

VIETNAM AFFAIRS STAFF
O/DCI

DATE: 12 Feb 68

TO: The Director

FROM: GWallen

SUBJECT:

REMARKS:

Attached is a summary of the thrust of
this morning's meeting.



GEORGE W. ALLEN
Vietnamese Affairs Staff

Attachment

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12 February 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

SUBJECT: Staff Conference on the Vietnam Situation

1. The DCI convened a meeting in his conference room on 12 February 1968 of representatives from all components of the Agency concerned with Vietnam. He stated that the question before the meeting was whether more U.S. troops were needed in South Vietnam to cope with the type of offensive we have seen in the past ten days. He added that the problem should be viewed in terms of the anticipated performance of the Vietnamese armed forces. He asked for the views of each person present on this question.

2. Mr. George Carver (SAVA) stated that the issue of the war hangs in the balance. He seriously questioned RVNAF ability to take another heavy blow. All of ARVN is entirely committed while a major portion of the enemy's forces are not committed. We thus have a test of wills, and if cracks in the GVN apparatus appear they can rapidly spread. U.S. troops have crystallized ARVN in some areas and additional U.S. troops would help in other areas. He expressed concern about ARVN's behavior, noting that generally they have placed too much reliance on artillery, and there have been disquieting reports of looting.

3. Mr. R. J. Smith (ADDI) said that he was uncertain about the situation and that much data needed was still not available. It is still not clear whether the VC effort is pointed at a crystallization of will. The enemy's Tet offensive might have produced a good hard shock to his forces. We are not certain how many of his resources remain uncommitted. We don't know how badly his forces have been chewed up. Regarding the long-term problem, we already have too many troops in Vietnam. We are fighting the wrong kind of war and cannot accomplish by military means what needs to be accomplished by other -- political means. We should lower our level of effort for the long pull, and convince the enemy we won't get out until stability exists. He is not sure whether enclaves are the answer, but the large search and destroy missions do not seem to be the way to fight the war. If the VC indeed make an all-out effort, more

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U.S. troops might be useful to meet that threat; however, we would never get these troops out. We should stay with what we have, and shift to a long-term effort, recognizing that it might take five or six years.

4. Mr. Abbot Smith (D/ONE) agreed that we lack information. He does not expect the GVN and ARVN to collapse, basing this judgment largely on the fact that it hasn't thus far. The top GVN command knows it must stick. The worst condition would not then be a collapse, but the grievous loss of positions here and there. More U.S. troops would help ARVN to continue, but it really can't accomplish too much. He believed the problem would take longer than the five or six years cited by R. J. Smith.

5. Mr. James Graham (ONE) expressed uncertainty regarding the status of ARVN. He believes the Communists are still determined to make a large scale effort to bring about a solution unacceptable to us. Their tactic of forming new fronts is obviously an effort to bring about a coalition which would be essentially a Communist front. The enemy apparently is determined to put additional resources into the fight, including additional divisions from North Vietnam (citing the indications of the possible presence of the 316th Division north of the DMZ). If the U.S. is determined to gain a solution, involving something less than a Communist front government, it would be necessary to put in additional U.S. troops. The fight in I Corps will engage all U.S. and ARVN reserves while the Communists coordinate other attacks in other areas. This situation risks unravelling ARVN and the GVN. The Communists have been hurt but they retain significant capabilities and seem prepared to use them. If the U.S. wants a favorable solution, it must stay with what it takes to win.

6. Mr. Bill Colby (FE) said we are addressing the wrong question. More appropriate questions would be what is our policy and how determined are we to execute it? Not should we send more boys, but in what way should we use them. This is the same question we addressed in 1965. We put more forces in then, but this hasn't saved the situation. Our forces are thinly spread, we have no depth. The fact that the enemy offensive used only local forces shows how thin ours are. The enemy has a second punch he can mount with regulars, and he can pour more forces down from the North. His recent air activity shows that he is prepared to commit additional resources. If our policy is to prevent a Communist victory, then we should send more U.S. forces, make this completely a U.S. war, and set up the GVN as a colony as we did in Korea. On the other hand, if we want out, let's take advantage of the possibilities of a coalition. Gen. "Big" Minh might be our Souvanna. This would keep our options open. If we don't want that, then we need a new strategy which would get around the

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problem of thinness. When we sent in troops in 1965, we didn't change our strategy, we merely sugar-coated it with the term pacification, but we continued the emphasis on killing Communists. If our strategy is to fight a limited war, we need new approaches. Sending additional troops with the same strategy and same approaches is not enough.

