will be inspired enough or strong enough to make such an effort -- certainly not in the near future.

9. The GVN also performed adequately in the immediate emergency, particularly in the Saigon area. There now appears

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to be a greater recognition of the need to push forward with additional measures, but the Communist challenge has not yet proved a catalyst in stimulating an urgent sense of national unity and purpose.

10. The overall position of the government has been weakened. Its prestige has suffered from the shock of the Tet offensive; its control over the countryside has been greatly reduced. Popular attitudes are confused and contradictory; the Viet Cong received virtually no popular support, but neither was there a rallying to the government side. Passivity is likely to continue as the dominant attitude in most of the population, but further military defeats could cause a sudden swing away from the government. While the central authority in Saigon is unlikely to collapse, its ability to provide energetic leadership throughout the country and all levels is in serious doubt. It is possible that over the next few months certain provinces, especially in I and IV Corps, will be lost to Saigon's effective authority.

11. The psychological factor is now critical for South Vietnam's whole political-military apparatus. The widespread rumors that the US conspired with the Communists are symptomatic

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of popular anxieties over the future course of the war and US attitudes toward a political settlement. As yet, however, there are no signs of a crisis of confidence within the government.

12. If major military reverses occur, the political and military apparatus could degenerate into general ineffectualness. If, on the other hand, US and ARVN regain the initiative and inflict some conspicuous setbacks on the Communists and the general offensive appears to be contained, then the GVN might manifest new energy and confidence and draw new support to itself. On balance, we judge that the chances are no better than even that the GVN/ARVN will emerge from the present phase without being still further weakened.

Alternative Outcomes of Present Phase

13. We believe that the Communists will sustain a high level of military activity for at least the next two or three months. It is difficult to forecast the situation which will then obtain, given the number of unknowable factors which will figure. Our best estimate is as follows:

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a. The least likely outcome of the present phase is that the Communist side will expend its resources to such an extent as to be incapable thereafter of preventing steady advances by the US/GVN.

b. Also unlikely, though considerably less so, is that the GVN/ARVN will be so critically weakened that it can play no further significant part in the military and political prosecution of the struggle.

c. More likely than either of the above is that the present push will be generally contained, but with severe losses to both the GVN and Communist forces, and that a period will set in during which neither will be capable of registering decisive gains.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



ABBOT SMITH
Chairman

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Executive Registry

108-938

13 February 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Vietnam

1. In the aftermath of the Communist Tet offensive most observers have agreed on the need to suspend judgment until more data is available. Nevertheless, such avowals have been quickly followed by broad judgments ranging from the blackest pessimism to the wildly optimistic. Inevitably, judgments concerning the objective situation in Vietnam have been mixed with and influenced by a complex of attitudes on the justification or lack thereof of our policy in the area and its impact on life in the US and our posture in the world at large. Perhaps a non-emotional approach to the problem is no longer possible for anyone with any sense of involvement. (Many of us have been involved, in one way or another since at least 1950 and can point to this or that estimate, recommendation, or action which if properly followed through by wise statesmen and soldiers would have avoided our present frustration and malaise.)

2. But here we are and our first responsibility is to assess the capabilities and intentions of our adversaries and the will and

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competence of our friends. Over the past two weeks the general trend has been to inflate the power of the former and to derogate the performance of the latter.

3. An objective appraisal of the Communist position should begin with the understanding that the winter-spring campaign -- in both its military and political aspects -- does represent a radical shift in tactics. Beginning last fall with the battles of Loc Ninh and Dakto, we witnessed a departure from the low risk approach of a protracted war effort and the switch to a determined effort to force a relatively early and successful conclusion of the conflict. This new strategy was impelled, not by a sense of great strength, but by a realization in Hanoi that the US/GVN effort in South Vietnam was gathering momentum, that manpower in the South was increasingly being denied to the Viet Cong, and that a war of resistance in the South based on a predominately northern force was not politically viable. In brief, Hanoi calculated that the strain of the war could not be borne indefinitely and that something drastic had to be done to retrieve the situation.

4. The Tet offensive itself, far from demonstrating unexpected Communist strength (give it excellent marks for daring,

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fair marks for coordination), confirmed the low state to which many local Viet Cong units had fallen. In Saigon a large number of inexperienced, recently impressed young men were used in attacks on key targets. It also appears that many local Viet Cong units had to be stiffened by North Vietnamese replacements. Surely, if better trained Viet Cong units familiar with the street plans of the various towns and cities had been available they would have been used, possibly to decisive effect. The failure of main force units -- Viet Cong and NVA -- to follow up quickly to exploit the confusion of initial attacks shows poor coordination, a lack of confidence, or both.

5. It might be said that the hoped for effect on the GVN was worth the sacrifice of the poorly trained local units and even their experienced cadre. But this does not detract from the argument that the Tet attacks are further evidence of high risk tactics on Hanoi's part. Many of the attacks were in fact carried out by Main Force units -- Viet Cong and NVA. Hanoi could not be sure that surprise would be achieved; they were risking substantial losses of trained manpower. And as it turned out, losses to these units -- as in Kontum -- were high even with surprise. Exposing the 2nd NVA Division in the vicinity of Danang-Hoi-Hu

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where it was badly beaten between 8-10 February makes no sense except in terms of a high risk determined effort for an early and decisive impact on the ARVN, the GVN, and the US.

6. Obviously, the military punishment which Communist forces took last fall along the Cambodian border, around the cities during Tet, and around Khe Sanh over the past month has not forced Hanoi to call off its major effort. The scenario is far from played out and the Communists probably have other surprises yet to spring. More NVA Divisions can be committed across the DMZ, new Soviet-made weapons can be introduced, Viet Cong units can be replenished by impressment from the unprotected countryside, perhaps Khe Sanh can be over run by a maximum effort. But Communist forces in the field are not composed of supermen, they continue to demonstrate the inability to coordinate actions closely, to meet readiness deadlines, to stand up to the superior fire power and mobility of US/ARVN forces. Their chances of success continue to rest heavily on destroying the will and effectiveness of the ARVN and GVN.

7. The failures of the ARVN and the GVN are, of course, the source of much of our pessimism and frustration. We want or expect the GVN to snap to, vitalize national administration,

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raise taxes, weed out corruption, get cracking on pacification, stimulate democracy, and generally win the hearts and minds of the people. Progress toward many of these objectives in the short term is quite unrealistic in view of the cultural inertia of a traditional confucian society and quite out of the question in the midst of a major war. Perhaps the US should be encouraged by the simple fact that a government of sorts has now been in continuous control since the emergence of Ky and Thieu in 1966. Certainly the GVN and the ARVN could and should do more -- the ARVN a good deal more -- to make the overall political and military effort more effective. But perhaps if we had expected a little less we would be more willing to acknowledge that some progress had been made before Tet, that ARVN and GVN reactions during Tet were not so futile, that South Vietnamese morale has stood up amazing well over the past two weeks, and that the outlook is not totally black. Obviously, if the US wavers at this juncture, the entire structure could unravel quickly.* But there is still no

* And if this should happen there would, of course, be no chance for a "satisfactory" negotiation to ease the US departure from Vietnam. Whether or not the US should take this opportunity to shed its burdens and make a fast exit is another matter. The point here simply is that it would have no alternative if it appeared now to reduce its commitments.

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evidence of a widespread preference for the Communists in South Vietnam, even if there is little evidence of a passionate loyalty to the GVN. (Ho Chi Minh may be a popular nationalist figure in Vietnam, this does not mean that his party shares in this esteem either in North or South Vietnam.)

8. Thus, the issue remains in doubt. The Communists have risked much already, including their prestige and the morale of their forces. Many of their regular units have been subjected to prolonged and continuous harassment and attrition. If they back off now and return to a protracted war line they will risk an adverse reaction among their less committed adherents in the South who have been sustained by hopes of an early end to the war. Meanwhile, the strains of the war which led to the adoption of high risk tactics will still be there. If they continue to commit their resources in all out effort over the next few months and fail to achieve their purpose they will be in an even less advantageous position to prolong the fighting.

JAMES GRAHAM

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