7. [] (OCI) said the Communists can keep up the pressure. ARVN performance has been spotty and she is not sure ARVN can take another heavy blow. The Communists can be expected to be much more active politically and she is not sure the GVN can withstand this pressure. She is not confident that the people can withstand the combination of increased insecurity and increased Communist political action. Although the people did not support the Communists in their recent offensive, they remain essentially passive, have been intimidated and are psychologically vulnerable. She feels we do need a new strategy and that we are spread too thin militarily.

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8. [] (OCI) said that the analysts are not confident because of the lack of data. It will be difficult to make firm conclusions until we see what develops in the way of the Communists' military campaign. We cannot be sure now whether the enemy can conduct even normal levels of activity. The enemy seems still to have strong capabilities, however, and probably will carefully ration these capabilities depending on developments, exploiting advantages where they exist. He will probably keep the pressure on for as long as he can, and his abilities to dragoon people, as reflected in recent reports, suggest he may be able to replace at least some of his losses. ARVN has been badly hurt, as reflected in the indications of its lack of aggressiveness and its poor response to the more recent attacks. It looks like ARVN is headed down hill, and that we can't reverse the situation without the wholesale commitment of U. S. forces. Our best strategy might be to put in one or two more divisions to try and hold for a couple of months. There is a real danger that the intimidation of the populace will mount and that the uncommitted elements will become so tired and war weary that they will opt for accommodation with the Communists. Additional U. S. troops might hold things together.

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9. Mr. Douglas Blaufarb (FE/VNO) said we should face the fact that a coalition would be merely a face-saving way of surrendering, and he personally rules this out as an acceptable option. Additional U. S. troops would just get us deeper into the morass. It is too late for a new approach, we cannot now, in 1968, admit that our whole effort all along has been mistaken. He is hopeful that the ARVN picture is not as black as some of the others apparently believe. He thinks that ARVN may be better off than before and capable of meeting another enemy effort. The GVN leadership has behaved well, and is reflecting confidence in the

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situation. Our station in Saigon seems to feel that we are in reasonably good shape. If we do send more troops, we should attempt to get a better balance between the combat forces and support elements.

10. [] (OER) said that the situation shows that we don't have enough forces, and that the VC can tear the country apart at will. The number of additional U.S. forces required to alter the situation probably is unacceptable. The alternative would be to change our strategy, get troops into those parts of the country that count, and maintain security there. If Ambassador Komer is right in saying that the answer lies in the hearts and minds of the people, additional U.S. troops obviously are not the answer. He is quite gloomy, and feels that the best we can do is to try to weather the storm. We should change our strategy, make optimum use of our forces, and make it clear to the GVN that if it can't get going, initiate reforms, mobilize its resources, and get popular participation, then we must admit that we have made a mistake, cut our losses, and negotiate our way out while saving as much face as possible. If the GVN leaders can't cut the mustard, we ought to get out.

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11. [] (OER) said we have a number of uncertainties regarding VC capabilities, the status of ARVN, the rural situation, and the urban populace. More U.S. troops really will not contribute a lot. While they would add to our military capabilities, it is possible that a continued VC offensive would lead to massive ARVN desertions. The population might give up under pressure. Further urban attacks are likely, as the VC try to get the urban population to throw in with them. We have to change our strategy and our role -- it is not just a simple question of additional troops, we are past the point where that will do some good. We need a new strategy and a new assessment; a new strategy would enable us to withdraw gracefully.

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12. Mr. E. Drexel Godfrey (ADCI) said that if we examine what has been said by prisoners, documents, and the NLF, the target of their offensive is as much the GVN as it is the U.S. The enemy is skillful and inventful, and probably will direct the next phase of his campaign against particularly weak targets -- ARVN and the GVN. He fears this development the most, because this activity could start a stampede. Regarding U.S. reinforcements, our strategic reserve -- which consists of perhaps two divisions -- will not contribute much. Deploying this force would have serious consequences at home and we would not be able to respond to Pueblo-type incidents. We would have to go into partial mobilization because others might be tempted to take advantage of our Vietnam problem to present us with additional problems elsewhere.

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13. Mr. Joseph Smith (FE) said that he agreed generally with Bill Colby. It seems the war may be lost, and that all we have tried has not worked. We seem to have nothing to offer but proposals and suggestions for what the GVN can do. We have set up the GVN psychologically so that it merely relies on us to bail them out of their deepening difficulties. The best we have gotten from them is their willingness to participate in a joint relief effort and their performance in that effort has been dramatized by the resignation of Gen. Thang -- our "white hope." Now we are looking for the kind of GVN that can make a deal. The more we do and the more resources we commit, the more they merely talk about their unwillingness to negotiate. Sending more U.S. troops might have some psychological effect, but only if it is done in the context of mobilization. Without mobilization, we would be wasting time and nothing would be gained but a vast popular outcry in the U.S. We should not put in more troops and we should tell the Vietnamese that they have to solve the problem.

14. Mr. Tom Karamessines (DDP) said he is not quite as gloomy as Joe Smith and some of the others. He agrees that we need a fundamental rethinking of our strategy. We have to get the Vietnamese more active and he is not sure that putting in more U.S. troops will accomplish this. We must impose demands on the GVN for actions similar to those proposed in Mr. Carver's memo, and we must make it clear that they must buckle down. Their troop mobilization is a move in the right direction. Sending more U.S. troops might deter the GVN from doing what it should and it would also show the North Vietnamese that their Tet offensive had accomplished what they wanted. He is not sure that we should confirm for them now that this is the case. He is not pessimistic regarding ARVN and thinks that they have put up a pretty good show thus far.

15. Admiral Taylor (DDCI) said he was inclined to agree with Tom Karamessines and with George Carver's remarks about the possibility of the situation unravelling. We are dealing with risks and uncertainties. The question is not whether we should send more troops but how many can we send and in what timeframe. He expects that the Communists will emphasize terrorism in pacified areas of the countryside rather than in the cities. Regarding ARVN, we don't know how many have returned to duty, but some have come back voluntarily. Reports indicate signs of popular outrage against the Communists but we can't be certain how deep this feeling goes. We don't know who is hurting the most. We know how much we have suffered but we don't really know what this effort has cost the enemy. If his information is bad and he failed in his objectives, he must regroup. How does North Vietnam assess the problem? Will they take into account their own self-interest, or will they "go for broke" in some areas? Perhaps we should re-examine our strategy, because a Korean-type war is wrong in Vietnam. We have to take our chances on how

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this will turn out and not send more troops because we can't handle threats in other areas without mobilization. In effect, we have put all our chips in this poker game but we are not sure whether the other fellow has put his chips in. The real question is how much can ARVN hold on. In summary, he feels that we should hold what we have, and not put in more, because he is not too gloomy.

16. Mr. George Allen (VAS) said that, unfortunately, we are being asked to make judgments without having all the facts but this is the nature of our profession. He believes the Communists will maintain their pressure at least at the level and in the form that we observed in the winter phase of his campaign. While the enemy has suffered a qualitative loss in recent attacks, we cannot be confident that he has not been able to replace those losses through impressment and recruiting in newly occupied areas. He is not confident that ARVN will be able to hang on, and thinks that we should expect some disintegration in areas where ARVN is isolated from contact with U.S. forces. We can't be sure how the RF and PF in isolated rural areas have withstood the enemy thrust and we should not be too hopeful of the extent to which that half of the Vietnamese armed forces, which was on leave at Tet, has been able or is even seeking, in the confused environment which exists, to return to their units. We should not be too hopeful concerning the GVN's ability to rise to the occasion. The Vietnamese have not, in the past, been noted for their ability to respond effectively to a crisis. With respect to rethinking our strategy, certainly this is necessary. But, any retrograde movement resulting from a revised strategy carries with it the danger of exacerbating our problems because of the adverse impact it would have on ARVN and the populace. It may be too late to try to develop the kind of political action needed to enable the GVN to mobilize the people in its support. While sending additional U.S. troops would bolster the performance of ARVN in some areas, no foreseeable forces will really enable us to retrieve the situation. It seems as though the Communists are likely to succeed in their basic aim of convincing us that we cannot achieve a military solution and that we should, therefore, negotiate for the best terms we can get. This obviously will entail some form of coalition and perhaps Bill Colby's suggestion regarding Gen. "Big" Minh is the answer.

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